

# Managing Religion and Religious Changes in Iran: A Socio-Legal Analysis

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SAJJAD ADELIYAN TOUS AND  
JAMES T. RICHARDSON

*Managing Religion and Religious Changes in Iran* is a concise, highly erudite, study that focuses on how the Islamic Republic of Iran and the confessional communities within its society grapple with transformations in religious identity, beliefs, practices, and social and political implications of change within the setting of a Ithnā-‘Asharī or Twelver Shi‘ite theocratic state. Through fifty-seven pages of facts and evaluations, Tous and Richardson insightfully investigate the impact of sectarian authoritarianism upon the majority Shi‘i Muslim community, and the Sunni and Sufi Muslim, and Baha‘i, Christian, Zoroastrian, and Jewish minorities.

An Introduction and Relevant Background (pp. 1–6) lays out the underlying approaches to this country-specific study, namely, sociology of religion and sociology of law. It then covers theoretical frameworks which are applied by the co-authors for authoritarianism and for state-imposed regulations and restrictions on religious beliefs and expressions.

Chapter 1, Religion and Religious Freedom (pp. 6–11), focuses on the constitutional basis for control of religion and society that was made law in 1979 and revised/updated in 1989, and the judicial implementation of codes now governing religion and confessional communities within Iran. This section provides a precise overview of the religio-legal background of activist Shi‘ism that has shaped the Islamic Republic of Iran since the revolution of 1979. Chapter 2, Religious Freedom Status of Minority Religious Groups (pp. 11–23), discusses, through broad details and particular examples, the complicated situations and ever-fluid, even dangerous, circumstances of religious minorities, such as Baha‘is, who are not recognized or protected under the constitution and shari‘a legal system and those who at least in theory are, specifically indigenous Zoroastrians, Armenian and Assyrian-Chaldean Christians, and Jews. One oversight in this chapter is lack of differentiation between Christian communities viewed as historically and culturally a part of Iranian society—the aforementioned Armenians, Assyrians, and Chaldeans—and other Catholic and all Protestant Christians who have no religious freedoms ascribed into the Islamic Republic’s legal provisions. Much of the focus of these initial chapters is on legal issues which, while thorough, would have benefitted from more attention to augmentary social issues that are interlinked and often inseparable from the law.

*Managing Religion and Religious Changes in Iran* then transitions, in Chapter 3, Religious Life, Cultural Diffusion, and Religious Pluralism (pp. 24–32), to how and why imposition of activist Shi‘ism has resulted in both pushback against orthopraxy and diversification of orthodoxy within the religious majority. Readers are provided with a range of new religious movements that have sprung up within and outside the parameters of traditional Islam, even beyond Sufism or established Muslim mysticism, demonstrating that control over emergence of new forms of spirituality at home and from abroad (including from the West) are proving difficult for the Iranian state’s regulatory apparatus and its interconnected Shi‘i clerical hierarchy to thwart or shape. Chapter 4, Social Control of New Religious Movements (pp. 32–45), proceeds to examine, in chronological fashion, specific efforts by various branches of the Iranian government and by the Shi‘i mullahs to regulate, especially

through societal mechanisms, those ideas and practices regarded as deviations from mandated norms. In particular, the study's co-authors lay out a sequence of committees, institutes, proclamations, reports, and even proposed parliamentary bills put forth by the Islamic Republic of Iran's religio-political leaders to shape public thought. The fascinating details in Chapter 4 would have benefited from succinct historical and conceptual comparisons with efforts by the previous regime, the Pahlavi monarchy of 1925–1979, to instill its own vision of a polity through state-led efforts. An even broader historical inspection of similar endeavors which have occurred frequently in Iran's past, including by the Zoroastrian Shahs of the Sasanian dynasty (224–651) and by the Safavid rulers (1501–1736) who converted Iranians from a Sunni majority to a Shi'ite one, is beyond the scope of *Managing Religion and Religious Changes in Iran* but must be noted as relevant.

In the final Chapter 5, Conclusions, Relevant Sociological Theories, and Theoretical Applications (pp. 45–57), Tous and Richardson masterfully knit together the preceding pages to demonstrate that “In Iran, ecclesiastic power is inseparably linked with state power and is foundational to its structure” (p. 45). They acknowledge as well that “today's Iran is an increasingly pluralistic society” (p. 48). So whether, despite over four decades of increasingly religio-political despotism, the theocrats will be able to reinforce let alone maintain control of Iran in the years ahead remains to be seen (pp. 56–57).

The bibliographical References (pp. 58–72) is by-and-large a comprehensive resource of the range of scholarship on contemporary Iranian religious groups and of applicable theoretical and methodical studies. To the items listed therein Navid Fozi, *Reclaiming the Faravahar: Zoroastrian Survival in Contemporary Tehran* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2014) should be added. One unfortunate omission from this informative volume under review is an Index, the inclusion of which would have enhanced research functionality.

Tous and Richardson have produced a theoretically complex, methodologically innovative, data driven study which yields important and relevant results. Their analyses and conclusions cannot be overlooked and should inform future studies by scholars and students of religiosity

in contemporary Iran. Their research and writing reveal continuing attempts by contemporary Iranian leaders to follow the Middle Persian or Pahlavi and Classical New Persian or Farsi maxim: “Religion and state were born of one womb, joined together never to be sundered.” The Iranians on whom the volume focuses, however, seem increasingly ready for change away from the nexus of faith and politics that produced and sustains the Islamic Republic.

JAMSHEED K. CHOKSY  
DISTINGUISHED PROFESSOR OF IRANIAN STUDIES  
INDIANA UNIVERSITY  
BLOOMINGTON, IN.

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