



Extended Abstract of PhD Dissertation

A Comparative Study of Cultural Policy-Making Models of the Vatican and Āstān Quds Rażavī Based on Strategic Documents and Cultural Activities

Ramazanali IZANLOO

Senior Researcher, Department of Comparative Religions, Islamic Research Foundation, Mashhad, Iran. Email: ramazanaliizanloo@gmail.com

Mansour Motamedi *

Associate Professor, Department of Comparative Religions and Mysticism, Faculty of Theology and Islamic Studies, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Iran.

Email: motamedi@um.ac.ir

Ali Ashraf Emami

Associate Professor, Department of Comparative Religions and Mysticism, Faculty of Theology and Islamic Studies, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Iran.

Email: imami@um.ac.ir

* Correspondence

Abstract

The Catholic Church and Shi'ism represent two historically rich currents within the great religions of Christianity and Islam. The Vatican, as the central authority of the Catholic Church, possesses the most extensive and organized religious structure in the world. Conversely, within the Shi'ite tradition, Āstān Quds Rażavī (the Custodianship of the Shrine of Imam Riżā) can be regarded as the most dynamic and active religious center of Shi'ism. From the Safavid period onward, Āstān Quds Rażavī developed into a vast and influential institution within both the Shi'ite and broader Islamic world, and after the Islamic Revolution, it emerged as the most impactful religious and cultural organization at national and transnational levels of Shi'ite life. The Vatican serves as the permanent seat of the Popes and functions as the administrative and spiritual headquarters of the Catholic Church, whereas Āstān Quds is an Islamic institution centered on the sacred shrine of Imam 'Alī ibn Mūsā al-Riżā. Both institutions conceive their primary mission as cultural and have, in pursuit of this vocation, undertaken the formulation and codification of cultural policies and strategic orientations. The principal focus of this research is to comparatively analyze the models of cultural policy-making developed by these two institutions on the basis of their official strategic documents and cultural activities. The study first provides a comprehensive introduction to both institutions, with particular emphasis on their strategic documents, and then identifies their dominant approaches and policy-making models to conduct a comparative examination of their frameworks, structures, and guiding principles.

Keywords: Comparative Study; Cultural Policy-Making; Vatican; Āstān Quds Rażavī; Strategic Documents.

Research Context and Objectives

A comparative analysis of two institutions that simultaneously function as custodians of sacred space and as centers of religious authority within the distinct traditions of Islam and Christianity can, despite their differing religious, cultural, historical, and geographical contexts, facilitate the exchange of valuable experiences and contribute to the reform, expansion, and enhancement of their cultural activities. Reciprocal collaboration, which was not a widely recognized concept prior to the expansion of global communications in the modern era, has now become an inevitable necessity. Through an examination of the strategic documents, institutional structures, and diverse cultural activities of both the Vatican and Āstān Quds Rażavī, this study seeks to propose recommendations for reorientation and improvement of their respective cultural approaches. The comparative perspective allows for the identification of both successful and unsuccessful experiences, providing a foundation for constructive institutional learning. A comparative study of these two organizations, given their shared functional domains as well as their unique institutional characteristics, opens avenues for fruitful cross-religious engagement and sustained cultural interaction.

Since the subject of this dissertation belongs to the domain of comparative and interdisciplinary studies, no prior research offering a comparative analysis of these two institutions has been identified in the existing scholarly literature. Accordingly, the research pursues the following objectives:

1. To compare and analyze the strategic documents, structures, and cultural activities of both religious institutions;
2. To identify similarities and differences through a critical analysis of their respective strengths and weaknesses;
3. To apply the Vatican's successful experiences in cultural activity to the context of Āstān Quds Rażavī;
4. To learn from the Vatican's less effective policies across the history of Christianity;
5. To propose revisions to the macro-level policies and orientations of Āstān Quds Rażavī in light of the study's findings;
6. To discern and compare the cultural perspectives and orientations of both institutions;
7. To identify potential areas of interaction in religious and cultural dimensions;

8. To foster mutual understanding between the two institutions and facilitate joint cooperation by drawing upon their capacities and accumulated experiences.

Research Questions

1. Do the Vatican and Āstān Quds Rażavī recognize the politicizability of culture; that is, do they adopt a Platonic view of culture as necessary for strict control and moral censorship to maintain social order, or an Aristotelian view of it as necessary for the public education and psychological catharsis required for citizens' virtuous flourishing within the state?
2. Upon which established model(s) of cultural policy-making are the cultural policies and strategic orientations of the Vatican and Āstān Quds Rażavī based?
3. To what extent are the cultural activities of the Vatican and Āstān Quds Rażavī influenced or determined by their official strategic documents?
4. What means and instruments do these two religious institutions employ to communicate and transmit their cultural and religious messages?
5. Is there a discernible correspondence between their cultural and missionary activities and the nature of their target audiences?
6. How do the Vatican and Āstān Quds Rażavī engage with the issues and needs of the contemporary human being?
7. What are the respective institutional and theological approaches of the Vatican and Āstān Quds Rażavī toward pilgrims and the practice of pilgrimage?
8. What is each institution's conceptual approach to culture, i.e. a minimalist or a maximalist understanding?

Hypotheses

- The cultural policies, strategies, and activities of the Vatican are grounded in a realist model of cultural policy-making, whereas those of Āstān Quds Rażavī follow an idealist model within the same theoretical spectrum. The Vatican's cultural engagement is shaped by a coherent strategic framework, most notably articulated through the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II), which provides a consistent doctrinal and operational foundation for its cultural initiatives. By contrast, the cultural activities of Āstān Quds Rażavī are only partially aligned with its overarching institutional policies and often display discontinuity across administrative periods.

- The Vatican encounters a duality between the pilgrim and the tourist. In practice, the Vatican functions more as a site of religious tourism than of pilgrimage, whereas the Rażavī Shrine primarily embodies a space of pilgrimage and worship, with limited emphasis on its artistic and historical dimensions as a potential cultural tourism destination. Despite its architectural and artistic uniqueness within the Islamic world, the shrine’s heritage and aesthetic aspects have received comparatively little systematic attention in policy planning.
- Both the Vatican and Āstān Quds Rażavī adopt a maximalist conception of culture, viewing it as a comprehensive sphere encompassing all dimensions of human and institutional life. However, their operational roles differ substantially. Āstān Quds Rażavī assumes a directive and executive role, functioning primarily as an implementing (or “frontline”) institution in cultural affairs; whereas the Vatican fulfills a leadership and supportive role, operating as a coordinating (or “central”) institution in the cultural domain. This distinction between executive versus guiding functions represents the core institutional divergence in their cultural policy models

Methodology

This study employs a descriptive–analytical, comparative, and applied research design. Initially, a descriptive method was used to introduce and contextualize both Āstān Quds Rażavī and the Vatican. Given the author’s professional responsibility within the cultural leadership departments of Āstān Quds Rażavī and his lived experience in this institution, a qualitative self-ethnographic approach was adopted to describe and analyze its cultural policies from an insider perspective. Subsequently, analytical and comparative methods were applied to examine and contrast the cultural policy-making models of the Vatican and Āstān Quds Rażavī, allowing for both structural and functional evaluation within a cross-religious framework.

Findings and Main Arguments

The Vatican and Āstān Quds Rażavī are two religious institutions that share common objectives. In the theoretical bases of their cultural policy-making, both understand culture in its maximalist sense, i.e. culture as a way of life that influences all other spheres. Accordingly, both deploy culture as an instrument for comprehensive development. Each institution has turned to culture to promulgate its religious teachings. According to the strategic documents of the Vatican and Āstān Quds Rażavī, the foundational values of both are closely aligned due to their religious nature and functions. Likewise, broad participation, avoidance of direct executive control, the

principle of transparency, and synergy are shared strategic aims. At the same time, they pursue distinct approaches to cultural policy and planning. The Vatican employs a realist planning model in formulating policies, orientations, programs, and activities; Āstān Quds Rażavī follows an idealist planning model. The principal operational difference between the two lies in the contrast between leadership versus executive roles: the Vatican adopts a supportive and guiding posture, whereas Āstān Quds Rażavī assumes a direct executive and interventionist posture. Centralization prevails in the structure and activities of Āstān Quds Rażavī, while the Vatican defines decentralization as a vital strategic principle.

In this research, the macro-structure and governance of the Holy See and its central government (the Roman Curia), together with Āstān Quds Rażavī, were first examined comparatively. The study then turned to a comparative analysis of the cultural arena, the strategic documents, and the cultural policy-making models of these two institutions; since each institution's cultural domain is shaped by its overarching structure.

1. Saint Peter and Imam al-Riżā: The Ontological Rationale of the Vatican and Āstān Quds

Saint Peter (d. 64 CE), as Pope, and Imam 'Alī ibn Mūsā al-Riżā (148–203 AH / 766–818 CE), as Imam, hold eminent positions within the two great religious traditions of Christianity and Islam and are venerated as saints. They provided the historical basis for the emergence and development of two major religious institutions in the Christian and Islamic worlds; more precisely, these distinguished religious figures constitute the existential foundation of the Vatican and Āstān Quds Rażavī. The Vatican is the permanent seat of the Popes, successors to Jesus Christ and Peter, and the administrative center of the Catholic Church; Āstān Quds Rażavī is an Islamic institution centered on the sacred shrine of Imam al-Riżā.

2. Formation and Development of the Vatican and the Rażavī Shrine

The formation of the Vatican and the Rażavī shrine began from the burial grounds of Saint Peter and Imam al-Riżā, respectively, and gradually expanded across historical periods into their present monumental forms. The apex of the Vatican's religious architectural development occurred from the mid-fifteenth to the early sixteenth century (1450–1515 CE), a period corresponding to the late Timurid era and the early Safavid dynasty, during which the Rażavī shrine also underwent major expansion. A heritage-oriented, historical, and artistic outlook governs Vatican City rather than a primarily devotional orientation; by contrast, at the Rażavī shrine, a devotional and liturgical orientation predominates.

3. *Synchrony in Organizational Transformations of the Vatican and Āstān Quds Rażavī*

Most of the Vatican's executive bodies took shape in the sixteenth century, specifically between 1542 and 1588 CE; i.e. the same period in which the Safavid state was established in Iran and the bureaucratic structure of Āstān Quds Rażavī assumed formal contours, especially under Shah 'Abbās I. Parallel developments are also observable in the post-Vatican II era and during the reign of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, as well as in the concurrent custodianship of 'Abbās Wa'iz Ṭabassī (1979–2016) and the papacy of John Paul II (1978–2005), when both institutions experienced far-reaching reforms.

4. *Leadership and Structure*

In both institutions, the supreme authority, i.e. Pope and Custodian, bears ultimate leadership and decision-making responsibility. Although advisory councils exist in each case, they possess no juridical force and remain consultative; the validity of decisions is contingent upon issuance, approval, or ratification by the supreme authority.

5. *Role of Clergy and Non-Clergy in Macro-Governance*

At the Vatican, senior managers and members of congregations and other bodies are cardinals, archbishops, or bishops; priests and laypersons occupy comparatively fewer executive posts, though lay specialists from various academic fields serve as consultants. By contrast, senior administrators at Āstān Quds Rażavī are predominantly lay professionals, with university-trained experts more prominent than seminarians. The Vatican's leadership-and-support model versus Āstān Quds Rażavī's executive model largely explains this difference.

6. *Comparative Analysis of Cultural Policy-Making at the Vatican and Āstān Quds Rażavī*

Both institutions rely on culture to disseminate religious teachings. According to their strategic documents, their core values converge, owing to their religious nature and functions; and include broad participation, avoidance of executive overreach, transparency, and synergy. Yet their policy models diverge: the Vatican follows a realist planning paradigm (as exemplified by the opening ten sections of *Gaudium et Spes*, addressing the challenges of modern humanity), whereas Āstān Quds Rażavī exemplifies an idealist planning paradigm, evident in superlative formulations such as “the most dynamic” and “the supreme source” of pilgrimage destination. Papal constitutions issued by John Paul II and Francis advance Vatican II's aims without revisiting theological first principles, indicating programmatic continuity. In Āstān Quds Rażavī, however, changes in custodianship often lead to the replacement of prior strategies with newly authored documents, signaling programmatic discontinuity.

Two policy orientations are particularly salient. A “top-down, elite-driven” approach seeks to expand cultural consumption through subsidizing state-favored culture and providing low-cost or free opportunities, often overlooking many cultural identities. A second, “bottom-up, participatory” approach emphasizes public involvement in producing and distributing cultural activities and artifacts, with the state’s role defined as ensuring equal opportunities for all citizens to express their cultural identities. In practice, the Vatican’s support for cultural innovation across diverse forms and civilizations reflects a bottom-up posture. Āstān Quds Rażavī tends toward executive production of cultural works and activities, granting the public limited participatory roles and primarily treating them as consumers.

Both institutions pursue the fundamental goal of articulating and promoting religious teachings and view culture as a means to that end and to comprehensive development. Each employs diverse instruments and media to reach its audiences. The Vatican has made particularly effective use of the arts and the digital sphere, whereas Āstān Quds Rażavī, despite the shrine’s outstanding artistic and architectural assets, has engaged less with the arts as a central medium of cultural communication.

Operationally, the Vatican’s supportive and guiding role contrasts with the direct executive intervention of Āstān Quds Rażavī. Centralization characterizes Āstān Quds Rażavī’s structure and activity, while decentralization is a defining strategic principle of the Vatican, explicitly affirmed in the preface to Pope Francis’s apostolic constitution. The Vatican treats cultural diversity and minority communities as opportunities aligned with its mission, a stance not yet clearly articulated in Āstān Quds Rażavī’s strategic documents, despite some recent, scattered initiatives. Owing to its international status, the Vatican fully leverages participation in global institutions, whereas Āstān Quds Rażavī maintains limited memberships even domestically. The Vatican’s attention to pressing global issues, responsiveness to contemporary human needs, collaboration with civil society, and context-sensitive program diversification further distinguish its model.

Final Discussion and Conclusion

This comparative inquiry into the Vatican and Āstān Quds Rażavī has demonstrated that, while these two institutions emerge from distinct theological, historical, and cultural contexts, they share a profound conviction that culture is not peripheral to religion but constitutive of it. Both conceive culture in its maximalist and civilizational sense, as a comprehensive framework shaping belief, ethics, aesthetics, and social life, and thus employ cultural policy as an instrument of religious communication, education, and transformation. Yet, beneath this shared axiom, their respective institutional trajectories and operational modalities disclose two markedly different models of religious cultural governance: the Vatican's realist, decentralized, and dialogical paradigm, and Āstān Quds Rażavī's idealist, centralized, and executivist framework.

The Vatican's model of cultural policy-making, rooted in the post-Vatican II theology of engagement articulated in *Gaudium et Spes*, reveals an institution that has progressively reconceptualized itself as both guardian and dialogue partner in the modern world. Its cultural strategy is characterized by structural continuity, subsidiarity, and responsiveness to global concerns. Through its Pontifical Councils, commissions, and curial reform initiatives, the Vatican operationalizes a participatory, bottom-up approach that affirms cultural pluralism and the creative agency of the faithful. Culture here functions not merely as heritage but as a living medium of theological communication, a locus where faith and reason, sacred and secular, converge.

Āstān Quds Rażavī, by contrast, exemplifies a model deeply embedded in the post-revolutionary Iranian context, combining custodianship of sacred heritage with direct engagement in socio-religious and economic fields. Its idealist orientation has produced visionary yet often discontinuous policy frameworks shaped by leadership transitions and institutional centralization. The predominance of executive management, together with limited public participation, reflects a top-down logic of cultural production that prioritizes administrative control over dialogical exchange. Nonetheless, Āstān Quds Rażavī's vast material, artistic, and ritual resources situate it as a unique laboratory for developing integrative models of Islamic cultural policy that could, with structural reform, align more closely with participatory and internationally networked paradigms of religious governance.

Comparatively, the study illuminates a dialectic between institutional centralization and decentralization, idealism and realism, and executive control and cultural subsidiarity, which together define the distinctiveness of each model. The Vatican's effectiveness lies in its ability to sustain theological coherence while adapting to global complexity through

decentralization and interreligious dialogue. Āstān Quds Rażavī's strength lies in its devotional intensity and organizational reach, yet its future vitality may depend on its capacity to move from custodial administration toward strategic facilitation of cultural creativity and transnational collaboration.

Beyond institutional comparison, this research contributes to the emerging field of comparative religious cultural policy studies. It demonstrates that religious institutions, when viewed as cultural actors, not only transmit faith but also shape public ethics, aesthetics, and civic imagination. Their models of cultural governance mirror their underlying theological anthropology: the Vatican's humanistic universalism versus Āstān Quds Rażavī's eschatological idealism. Both can serve as instructive interlocutors in the global debate on the role of religion in cultural development, inter-civilizational understanding, and peacebuilding.

Ultimately, the study argues that sustained dialogue and knowledge exchange between the Vatican and Āstān Quds Rażavī could inaugurate a new phase of interfaith cultural diplomacy. Such engagement, grounded in mutual respect and policy learning, could transform these two historically inward-looking institutions into exemplary models of how faith traditions can cooperate in addressing the moral, aesthetic, and spiritual needs of contemporary humanity. By reimagining cultural policy as a shared theological endeavor, the Vatican and Āstān Quds Rażavī might contribute not only to the enrichment of their own traditions but also to the broader cultivation of a global culture of meaning, dignity, and peace.

Dissertation Information

This doctoral dissertation was successfully defended and refereed in October 2024 at the Department of Comparative Religions and Mysticism, Faculty of Theology and Islamic Studies, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Iran.

Selected Bibliography

Āstān Quds Rażavī. n.d. “ماموریت [Mission Statement].” *Official Portal of Āstān Quds Rażavī – Policy Center*. Accessed November 10, 2025. <https://policy.razavi.ir/fa/226242/ماموریت>.

Bennett, Oliver. 2009. “On Religion and Cultural Policy: Notes on the Roman Catholic Church.” *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 15 (2): 155–70. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10286630802609972>.

Dicastery for Culture and Education. n.d. “Documents of the Dicastery for Culture and Education.” *The Holy See – Vatican Website*. Accessed November 10, 2025. <https://www.vatican.va/content/romancuria/en/dicasteri/dicastero-cultura-educazione/documenti.html>.

Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Heritage of the Church. n.d. “Documents of the Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Heritage of the Church.” *The Holy See – Vatican Website*. Accessed November 10, 2025. https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_commissions/pcchc/documents/rc_com_pcchc_index-documents_en.html.

Pontifical Council for Culture. 1999. *Towards a Pastoral Approach to Culture*. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana. https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/cultr/documents/rc_pc_pc-cultr_doc_03061999_pastoral_en.html.

Reese, Thomas J. 1998. *Inside the Vatican: The Politics and Organization of the Catholic Church*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. ISBN: 9780674932616.