

Abstract:

The subject of this paper is the conversion of the Iranian area to Shi'a Islam. This conversion took place under the patronage of the Safavid dynasty in the period between the years 1501 and 1736. I deal primarily with individual religious groups which did not have the support of the state in this period. On these I demonstrate the way Iranian diverse religious scene changed from a Sunni one with many heterodox and unislamic groups to a centralized polity with a Shi'ite identity. There was a great difference between the two Safavid centuries. In the 16th the kings focused on building a Shi'ite identity for their lands while keeping their own messianic role. That was detrimental mainly for Sunnis, Sufi orders, and other Shi'ite groups. Contrarily, in the 17th century the Shi'ite identity was well rooted and only politically motivated movements of Christian population took place. In the very end of Safavid rule, in a time of decline, a class of influential clerics tried to unite the population under Shi'ite Islam and instigated another wave of persecutions targeting this time Sunnis and non-Islamic minorities. During the whole Safavid period the heterodox Islam of the original Safavid Sufi order declined, since their chiliasm was over time neutralized.