
The book is a fascinating look into the complex scheme of Muslim-Christian dialogue in post-revolutionary Iran. Tavassoli desires to: 1) inform English readers about modern Shi’i thought as it relates to Christianity; 2) assess the achievements of Iranian Muslim dialogue with Christians; and 3) demonstrate that Shi’i Muslims in Iran are open further to engage with Christians (p. 9). His thesis is that since the Revolution, changes are occurring among Iranian Muslim intellectuals regarding Christianity that allow for more open and honest discussion.

Tavassoli divides *Christian Encounters* into six parts. Chapters one and six are the introduction and conclusion, respectively. Chapter two provides an overview of Iranian attitude toward Christianity. It addresses the history of Christianity in Iran and notes some of the Muslim dynasties that helped Iran connect with Christianity (Safavids, with the Armenian Christians, for example). The chapter also attends to some of the theological, cultural, historical, and political influences that aid in shaping Iranians’ understanding of Christianity. Chapter three discusses Iranian publications that relate to Christianity. These distributions fall into one of three general categories: traditional/polemic, objective/descriptive, and comparative/dialogical. In each section, samples of representative works are provided. Chapter four summarises inter-faith discourse between Iranian Muslims and Christians worldwide. Much of this chapter centres around four academic organisations that have fostered dialogue with Christianity: three in Tehran, one in Qom; two governmental, two non-governmental. Chapter five focuses on three Iranian Shi’i intellectuals that have taken an active role in Muslim-Christian involvement. All three are at the cutting edge of progressive religious thought.

While there is some discussion of the negative characteristics of Iranian society and Iranian Muslim intolerance toward biblical Christianity, the majority of the work centres on the advances made in Iranian Muslim-Christian dialogue since 1979. Tavassoli’s intent to focus on the positive aspects of Iranian Muslim discussions with Christians (particularly during the presidency of Mohammad Khatami) marks the overall tone of *Christian Encounters*. Tavassoli explains that some Iranian thinkers’ interpretation of the Qur’an and Hadith promotes communication with Christians (pp. 19, 106). He notes some intellectuals believe that Islam and Christianity can unite against common ills, such as secularism and globalisation (p. 108). He mentions similarities in doctrinal themes.
between Shi‘i Muslims and Christians, Roman Catholics in particular (p. 21). Tavassoli even shows that bridges are being made into Western culture and philosophy (p. 22).

Tavassoli’s irenic tone toward Iranian intellectuals portrays them as thinkers who desire to gain a better understanding of Christianity. Many of them desire to teach Christianity accurately, and not just from an Islamic perspective. This includes Christian doctrines that are controversial for Islam, such as the resurrection of Christ, divine sonship, and the Trinity (pp. 71, 112).¹ Within this largely liberal tradition of Iranian Muslim thought, there is an aura of acceptance of divergent beliefs. A thought pattern appears to be developing where Christianity could be seen as a way to salvation (p. 127).² While this is helpful in some regards, Tavassoli indicates correctly that a promotion of pluralism lessens the need to focus on Christian distinctives (p. 128) and, thus, could diminish the very dialogue Iranian intellectuals intend to promote.

Being Iranian himself, the author understands the importance of a non-confrontational style to his people’s psyche. Treating those who he encounters with respect and equality seems to have provided the work with its greatest strength: it makes available to Westerners data on institutions, publications, and people associated with Muslim-Christian discourse in Iran. The organisations Tavassoli mentions—The Organisation of Culture and Islamic Relations (OCIR), The International Centre for Dialogue Among Civilisations (ICDAC), The Institute for Interreligious Dialogue (IID), and The Centre for Religious Studies (CRS)—all promote, to varying degrees, discussion with Christians. While there are inherent weaknesses in some of their strategies (pp. 126-128), these government-sanctioned institutions that arose after the Revolution show the interest Iranians have in religious discussion.

The volume of material written by Iranians on Christianity and the Western works being translated to Persian by Iranians reveal an openness toward dialogue with Christianity not seen in many Muslim countries nor addressed in the Western media.

Tavassoli’s discussion of Abdol Karim Soroush, Mostafa Malekian, and Mojtabeh Shabestari, is noteworthy. They are Iranian Shi‘i thinkers trained in Qom and have an acute knowledge of Islam, while at the same time understand Christianity. Each is influential, each has taught courses

¹ Of these doctrines, interestingly, the belief that one Iranian scholar sees as the most divisive and irreconcilable is the doctrine of original sin (p. 82).  
² Tavassoli notes this is seen through a traditional understanding of Islam that states all prophets have brought the same message (p. 127).