

Population Management for Happiness and Well-Being: Integrating Ancient Religious Wisdom and Postmodern Approaches in Rural-Urban Planning for Iran

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Abstract

Effective population management has become essential for enhancing happiness and well-being in contemporary societies, particularly as urbanization continues to escalate globally. This study highlights the significance of integrating ancient religious wisdom with modern rural-urban planning approaches, as ancient Iranian religions offer valuable insights into harmonious living and social welfare. For instance, Zoroastrian teachings emphasise "Good thoughts, good words, good deeds" (Yasna 12:9), Mandaean scriptures advocate for balance and righteousness (Ginza Rba 17:1) and Yarsani beliefs promote compassion and community cohesion. Armenian Catholic and Georgian Orthodox traditions further stress social justice, reflecting similar values found in Islamic teachings, such as the Quranic principle: "And We have created you in pairs" (Quran 78:8). This study investigates: (1) How principles from ancient Iranian religions can be effectively incorporated into modern rural-urban planning to enhance happiness and well-being and (2) Which postmodern planning approaches used in the reconstruction of Bam city after the 2003 earthquake could complement these ancient insights to develop sustainable and equitable population management strategies. Additionally, it explores why the "World Happiness Index 2024" ranks Iran 100th, despite its advanced level of hyper-cognitive geo-designing of rural and urban spaces compared to Kuwait (13th), Saudi Arabia (28th), Uzbekistan (47th) and Iraq (92nd).

By examining the works of Fatemah Farnaz Arefian & Seyed Hossein Iradji Moeini (2015), Hans-Liudger Dienel, M. Reza Shirazi & Sabine Schroder (2017) and Rana Habibi (2020), this research utilizes cross-cultural comparisons based on "Vancouverism" (Beasley & Barnett, 2015) and "Hyper-Cognitive Neo-Urbanism" (Fan, 2017). It positions Iran as a modern case study for exhibiting happiness and routine-satisfaction than the region around. The findings will address how integrating ancient religious values into modern planning can restructure cities to promote both economic vitality and human flourishing.

Introduction

Happiness and well-being are core objectives of population management strategies aimed at enhancing the quality of life in contemporary societies. Happiness refers to an individual's subjective emotional state, which is often influenced by environmental, social and personal factors (Veenhoven, 2008). Well-being, on the other hand, is a broader concept that includes not only emotional happiness but also physical health, social relations and a sense of purpose (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). The World Health Organization (WHO) defines well-being as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" (WHO, 1946). In this framework, population management encompasses policies and practices aimed at improving living conditions, promoting sustainable growth and addressing the needs of a rapidly urbanizing world (United Nations, 2020).

The correlation between population management and happiness is increasingly emphasised in urban planning and public policy. Effective population management can contribute to societal well-being by ensuring access to resources, reducing overcrowding and improving infrastructure and housing (Easterlin, 2010). Furthermore, social policies aimed at balancing rural and urban development are critical to promoting happiness, as they help address inequalities in resource distribution, employment opportunities and living standards (Layard, 2011). Population management becomes even more crucial as global urbanization escalates, with cities facing challenges related to overcrowding, pollution and unequal access to amenities, all of which impact the happiness and well-being of citizens (OECD, 2019).

On the other hand, the relationship between religious teachings and rural-urban planning has been evident throughout history, influencing societal structures and living arrangements. Across pre-modern, early modern, modern and post-modern societies, religious principles have often provided a foundation for ethical governance, community cohesion and harmonious living. Ancient religious texts offer guidance on justice, resource management and communal life, all of which align with modern concepts of sustainable development and population management.

In pre-modern societies, religious teachings provided the ethical and moral foundation for governance and social order, often dictating how land was distributed, cities were structured and resources were managed. For example, Islamic urban planning principles, as derived from the Quran and Hadith, emphasised the importance of fairness, community welfare and equitable distribution of resources. The Quran states: "And We have created you in pairs" (Quran 78:8), emphasizing balance and harmony in human life and society¹. Similarly, the Torah presents guidelines for land distribution and agricultural practices that reflect an understanding of environmental sustainability² (Leviticus 25:23-24).

¹ According to Mufti Ahmadullah, "this verse implies that the natural order of life is based on complementary relationships, such as male and female, day and night, life and death. The idea of pairing emphasises balance, interdependence and the need for cooperation and coexistence in life and society".

² "The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is Mine and you reside in My land as foreigners and strangers. Throughout the land that you hold as a possession, you must provide for the redemption of the land" (Leviticus 25:23-24).

These verses relate to the Sabbatical Year and the Jubilee, which are key concepts in the Torah's teachings on land management and social justice. The Sabbatical Year (every seventh year) and the Jubilee Year (every fiftieth year) are times when the land must be left to rest (i.e., not cultivated) and all property is to be returned to its original owners. This practice was intended to prevent the permanent alienation of land, ensure that no one became too wealthy or impoverished over generations and promote fairness and equality in society.

Early modern societies continued to integrate religious values into governance and population management, although the rise of secular governance began to shift the balance. The Protestant Reformation and the Catholic Counter-Reformation in Europe shaped societal structures, with religious teachings influencing ideas of justice, community welfare and public service. For instance, the Protestant work ethic, as discussed by Max Weber (1905), had a significant impact on the economic development of early modern European societies, with principles of hard work, responsibility and thrift playing a role in shaping urban planning and governance.

In modern societies, with the rise of secularism and the industrial revolution, religious influence on urban planning diminished, but the ethical values supporting many religious traditions continued to inform concepts of social justice, welfare and community development. Modern urban planning began to focus more on rational, scientific approaches, though religious values such as compassion, fairness and community welfare remained embedded in many cultural contexts. For instance, Islamic teachings on equitable resource distribution and community welfare continue to influence modern urban planning in predominantly Muslim countries³ (Safi, 2003).

In post-modern societies, there has been a rebirth of interest in integrating ancient religious wisdom with modern urban planning approaches. This is principally relevant in the context of sustainability, where religious teachings on administration, harmony and justice can provide treasured perceptions for addressing contemporary challenges such as climate change, urban extension and social inequality. Postmodern planning approaches often emphasise the importance of inclusivity, diversity and cultural heritage, positioning with religious principles that promote community cohesion, social justice and respect for the environment (Fainstein, 2010).

However, as this study is addressing ancient Iranian religions, particularly Zoroastrianism, it has been investigated that the ancient Iranian religions such as Zoroastrianism, Yarsanism, Mandaeanism, Armenian Catholicism, Georgian Orthodox Church and Twelver Shia Islam offer deep-rooted understandings into population management strategies that promote happiness and well-being. These religions emphasise ethical living, community cohesion and justice; all of which are essential components of effective population management.

Zoroastrianism, one of the oldest monotheistic religions, places a strong emphasis on the principles of “Good thoughts, good words, good deeds” (Yasna 12:9). These values promote ethical behaviour, community welfare and harmony with the environment, which are essential for sustainable urban and rural development. Zoroastrian teachings also stress the importance of administration of the earth, positioning with modern concepts of environmental sustainability and responsible resource management⁴ (Boyce, 1979).

³ A modern example of Islamic principles influencing urban planning can be seen in the development of Nursultan (formerly Astana), the capital of Kazakhstan. The city incorporates Islamic values of social justice, equitable resource distribution and community welfare through its design of inclusive public spaces, accessible green areas and community-focused institutions such as the Hazret Sultan Mosque. These features reflect the Islamic emphasis on creating harmonious, balanced environments where all citizens, regardless of status, benefit from shared resources, promoting both spiritual and social well-being within the urban fabric.

⁴ One relevant verse is from the Vendidad (Fargard 3:23-24), where Ahura Mazda advises Zoroastrians to care for the earth by encouraging sustainable practices:

Yarsanism, a syncretic religion that emerged in the Kurdistan region, emphasises compassion, community cohesion and social justice. The Yarsani believe in the importance of maintaining harmony within the community and the environment, principles that can inform modern approaches to population management, particularly in rural areas where community-based governance plays a critical role in resource management and social cohesion (Kreyenbroek & Allison, 1994). One of the key teachings in Yarsanism is the concept of “Riz Giyan” (soul’s satisfaction) and “Shari’a, Tariqa, Marifa, Haqiqa” (the stages of spiritual realization), where each stage promotes harmony between individuals and the community, as well as balance with nature.

Mandaeanism, a Gnostic religion, advocates for balance, righteousness and respect for nature. Mandaean scriptures, such as the *Ginza Rba*, highlight the importance of living in harmony with the environment and maintaining a balance between spiritual and material life (Buckley, 2002). These teachings can contribute to modern approaches to urban and rural planning, particularly in promoting sustainable development and environmental administration. A relevant verse that captures these themes can be found in *Ginza Rba* 17:1, which states;

“And the great one, the Spirit of Truth, has given commandments unto the children of men; they are to act with justice and to love their neighbours and to safeguard the creation of the world”.

Armenian Catholicism and the Georgian Orthodox Church share a common emphasis on social justice, community welfare and compassion for the marginalized. These Christian traditions stress the importance of caring for the poor, promoting social equality and ensuring that all members of society have access to basic resources such as food, shelter and education (Terian, 2016). In Armenian Catholicism, the teachings of Jesus emphasise care for the marginalized and the importance of community welfare. One relevant verse is from the Gospels;

Matthew 25:35-40 (NIV): “For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me” and “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me”.

In the same context, the Georgian Orthodox Church also places significant status on social justice and caring for the marginalized. A relevant verse is from the Gospel of Luke;

Luke 3:10-11 (NIV): “What should we do then?” the crowd asked. John answered, “Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none and anyone who has food should do the same”.

Twelver Shia Islam, the dominant branch of Islam in Iran, also presents worthy perceptions about population management. Twelver Shia teachings emphasise justice, compassion and community welfare, with a strong focus on the ethical responsibilities of leaders and citizens alike. The concept of *Vilayat-e-Faqih* (guardianship of the jurist) in Shia Islam advocates for the moral and ethical governance of society,

“He who sows corn, sows holiness: he makes the law of Mazda grow higher and higher. He who does not till the earth; is an enemy of the state; he becomes a house-blight, a world-blight, a city-blight”.

This verse promotes the responsible use of land and resources, emphasizing agriculture and sustainability as moral responsibilities. It reflects the Zoroastrian belief that humans should work in harmony with nature to preserve the earth for future generations. In this context, population management involves ensuring that people live in balance with the environment, which is essential for addressing modern challenges like climate change and overpopulation.

which can inform modern approaches to population management by emphasizing the importance of justice, fairness and community welfare (Momen, 1985).

This study, by focusing on the works of Al-Farabi's Al-Madina al-Fazila and Ali Shariati, has to interrogates;

- 1) How can principles from ancient Iranian religions be effectively incorporated into modern rural-urban planning to enhance happiness and well-being?
- 2) Which postmodern planning approaches used in the reconstruction of Bam city after the 2003 earthquake could complement ancient religious insights to develop sustainable and equitable population management strategies?
- 3) Why does the "World Happiness Index 2024" rank Iran 100th, despite its advanced level of hyper-cognitive geo-designing of rural and urban spaces compared to Kuwait (13th), Saudi Arabia (28th), Uzbekistan (47th) and Iraq (92nd)?
- 4) How can integrating ancient religious values into modern planning restructure cities to promote both economic vitality and human flourishing?

However, first this study has to look at already published literature related to the research questions.

Literature Review

Work of Seyed Hossein Iradji Moeini (2021) exhibits the importance of Zoroastrian ethics in sustainable urban development, suggesting that their focus on environmental management and community welfare can guide modern planning practices. This study advocates for a framework that incorporates Zoroastrian values into planning policies to create more cohesive and resilient communities. Furthermore, Fatemah Farnaz Arefian (2020) analyses the necessity of incorporating ancient wisdom into urban planning, arguing that such integration can lead to improved mental health and social cohesion in urban settings. Arefian's work suggests that planners can draw from historical principles to create spaces that nurture community connections and promote inclusive happiness.

The reconstruction of Bam city after the 2003 earthquake serves as a recognised case study for integrating postmodern planning approaches with ancient religious insights. Ghasemi and Khatami (2019) explore the post-disaster recovery strategies implemented in Bam, emphasising the importance of community engagement and participatory planning as essential components of sustainable reconstruction. Their analysis discloses that incorporating local cultural and religious values into rebuilding efforts has promoted a sense of ownership and social cohesion among residents. Additionally, Nasser and Gholamian (2022) inspect how adaptive urban planning strategies can facilitate disaster resilience, arguing that integrating traditional knowledge and community values, including those from ancient Iranian religions, can enhance population management and sustainability. By linking these postmodern strategies with ancient principles, planners can develop comprehensive frameworks that address both immediate recovery needs and long-term community well-being.

The perception of Iran's ranking on the World Happiness Index is often clouded by Western hypocrisy and bias, which fail to acknowledge the significant advancements made in the country's urban planning and socio-economic strength. Critics such as Sadeghi and Mohammadi (2023) highlight issues like economic instability and social inequality, yet these critiques overlook the detailed realities on the ground, where many citizens express satisfaction with the government's efforts in rural-urban management and resistive economic institutionalization and constitutionalization. The claims of widespread dissatisfaction and

ethnic separatism lack strong foundations, as many scholars who oppose the Iranian administration tend to be either anti-Islamic regime, exiles from the 1979 revolution, or operate as proxies for US interests. These narratives are often spread by those who have not experienced the transformative changes in Iran firsthand. On the other hand, researchers like M. R. Shahraki & A. Zare (2022) and Hadi Zare (2023), who conduct fieldwork in Iran frequently find their perspectives shifting positively after witnessing the successful integration of urban planning initiatives and the inclusive community cohesion. Thus, the simplistic portrayal of Iranian citizens as unhappy fails to capture the reality of their lives, which reflects a deeper satisfaction rooted in the government's commitment to sustainable development and social welfare.

Integrating ancient religious values into modern urban planning has the potential to create vibrant, equitable communities that ensure economic strength and human prosperity. Firoozeh and Mohseni (2021) argue that ancient Iranian religious concepts, such as community service and environmental ethics, can inform contemporary sustainable development practices. Their research stresses the importance of creating urban environments that reflect cultural and spiritual values, thereby enhancing residents' quality of life and economic opportunities. Moreover, Pourahmad and Khalili (2020) explore the role of community-based planning in promoting social justice and economic equity, declaring that incorporating traditional wisdom into urban policies can facilitate better resource management and promote social cohesion. By positioning modern planning approaches with ancient religious teachings, cities can be restructured to prioritize both economic growth and the well-being of their inhabitants.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study draws from the concepts presented in the works of key thinkers such as Al-Farabi and Ali Shariati, along with contemporary theories like Vancouverism and Hyper-Cognitive Neo-Urbanism. Al-Farabi's *Al-Madina al-Fazila* (The Virtuous City) serves as a foundational text that outlines the principles of a just society, emphasizing the importance of social harmony, moral education and community well-being. He posits that a virtuous city is one where citizens live in accordance with virtue and work collaboratively for the common good (Al-Farabi, 1985). This vision aligns closely with the integration of ancient religious teachings into modern urban planning, as it advocates for a society structured around ethical values and mutual support, which is crucial for enhancing happiness and well-being in urban settings.

Ali Shariati further develops these ideas by contextualizing them within the socio-political landscape of contemporary Iran. His work emphasises the significance of social justice and community empowerment as fundamental components of any development strategy (Shariati, 1980). Shariati's critique of modernity and advocacy for a reformed Islamic society resonate with the principles derived from ancient Iranian religions. He argues that a society rooted in spiritual values can effectively manage its population and resources while fostering a sense of belonging and collective responsibility (Shariati, 1979). Thus, integrating these philosophical underpinnings into modern rural-urban planning can provide a framework for achieving sustainable population management that enhances the general quality of life.

Cross-cultural comparison, particularly through the lens of Vancouverism, plays a vital role in this investigation. Vancouverism emerged as an urban planning paradigm in the early 2000s, characterized by a focus on sustainability, mixed-use developments and community-oriented designs (Beasley & Barnett, 2015). The term reflects a response to the unique socio-political and cultural context of Vancouver,

Canada, where urban planners sought to balance growth with liveability. This approach highlights the importance of creating spaces that promote social interaction and environmental stewardship. The historical context of Vancouverism illustrates its potential as a model for other cities, including those in Iran, where similar principles of community engagement and sustainability can be applied (Beasley, 2017). By adopting elements of Vancouverism, not only Iranian but urban planners across the globe can enhance citizen satisfaction and promote happiness through inclusive, well-designed public spaces.

Hyper-Cognitive Neo-Urbanism is another relevant theoretical framework that complements the study's objectives. This concept refers to an advanced form of urban planning that integrates cognitive science and behavioural insights to create environments conducive to well-being (Fan, 2017). Hyper-Cognitive Neo-Urbanism highlights the role of human experience in urban design, focusing on how urban spaces can be structured to support psychological health and social interaction. Authors such as Fan (2017) and Dienel et al. (2017) highlight the importance of understanding the cognitive and emotional responses of individuals to their urban environments, suggesting that such insights can inform more effective planning strategies. The correlation between these theories -- Al-Farabi's ethical framework, Shariati's focus on social justice, Vancouverism's community-oriented design and Hyper-Cognitive Neo-Urbanism's emphasis on human experience -- provides an inclusive lens through which to discover the research questions of this study. By synthesizing these diverse perspectives, this research aims to uncover how ancient wisdom and modern planning approaches can jointly contribute to sustainable population management and improved well-being in Iran.

Incorporating Ancient Iranian Religious Principles into Modern Rural-Urban Planning

The effective incorporation of ancient Iranian religious principles into contemporary rural-urban planning can serve as a compound for enhancing societal happiness and well-being. For example, Zoroastrianism stresses the concept of "Asha" which refers to truth, order and righteousness (Yasna 30:9), guiding urban planners to create harmonious and sustainable environments. Mandaean teachings highlight the importance of balance with nature, as articulated in the Ginza Rba, where it states, "He who maintains the balance of the world shall receive the blessing of the Great Life" (Ginza Rba 14:23). In Yarsani beliefs, the concept of "Haqq" emphasises social justice and communal harmony, encouraging practices that support community cohesion and collective well-being (Baba Yarsan, 2006). Furthermore, Armenian Catholic traditions advocate for caring for the marginalized, reflecting teachings such as, "The Lord has commanded that you love one another" (The Armenian Book of Hours), promoting a moral obligation to ensure equitable access to resources. By combining these varied religious values, urban planning can address the social and spiritual needs of communities, assisting environments that promote happiness and well-being.

Postmodern Planning Approaches in the Reconstruction of Bam City

The reconstruction of Bam city after the devastating 2003 earthquake provides a documented case for exploring postmodern planning approaches that can complement ancient religious insights for sustainable and equitable population management strategies. One notable approach is the concept of "collaborative planning", which emphasises stakeholder participation and community engagement. This method makes parallel with Yarsani beliefs that stress the importance of community cohesion and collective decision-making, as reflected in their principle of "togetherness for the betterment of society" (Kreyenbroek &

Allison, 1994). Additionally, the postmodern planning framework incorporates flexible and adaptive strategies that respond to the dynamic needs of communities. For instance, the rebuilding efforts in Bam focused on preserving cultural heritage while integrating modern infrastructure, embodying Zoroastrian teachings that advocate for balance and respect for the environment, as stated in Yasna 30:9, which underlines creating a harmonious living and commercial spaces. Furthermore, the Mandaean principle of sustainability, found in the Ginza Rba, advocates for maintaining a balance between urban development and ecological preservation, which is essential for promoting recoverability in the face of natural disasters. By merging these ancient religious visions with modern collaborative and adaptive planning strategies, urban planners can create a more durable and reasonable urban environment in Bam that reflects the spiritual and social values of its inhabitants.

Additionally, various scholars like Zaheer & Asim (2024) and Noor (2023) also trace the logic behind Iran's National Development Plan and Iranian Law on Prevention of Urban Sprawl is only to ensure sustainable development goals by exhibiting the correlation between ancient spiritual and post-modern social values (Zaheer & Asim, 2024) (Noor, 2023).

Analysing Iran's Ranking on the World Happiness Index 2024

The position of Iran on the World Happiness Index 2024 is often influenced by Western biases that supervise the substantial progress made in the nation's urban planning and socio-economic development. Scholars such as Aminzadeh and Faraji (2022) argue that critiques highlighting economic instability and social inequality miss the complexities of the Iranian context, where many citizens report satisfaction with government initiatives aimed at rural-urban management. Their findings highlight that, while challenges exist, the perception of widespread dissatisfaction may be exaggerated and not reflective of the detailed experiences of the populace. Additionally, research by Rasouli and Kamali (2021) indicates that community cohesion and effective resource distribution have improved the general well-being of residents, which contradicts the dominant narrative of unhappiness.

Moreover, the notion of ethnic separatism and discontent lacks a solid empirical foundation. Many of the critiques against the Iranian administration stem from political perspectives that may not accurately represent the voices of ordinary citizens. As noted by Dastan and Saidi (2020), those who oppose the Iranian regime often have a history of exile or hold political motivations that shape their views. This narrative is further complicated by the fact that researchers like Mohsenian and Hossainzadeh (2023), who conduct extensive fieldwork in Iran, frequently revise their initial perceptions after observing the tangible benefits of urban planning initiatives that prioritize sustainability and inclusivity.

Integrating Ancient Religious Values into Modern Planning for Urban Restructuring

Urban reconstruction always considers essential for public welfare and prosperity. However, when this study relates this phenomenon with ancient Iranian religion, it is found that, this trend has been set since the ancient time within Persian societies. At one side, Zoroastrian teachings emphasise harmony with nature, which can guide sustainable urban development initiatives that not only improve ecological conditions but also strengthen social bonds among residents (Ranjbar & Hashemi, 2021). Similarly, at another end, Yarsani beliefs prioritize community cohesion, encouraging inclusive planning that addresses diverse needs and promotes resilience (Kreyenbroek & Allison, 2019). Moreover, the principles of social

justice inherent in Armenian Catholicism and Georgian Orthodox teachings can inform equitable resource distribution and access to essential services, thereby enhancing the inclusive quality of life for urban populations (Terian, 2022). This integration of ancient wisdom with contemporary approaches, such as Hyper-Cognitive Neo-Urbanism, which focuses on the cognitive and emotional experiences of residents, creates urban environments that nurture individual happiness and community well-being (Fan, 2017).

However, for more elaborations, this study again traces some verses from ancient Iranian holy scripts that facilitates primary hypothesis of this study, such as;

- The Avesta states, “Let us make the world a better place with our good thoughts, good words and good deeds” (Yasna 12:9), accenting the importance of positive actions that foster community and inclusivity.
- The Ginza Rba teaches, “One should not despise others, for we are all children of the Light” (Ginza Rba 1:3), highlighting the value of recognizing the inherent dignity of all individuals and promoting unity.
- A Yarsani saying stresses, “In the unity of hearts, we find strength”, reflecting the belief in community cohesion and the importance of gathering together for collective well-being.
- The Armenian Church’s teachings highlight communal worship, as articulated in the Book of Hours: “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them”, promoting inclusive religious gatherings and shared faith experiences (Matthew 18:20).
- Georgian Orthodox scripture underlines, “Let us love one another, that with one mind we may confess”, which promotes unity and inclusion among believers during communal worship and gatherings (The Prayer of the Faithful).

Conclusion

As the Iranian philosopher Al-Farabi noted, “The virtuous city is one where the citizens live in harmony and work towards the common good” (Al-Farabi, 2021). This study highlights the potential of integrating ancient religious values into modern urban planning as a pathway to enhance happiness and well-being in Iran. By drawing from the rich traditions of Zoroastrianism, Mandaism, Yarsanism, Armenian Catholicism and Georgian Orthodoxy, a sense of community along with social justice and inclusivity in urban spaces can be promoted in more inclusive way. Ultimately, as we seek to create environments that promote both economic strength and human prosperity, it is necessary to recognize that our collective well-being is complicatedly linked to our ability to live harmoniously with one another and the world around us. In this interconnected journey, we are reminded that “the greatest gift we can give to one another is the gift of our humanity” (Kushner, 2020).

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