The Study of Islam @ UJ Book Review


LARA Deeb's reviewer gives the reader an insider's perspective into the lives of Lebanese Shi'a Muslims, who consider themselves at once pious and modern – contrary to popular belief, which holds that Islam and modernity are incompatible.

One of the book's aims is to dislodge that notion; the other is to show that political Islam is not a static monolith, as it is often portrayed when Western media lumps different movements and groups together (like the Taliban, in Afghanistan, with the Hezbollah, in Lebanon).

Although the book was published in 2006, the issues it discusses and the anthropological observations continue to be both valid and exceedingly relevant. Deeb aims 'to unravel the complexity around how pious Shi'a Muslims understand being modern' and, in doing so, uncovers a tension between secularity and religiosity and the struggle to define gender roles and ideal womanhood.

Deeb also intended to demonstrate the complexity of 'the ways notions of modernness and piety are lived, debated and shaped by everyday Islamiaces'.

After setting the scene of her field work, which was done in al-Dahiyya, Beirut's Shi'a suburbs and Hezbollah's stronghold, the book moves on to trace the path of Shi'a revival in Lebanon, providing relevant background information to the situation of the religious Lebanese Shi'a today, who have come from being a severely marginalised sector of society into a fully institutionalised one.

This, according to Deeb, was mainly due to the emergence of religion as a mobilising factor, the success of the Islamic revolution and the Israeli invasions and occupation of Lebanon.

Women's volunteerism, a salient characteristic of the Lebanese Shi'a women, is studied as the vehicle through which women's piety is most clearly brought into the public realm.

Women's community service activities are discussed as crucial to both material and spiritual progress, and, as such, are termed 'the women's jihad'.

Deeb also explores the ways that piety and politics, as well as humanitarian sentiment and historical models like Zaynab (RA), the sister of Imam Hussein (RA) and granddaughter of the Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h), merge to motivate women's public participation.

Deeb successfully navigates between the different concepts of being pious, modern, enchanted and Islamist, depicting the different levels at which these notions submerge and diverge.

She effectively critiques stereotypes often portrayed in the media, using dialogues and narratives of the women she meets, creating an engaging and lively discussion.

For example, in the book's introduction, Deeb quotes one woman affiliated with Hezbollah as saying: 'I can't believe this, what is this backwardness!' in response to live television images of the Taliban destroying the Buddha statues.

As an articulation of these new emerging complexities, Deeb explores women's public participation in a move away from the universal standard of measure, based upon a particular liberal feminist notion of emancipation and liberation.

Instead, she seeks to give voice to an emerging 'pious modern' class of Muslim women who interweave spiritual and material progress to form a new alternative model for ideal womanhood. Deeb's articulation of an 'authenticated' Islam in opposition to 'traditional' Islam is particularly nuanced.

Authenticated Islam is defined as a process involving conscious community involvement with the basic questions about religion and its importance to one's life and behaviour, facilitated by direct access to texts and, therefore, religious knowledge and interpretation.

An example of this is her characterisation of veiling as a symbol of public piety, for obvious reasons. She draws an important distinction though, that not all religious women cover, and not all covered women are necessarily religious. She categorises the many different dress codes found in al-Dahiyya, subtly pointing to the plurality of Muslim women.

Deeb notes that veiling paralleled the mobilisation of Shi'a society, and that 'women's increased veiling has been accompanied by a similar increase in women's public participation'.

In the same breath, Deeb argues that women do not veil to facilitate their participation but, rather, that veiling and participation simultaneously symbolise spiritual progress.

Deeb also looks at the role of Zaynab (RA) and points to her legacy as one of the reasons for women's public participation and community service in al-Dahiyya.

Public participation is seen as a religious duty for the pious modern. Women combat external stereotypes about themselves as non-modern in the same ways that they confronted patriarchal norms in their community.

They drew upon women's jaman'as (organisations) as examples, emphasised interpretations of Islamic texts that highlight gender equity, and highlighted Zaynab's model.

The book is a milestone in its genre. It presents the lives of the pious Shi'a in Lebanon, and their interaction with Islam, Islamism, Modernity and gender roles efficiently.

Review by SADIYAH SURTEE

Sadiyah Surtee is a Masters Student in the Department of Religion Studies at the University of Johannesburg