

*Religion and Politics in Modern Iran: A Reader*, ed. Lloyd Ridgeon (I.B. Tauris, 2005)  
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This is a difficult book to judge by its cover. *Religion and Politics in Modern Iran* looks like an edited book on post revolutionary relationship between religion and politics. What adds to this impression is the cover photo, a picture of a young woman in a black chador holding the contemporary Iranian flag, and one could be excused for thinking this is an edited book gathering together a group of contemporary Iran scholars on weighty matters of the moment.

But that is not what *Religion and Politics* is. In fact, the book is a reader, bringing together articles from a variety of Iranian authors who have written about the topic of religion and politics over the course of the last century. The articles have long been in the public domain, though it is nice to see some of them in more accessible or edited form and others now translated and accessible to a wider audience.

The book is divided roughly into three sections. The first group includes texts from a variety of authors in the early twentieth century (Chapters 1-5). Midway, there is, what might be called, “a Sufi interlude.” This is a set of texts (Chapters 6-9) that debate the merits and criticisms of Sufism in modern Iran over the last century. And lastly there is a set of texts (Chapters 10-14) on the revolution and its aftermath. Each article is preceded by a brief historical and critical discussion by the translator or editor, with some recommended reading.

It is difficult to appraise readers. One can hardly take issue with the contents of the materials. No doubt for each author, one could write whole books, and in some cases there are such books. One can wonder whether the articles chosen are more or less representative of a thinker, but that would be quibbling. And all the authors introduced are appropriate authors to consider closely for the topic at hand.

In the end, the only matter that one can consider critically is the design of the whole. To consider the reading matter in reverse then, the post-revolutionary section has the obligatory pieces by Al-e Ahmad, Shari’ati, and Khomeini. There is an extract of a chapter from Ziba Mir-Hosseini’s book, *Gender and Islam*, where she discusses and presents the work of Abdul Karim Soroush, and for those who have struggled with Mir-Hosseini’s book to find a reasonable and readable section to assign to their students, here it is. The essay by Mehrangiz Kar is also a welcome addition.

The Sufi Interlude section includes the obligatory anti-Sufi diatribe by Ahmad Kasravi along with a number of more sympathetic older and more recent voices: Mirza Hasan Safi ‘Ali Shah, Allameh Sayyed Mohammed Tabtaba’i, and Abdollah Entezam. This section will be of interest to many in the Europe and America with an obsession with Sufism and Iranian culture, but less to those who have an interest in politics. The reality of modern Iran is that power has been in the hands of those deeply hostile to Sufism, either secular or religious, and Sufism, let us be frank despite the Western obsession, has not been a political force of any significance in Iranian society in the last century. This

section seems oddly out of place in a reader on “religion and politics” but no doubt appealing to those (East and West) who think Sufism is the heart of Iranian soul, religion, and culture. Others will run out of patience.

The most refreshing part of this sourcebook is the opening set of texts. Again, we have obligatory figures, (Kasravi, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Mirza Malkam Khan) but along with Mansoureh Ettehadieh’s happy translation of Sediqueh Dowlatabadi’s feminist texts from the early twentieth century and likewise a proper translation of Shaykh Fazl Allah Nuri’s refutation of Constitutionalism. It is splendid to have Afghani’s “The Reign of Terror in Persia” available again in contemporary form, and more generally, it is refreshing, as one reads this section, to have a perspective on the topic of religion and politics over the long-duree. This section gives a glimpse of an age where issues were diced and sliced somewhat differently than they are in today’s ideologically polarized environment. It is always good to think out of the box.

No doubt, it is challenging to market what was apparently a class reader as a book. Nevertheless, one definitely feels some resentment towards an unscrupulous marketing staff that seems deliberately to have downplayed the fact that the book is a reader to boost sales (the subtitle, “a reader” appears in very thin smaller print beside the title is the only concession to honesty in advertising here). That said, as sourcebooks go, this is a good one.