

What are the justifications given by religious subjects for the ritual practices they engage in? This broad question stems from, and is indicative of, my two primary interests within the study of religion: religious practice and philosophy of religion. Specifically, I wish to examine the discursive use of 'tradition', employed by contemporary Twelver Shi'a of Karachi, as justification for religious practice. What is 'tradition' and why does the religious subject seek recourse to it? Is 'tradition' local to the religious group, or does it transcend temporal and geographical boundaries to link these religious subjects with other Shi'a across time and space? Has this category remained static over time and generations, or has it evolved with respect to the wider context and history of the city, the nation-state, and South Asia? With these lines of inquiry, I wish to bring the theoretical literature on religious practice, as well as on philosophy of religion, in conversation with the praxis of the Twelver Shi'a of Karachi.

Scholarship on Shi'ism has been predominantly Iran-centric. The number of monographs (in English) that focus on South Asian Shi'ism, from within a religious studies paradigm, remain in the single digits over the last three decades (Pinault 1992, 2001; Schubel 1993; Howarth 2005; Hyder 2006; Ruffle 2011; D'Souza 2014; Rieck 2016). Within the literature that exists, attention has largely been focused on the Shi'a of India. While scattered journal articles and book chapters have talked about aspects of the Shi'a of Pakistan (Hegland 1998, 2003; Abou-Zahab 2008; Madsen and Hassan 2008; Pinault 2008; Frembgen 2012; Zaidi 2014; Fuchs 2014), there has not yet been any scholarship stemming from a history of religions methodology. My research seeks to address this scholarly gap. The lines of questioning I pursue allow for a reciprocal relationship between my data and the history of religions theory and method utilized to examine the data. By privileging the subject's articulation of 'tradition' and examining it alongside contemporary academic theorization of 'tradition', I engage in a mutual, bi-directional interrogation of theory and praxis with each other.

My project attempts to understand ‘tradition’ as it is conceptualized by the religious subject. Whereas the subject uses ‘tradition’ to construct a sacred (and eternal) genealogy of religious practice, across time and space, I argue instead that tradition is dynamic, constantly in flux, and necessarily local in character. To make this argument, I examine two key religious practices for the Shi‘a of Karachi. First, I establish and analyze formal and substantive changes in the *nauḥa*— a rhythmic mourning poem to the tune of which bloody *mātam* (self-flagellation) is performed. What is a ‘traditional’ *nauḥa*? Are the religious subjects cognizant of the thematic shifts away from the ‘traditional’ *nauḥa*? Second, I investigate debates concerning antinomian religious practices in Karachi. These include ritualistic self-flagellation, ecstatic mourning, and joyous commemorations of Karbala; each of these draws the ire of the ‘educated’ religious subject for having no historical basis in ‘tradition’. By being attuned to the categories invoked in these debates, and their wider genealogies, I call for a positive reconceptualization of the category of ‘tradition’, as it is situated in contemporary scholarship.

The Department for the Study of Religion is a perfect venue for furthering my research because of its expertise in the study of South Asian traditions, as well as its strength in the study of theory and method in religious studies. My project will be supervised by Prof. Karen Ruffle, who has been an intellectual and professional mentor over the past four years. I have also worked closely with Prof. Sol Goldberg on questions of justification of religious belief and practice. I would further like to work with Prof. James DiCenso on hermeneutics, and incorporate his expertise into my research. I am a native speaker of Urdu (with experience in primary research), and have two years of formal training in modern standard Arabic as well as a year of formal training in modern standard Persian. The transcript for my last two years of study is indicative of my passion for the field of religious studies, and of my ability to manage advanced coursework alongside language preparation and full-time work commitments. I now wish to focus solely on my academics and for the DSR to be my intellectual home for the near future.