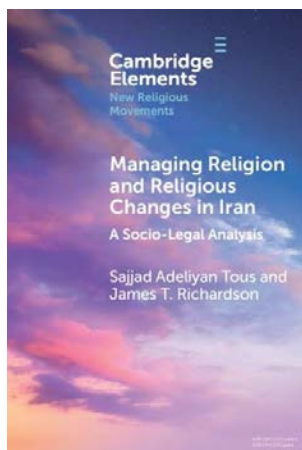




Review of *Managing religion and religious changes in Iran: A socio-legal analysis*.
Sajjad Adeliyan Tous and James T. Richardson. Cambridge Elements, 2024.

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In *Managing Religion and Religious Changes in Iran*, Adeliyan Tous and Richardson examine how Iran's theocratic government handles emergent religions and spiritual movements. Blending a brief historical overview with a sociological lens, the authors analyze the complex dynamics between the Iranian state, society, and the adherents of these new religious movements (NRMs). Despite the sociological elements, the book's prevailing tone is legal. Grounded in current regulations and judicial rulings, the core analysis focuses on the observable reality of religious freedom in Iran, particularly, the systematic control of the so-called false mysticisms and deviant cults through the penal system.

Conversely, the underlying socio-economic and structural causes of such stringent control receive only sporadic attention. Issues such as the financial interests of a religious state, the growing influence of virtual social networks, and the role of unofficial religious institutions are addressed only to a limited extent. Nevertheless, drawing on comprehensive research into the Iranian theocracy, the book demonstrates that, although the government's violations of religious freedom share certain characteristics with those found in other non-democratic regimes, they also display distinctive features. Most notably, there is a direct correlation between the novelty of a faith and the severity of its legal repression. Centered on Shi'ism, Iran's political system tolerates historical and pre-existing religious minorities under strict surveillance, while showing virtually no tolerance for contemporary newly-emerging spiritual movements and currents. Instead, the state subjects NRMs to a triad of serious accusations: heretical thought, Western influence, and posing an existential threat to the political order.

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The volume is logically organized into four main sections:

- Section 1 & 2: Introduction to the status of religious freedom in contemporary Iran, followed by a detailed assessment of the situation of religious minorities;
- Section 3: An interdisciplinary analysis of religio-cultural pluralism within the country;
- Section 4: An examination of the social control and criminal law mechanisms used against NRMs.

The authors' central argument hinges on how the theocratic establishment perceives NRMs. Although the attitudes of the broader population receive relatively little attention, the study effectively demonstrates that the Iranian regime's aggressive confrontation with NRMs lacks broad support among the Iranian public. While establishing this claim conclusively would require extensive empirical data beyond the scope of this study, the authors skillfully draw on the conduct of state institutions to illustrate the apparent absence of widespread societal support. They further show how the state's harsh and repressive measures can ultimately become counterproductive—an insightful observation that distinguishes this book from much of the existing literature. Throughout the chapters, the authors' concise argumentation and avoidance of unnecessary discussions make for a highly engaging and compelling read.

The authors' efforts to logically organize the material and provide rich contextual information—particularly in the footnotes—are commendable. However, despite the detailed footnotes, the book lacks a clear introduction to specific Shi'ite concepts, such as the *Occultation of the Infallible Imam Mahdi*, an understanding of which is necessary for Western or non-Muslim readers. Furthermore, two main issues arise concerning the coherence and alignment of the discussions with their respective headings. First, there is the premature placement of legal evidence. Most references to court rulings are confined to the first two sections. While these examples enrich the early chapters, they would be far more effective if integrated into the fourth section, which focuses on social control. Grouping these rulings together would have allowed for a stronger analytical focus and enabled the authors to evaluate the practical dimensions of state control, including the powers of law enforcement agencies, investigative methods, types of courts, and stages of judicial proceedings. Second, there is a conceptual narrowness in the discussion of social control. While the title of the fourth section promises an analysis of “social control,” a concept that encompasses legal, judicial, executive, and participatory mechanisms, the discussion focuses almost exclusively on narrowly defined legal controls and pre-enactment state measures.

The book's conclusion is highly scholarly, offering robust arguments on sophisticated concepts such as the “rule of law” versus “rule *by* law,” the tensions surrounding judicialization, and the economics of religion. However, the conclusion is overly devoted to introducing new foundational and theoretical discussions. A standard conclusion should primarily synthesize the arguments developed throughout the main body of the book. Had the authors expanded on the relatively brief discussion of state control mentioned in the introduction—particularly its consequences and future prospects—the final section would have felt more complete.

Despite these minor limitations, the book stands out for three highly significant attributes that make it a much valuable resource for scholars working at the intersection of religion, law, and sociology. First is *the exceptional quality of its source documentation*. The authors have successfully gathered and analyzed court rulings, particularly those issued by Iran's controversial Revolutionary Courts. Second is *the density and richness of its content*. Despite its brevity, the volume remains deeply substantive. The authors acknowledge the extensive existing literature and skillfully narrow their focus to the intersection of sociological theory and concrete legal measures. Third is *its unwavering objectivity*. The study maintains a remarkably objective stance throughout. While topics concerning religious freedom, human rights, and theocratic governance can easily provoke partisan arguments, emotional reactions, or premature judgments, this text remains remarkably impartial. Although the authors clearly demonstrate a baseline commitment to fundamental human rights frameworks, the study as a whole avoids bias, resulting in a highly commendable and balanced piece of scholarship.