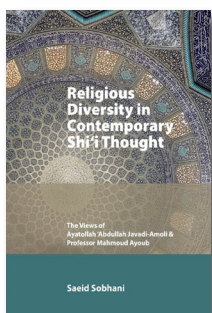


## BOOK REVIEW

***Religious Diversity in Contemporary Shi'i Thought: The Views of Ayatollah 'Abdullah Javadi-Amoli and Professor Mahmoud Ayoub.*** By Saeid Sobhani. London: ICAS Press, 2022. 375 pages. £20.00 (paperback). ISBN: 978-1-907905-55-1.



In summary, this book is absolutely essential for anyone working on the issue of religious pluralism in contemporary Twelver-Shi'i Islam. Saeid Sobhani has done a great service to the global community by rooting our understanding of how Shi'i Muslims deal with religious diversity through explicating with clarity the views of two influential Shi'i intellectuals of an older generation. Professor Mahmoud Ayoub (1935–2021; *rahmat Allāh 'alayh*) was well-known to Euro-American academia through his many academic publications and long career teaching mostly in the USA and Canada, as well as his active involvement in Christian-Muslim engagement. Ayatollah 'Abdullah Javadi-Amoli (born 1933) is less well-known in Euro-America, but one of the most revered scholars of the last forty years in the *hawza*, the global seminary system that forms the basis of Twelver-Shi'i religious authority. It should be noted that Sobhani straddles both worlds, being trained in the Iranian *hawza* and the son of another senior Ayatollah of great renown, Ja'far Subhānī (born 1929), as well as the possessor of a Ph.D. in Philosophy of Religion from the University of Edinburgh.

Sobhani writes as an “insider” who aspires to be an “impartial observer” (337). He lays out the perspectives of Ayoub and Javadi-Amoli with precision and erudition and shies away from making his own judgements in the process. In this regard, even though he has ample theological training, he demonstrates fidelity to the intellectual history approach dominant in secular Euro-American Islamic Studies. Indeed, even though one might expect him to show a marked preference for Javadi-Amoli's views over Ayoub, that does not come through in his presentation. Sobhani models fairness and accuracy in representing the views of his fellow believers (*mu'minūn*), which is a valuable methodological intervention in its own right. At the same time,

Sobhani does not shy away from contextualizing the views of his subjects, as one would expect from an intellectual historical approach. He notes that Javadi-Amoli's "exclusivist" and Ayoub's "pluralist" tendencies can be understood partly from their different experiences in the formative years of their lives. Ayoub was born in Lebanon, and not only regularly interacted with Christians, but was educated by them. He then went on to get his graduate training in American universities created by and staffed primarily by Christians. Javadi-Amoli, however, was raised in almost exclusively Muslim environments in Iran and trained within Muslim institutions of higher learning where he still teaches. Yet, at the same time, Sobhani is sensitive enough to the internal nuances of Iranian higher education that he highlights how Javadi-Amoli's concerns were also shaped by the reassertion of the importance of philosophy in the twentieth-century *hawza* (237–43).

The text is structured in such a way that one can easily find what one is looking for, if one wants to focus in on a specific issue. For example, much ink has been spilled on the meaning of Qur'an 2:62: "Truly those who believe, and those who are Jews, and the Christians, and the Sabeans—whosoever believes in God and the Last Day and works righteousness shall have their reward with their Lord. No fear shall come upon them, nor shall they grieve" (*The Study Quran* translation). A researcher interested in that issue could jump to Chapter Seven, entitled "A Comparative Analysis of Javadi's and Ayoub's Qur'anic Approaches to Religious Diversity." But at the same time, there is logical flow to the text, such that if one wants to read it from beginning to end, one is taken step by step to think through the issues at hand. The views of Ayoub and Javadi-Amoli are explicated in their own right, compared with each other, and also compared with other thinkers. For example, Chapter Two introduces some perspectives on religious diversity articulated by past authoritative figures in the Twelver-Shī'ī Islamic tradition, in particular al-Ṭūsī (d. 1274), Mulla Ṣadra (d. 1641) and al-Anṣārī (d. 1864). At different points in the text, other scholars are also included in the presentation. For example, Sobhani provides a corrective to Ayoub's portrayal of the Lebanese scholar Muḥammad Jawād al-Mughniyyah (d. 1979), arguing that al-Mughniyyah's exegesis of the Qur'an in Arabic is not as pluralist as Ayoub's references to him in English would have the reader believe (219–220). This is an example of one of the subtle challenges of this study, which is to disentangle Ayoub the intellectual historian from Ayoub the theologian. Anyone who is familiar with Ayoub's oeuvre notices this constant slippage. Trained in the academic study of Islam, but also wanting to represent Islam as a practicing Muslim, Ayoub represents the challenging balancing act that many Muslims face in the Euro-American academy. Without checking all the references that Sobhani marshals to demonstrate Ayoub's views, the reader

just has to assume that Sobhani is aware of the issue and makes defensible choices in representing Ayoub the theologian.

Sobhani very self-consciously chose to study two distinctively different thinkers and explains why (15). In doing so, he opens the door to respectful engagement between the world of the *hawza* and the world of Euro-American academia, as well as a historically rooted contemporary articulation of Shīrī perspectives on pluralism. A Catholic theologian of religions who does not know Hans Küng, whether or not they agree with him, would not be taken seriously by their peers. Similarly, after the publication of Sobhani's book, we feel that Ayoub and Javadi-Amoli need to be considered in the emerging discipline of a Twelver-Shīrī theology of religions, along with other important works cited by Sobhani such *Islam and Religious Pluralism* (1999) by Muhammad Legenhausen. But Sobhani is also engaging with Sunni thinkers such as Mahmud Aydin from Turkey and Muhammad Hassan Khalil in the USA, as well as prominent Christian theologians of pluralism such as John Hick and Paul Knitter.

Given his erudition, one might want to know exactly what Sobhani himself thinks of the issues raised by Ayoub and Javadi-Amoli, but he keeps his perspective close to his chest. That being said, on one critical issue, it seems he lays his cards on the table. He demonstrates quite convincingly that neither Ayoub nor Javadi-Amoli have much knowledge of the religious history of humanity outside an Abrahamic framework and Near Eastern origin. He mentions that, on the one hand, Ayoub's understanding of Christianity in particular was solid enough to receive recognition from Christian scholars, and that such study of another tradition on its own terms is a valuable enterprise (106). On the other hand, Ayoub admits that dealing with Indian, Chinese, or other traditions is "far more complex" (203). Therefore, in the conclusion, when Sobhani states that, "Islamic research suffers from lack of understanding of the wisdom-centered religions (as they have been called) in China and India and the native religions of the Americas and Africa," it is a clarion call for the Twelver-Shīrī educational world to continue the process of engaging with the diversity of humanity in all of its forms (342). Remarkably, Sobhani even wonders if there is some sort of "external criterion...independent from the Islamic perspective to adjudicate the validity and truth claims" (344). These are two very different intellectual endeavors. In the first, one needs to model the "impartial observer" ideal that Sobhani has demonstrated with regard to his subject. For example, in my own work on the Hindu tradition, I need to understand Hindus on their own terms first before I can begin to think about how to respond from within my Islamic worldview. In the second, the search for

criteria of adjudication forces the scholar to make choices based on their existential condition and placed within the stream of human history. In this regard, the reader appreciates how Sobhani acknowledges that his own study has raised important questions for the future of Muslim scholarship regarding the diversity and pluralism inherent in twenty-first century global life. I would contend that his observations are as relevant for Sunnis as they are for Shi'is, although Sobhani does not attempt to make that claim.

Lastly, it should be noted that this book is published by the publishing arm of the seminary in London where Sobhani currently teaches, the Islamic College of Advanced Studies. So this text also represents the new historical reality that the Twelver-Shi'i *hawza* is now also a Western phenomenon, and needs to be included in the nexus of Religious Studies departments, Christian seminaries, and other institutions in which the nature of religion is discussed in predominantly English-speaking polities (UK, USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and so on). However, there are challenges to its inclusion, which is one of the reasons for this book review. Even though this text is fully adherent to all academic standards, it is not available on Amazon in the USA, and can only be purchased from online Shi'i booksellers such as al-Buraq or directly through the link on the publisher's website (<https://islamic-college.ac.uk/shop/religious-diversity-in-contemporary-shii-thought/>). The author specifically told me that he wants to make his work known to a wider audience outside of English-speaking Shi'i communities; hence, I am also including the author's personal website (<https://saeidsobhani.com/>) so that he himself may be known to a wider audience in the English-speaking world. Books such as this remind us that not only is each religious tradition on its own unique trajectory to making sense of twenty-first-century global diversity, but also that Interreligious Studies has a long way to go to truly represent that diversity within its discourse.

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