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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

An Analysis of Content and Thematic Patterns in the Local Religious Press of the Qajar-Era Iran

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Introduction:

In this article, we attempt to evaluate and scrutinize three publications- "Al-Din va Al-Hayat" (published in Tabriz), "Al-Islam" (published in Isfahan), and "Al-Islam" (published in Shiraz) - as distinctive examples of religious periodicals produced outside Tehran, with particular attention to the thematic frameworks employed within them. The history of the Iranian press contains numerous instances of specialized journalism. In the field of women's issues, for example, publications such as "Zanban-e-Zanan" and "Nameh-e-Banoan" were published, the very titles of which indicated their specialized focus and predetermined readership. A similar pattern obtained in the domain of religious publications. Pioneer religious journals such as "Al-Islam" and "Setareh

Islam" pursued analogous objectives and addressed a specific audience. Nevertheless, a review of their contents reveals that, in addition to catering to audiences interested in religious matters, these publications also sought to disseminate religious ideas and defend Islam against the critiques of competing discourses.

Method:

This research employed library-based and documentary methods. Accordingly, three available publications from the Qajar period - characterized by both religious specialization and local provenance - were selected and subjected to textual analysis. These three publications are: "Al-Islam" (Isfahan), "Al-Islam" (Shiraz), and "Al-Din va Al-Hayat" (Tabriz). After extracting recurrent concepts, those with higher frequency across various issues were selected. Finally, by constructing a chain or network of concepts, the principal and emphasized thematic content of the publications in question was derived.

Findings:

A review of "Al-Islam" (Isfahan) reveals that this magazine addressed topics such as the defense of Islam, the prophethood of Muhammad (PBUH), the divinity of Jesus Christ (PBUH), the hereditary versus non-hereditary nature of original sin, the infallibility of prophets and messengers as portrayed in the Gospels, evidence for the prophethood of the Prophet of Islam, biblical announcements concerning the advent of Jesus (PBUH) and Muhammad (PBUH), apostasy in Islam, the conflict between the Gospels and the doctrine of infallibility, and comparisons between monotheism and the Trinity. Additional themes present in this publication include the status of Islam and Muslims and the path to salvation, the backwardness of Muslims and the decline of Islam, the characterization of European invasion as a crusade, the necessity of acquiring new sciences, Muslim independence, Islamic unity and the project of forming an "Islamic society," religious revivalism, the provision of up-to-date interpretations of Islamic rulings, the refutation of misinterpretations of Islam and the Quran, tyranny, the spread of superstitions, and the implementation of Islamic social laws and regulations.

In "Al-Islam" (Shiraz), the majority of religious content revolves around Quranic topics. In other words, Quranic themes constitute one of the prominent thematic pillars of this publication. Religious polemics and the treatment of doubts are also recurrent themes, present in most religious publications and regarded as central to this periodical. Another subject of interest, characterized by moral and social dimensions, concerns the duties of women in the home and society. This publication contains several articles addressing issues affecting women. Notably, the discourse on women is framed within religious concepts and originates from the Holy Quran; the author has incorporated selected Quranic interpretations concerning women.

A consistent feature of "Al-Din va Al-Hayat" is its engagement with Quranic themes, published under the rubric "Teachings of the Quran" across various issues. The themes proposed within this framework are primarily educational and pedagogical in nature. Additionally, attention to warning verses and their significance constitutes a theme that has been consistently considered by the author and editor of this magazine.

Conclusion:

Local religious publications during the Qajar period constituted a limited subset of provincial periodicals in Iran; nevertheless, their journalists and managers enjoyed considerable repute within

their local communities. For instance, the editor of "Al-Islam" in Isfahan was popularly known by the honorific "Da'e' al-Islam" (the Herald of Islam). From the perspective of journalistic style and genre, these publications can be regarded as specialized periodicals with a social orientation. The themes contained within them possess a distinctly social character and content, reflecting the concerns of journalists and managers with topics such as societal progress, the establishment of laws and legalism, the role of hijab in society, the necessity of acquiring new sciences, and - importantly - the relationship of all these issues to Islam.

The principal weakness of these publications lies in their failure to address local issues and the specific concerns of regional communities. Rarely does any content in these publications adopt a genuinely local perspective. At a minimum, one would expect such publications to examine the problems and harms of their local communities through a religious lens, or to critically identify the community's shortcomings. Another weakness is their neglect of the daily concerns of society and their failure to raise contemporary issues within the domain of religious discourse. Although all the publications studied acknowledge the need for societal change and adopt a community-oriented perspective, they maintain a holistic view of social issues. This limitation may be attributable to the specialization of religious publications. However, engagement with topics such as "religion" or "degradation" in Islamic societies generates an expectation among audiences for at least a modicum of detailed treatment.

Another significant issue with this category of publications is their failure to provide solutions to religious problems in society. Although the managers of these publications identified and articulated certain social ills, they did not offer prescriptions capable of remedying those ills in their writings. For instance, while the publications studied addressed issues of "oppression," they largely neglected to discuss how to avoid it, how to resolve it, or how to address its underlying causes.

Overall, the local religious publications of the Qajar period can be regarded as relatively successful in terms of journalistic style and thematic specialization. However, in terms of content, they adopted a conservative and cautious approach, utilizing precise but rigid thematic frameworks. This conservatism ultimately prevented these publications from achieving long-term sustainability and hindered their ability to establish a close and enduring connection with the readership of their time.

Data Availability Statement.

Data available on request from the authors.

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Ethical considerations

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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