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Instagram Clerics: Sacred Connections of Mundane life in the Digital Age

On January 2019 the social media-savvy Shi'a cleric, Seyyed Hasan Aghamiri, was defrocked and sentenced to two years to prison by the Special Clerical Court in Iran. Popular for his Instagram posts with over two million followers, Aghamiri is one of the most controversial Shi'a clerics known for his posts of dissident speeches and shared videos on his social media sites, which also include the popular Telegram instant messaging app. Aghamiri is among numerous other Shi'a clerics who actively participate on social media for religious expressions, but mostly for mundane practices. Such activities include posts that reveal aspects of clerics' intimate life that allow their followers to have a glimpse into their personal life, marked by photos of children, family games or companionship with pets. This paper is an attempt to understand such new phenomenon, known as "Instagram cleric," by arguing that much of Shi'a clerical activities on social media revolves around sacred connections of everyday personalized expressions, ranging from ordinary objects to intimate depictions of friends of families, from shopping for clothes to protecting animals, at times deemed unclean. Religious speeches posted on social media, in particular Instagram, also rely on the visual culture of personalized emotions, which ultimately reveal a distinct kind of religiosity that emphasizes sensation rather than dogma, visual perception rather than rational discourse. The paper finally ties the rise of "Instagram clerics" with broader global changes in sacred practices in terms of the digitization of religion in late capitalism.