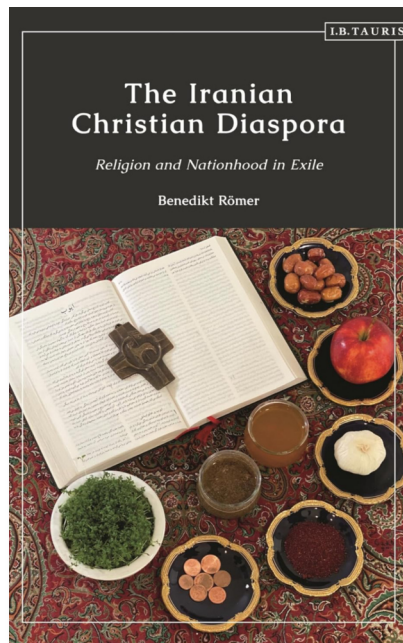


REVIEW: *The Iranian Christian Diaspora: Religion and Nationhood in Exile* by Benedikt Römer

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Benedikt Römer, *The Iranian Christian Diaspora: Religion and Nationhood in Exile* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2024). 236 pages. \$115.00. ISBN: 978-0755651689. Hardback.



Postdoctoral researcher and lecturer at the Institute of Cultural Studies at Bundeswehr University, Munich, Germany, Benedikt Römer, writes *The Iranian Christian Diaspora: Religion and Nationhood in Exile*. This work about expatriate Christians of Iranian origin is a revised account of his PhD dissertation from the University of Bayreuth (Germany) in 2022. Römer links the idea of “being Iranian” with Iranian Christianity and argues that Iranian Christians forced to live outside their country combine being Iranian with being Christian into one “national-religious identity” (8).

Along with an introduction and conclusion, Römer’s work is divided into six chapters. He begins by discussing the historical and theoretical concepts related to his topic, including the definitions of the terms “religion,” “nation,” and “diaspora,” which he believes are not unbiased expressions, and provides an overview of Christianity in Iran during the modern period (chapters 1 and 2). He follows by explaining how Iranian Christians in the diaspora “Christianize” certain Iranian poets and holidays (chapters 3 and 4). Römer then ends by addressing the extremes of Islamiosity (the ideology that defines Muslim communities by their faith) and Islamophobia (chapter 5) and makes clear why the Iranian Christian expatriate community connects their identity with biblical prophecy and the nation of Iran itself (chapter 6).

As Iranians are becoming disenfranchised with Islam and looking to alternative forms of faith, including Christianity, the desire to maintain being Iranian takes on greater meaning, especially when forced to live abroad. Much of the work in the

beginning sections helps understand these realities. While the data on the history of Christianity in Iran is gathered from secondary and tertiary sources, it is nonetheless helpful in providing the necessary background. It paints a picture of why connectedness among diasporic Iranian Christians and their home country is important. This is foundational because in later sections Römer explains that Iranian Christians, especially in the diaspora, have Christianized Iranian leaders, poets, and holidays because Christianity in Iran has a stigma of foreignness.

Iranian leaders like Cyrus the Great (arguably Zoroastrian), poets such as Hafez (Muslim), and non-Christian holidays like Norouz and Yalda (near Easter and Christmas, respectively), have taken on a meaning and an identity different than their origin. Exiled Christian Iranians contrast and promote these people and events (and others like them) against devout Muslim leaders and overt Islamic holidays, thus giving them an identity with their native country. Indeed, some diasporic Iranian Christians see themselves like the Israelites of the Old Testament with their exile and subsequent return to their homeland (170).

Römer's belief that religion, nation, and diaspora are not neutral terms becomes significant as these expressions come with "epistemological baggage" that separates them into silos. He argues this division stems from an Enlightenment motif and clouds their use today (37). In contrast, for example, Römer believes that religion is part of nation, specifically religious affiliation and nationhood (38). He writes, "Nationhood [sic] endeavors to define true belonging to a particular nation usually content themselves with the mentioning of a particular religious tradition supposedly intertwined with particular nations" (42, *italics his*). While this may be accurate to state about some faiths, it is problematic for Christianity, not the least of which is the assessment – rightly or wrongly – that the identity of the Christian faith is woven into the very fabric of certain nation(s) and vice-versa.

As Iranian Christians are excluded by Iranian authorities from full participation in the Iranian state, the idea Römer is trying to promote – that Iranian Christians in exile who are largely from Muslim backgrounds want to feel like they belong to Iran – makes sense, but he fails to grasp an essential tenant of the Christian faith: biblical Christianity in its purest form is apolitical. When outsiders like Römer see the opposite that is more of a condemnation of Christian practice than it is of his incorrect understanding. However, Römer differentiates religious nationalism and secular nationalism (43), which does not come from a lack of understanding, but from his own preconceived notion. This distinction is at best a false dichotomy. Secularism itself is a

religion, and every ideology or belief whether it is “religious” or not has sets of presuppositions that render it a matter of faith. That stated, his larger point – that one can be both Iranian Christian or Iranian Muslim without losing the identity of either faith or religion – accurately shows neither faith nor religion are mutually exclusive from one another.

Römer’s work while revised from his PhD dissertation (vii) still seems PhD dissertation-like. Its format, focus, and structure are of an academic thesis argued in a European context. This is helpful for the reader who seeks a reason for the desire that Iranian Christians in exile have for connectedness to their country. It is well written and researched, but partial in its own right toward a secular, non-Christian, sociological approach. Römer believes a main reason Iranians are turning away from Islam is because the Shiism of the Iranian administration is exclusionary towards those that disagree with it. The Islamic Republic has “failed to live up to its own promises of freedom and social justice” (139), he writes. This is a reminder to Christians that relying on government to promote and protect Christianity has its own issues that need reconciliation, reason alone to purchase this work.

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