

**An Enchanted Modern: Gender and
Public Piety in Shi`i Lebanon**

Lara Deeb

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In *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi`i Lebanon*, cultural anthropologist Lara Deeb writes an ethnography about a group of Shi`i Muslim women in a Beirut community. She follows their religious and social commitments, allows them to express their individual and collective sentiments, and describes their understanding of piety and how they manifest it in their commitment to social activism. She argues that they create a space for Islam within the modern world and that the notions *Islam* and *modernity* are not contradictory, but rather complementary. Her subjects practice *authenticated* Islam, which she defines as an Islam that has a modern interpretation based on knowledge and understanding, in contrast to a traditional, unquestioned Islam that is followed blindly by the older generations.

Deeb uses interviews and participant observation to ascertain her interlocutors' multiple discourses. These women, having steadfastly studied their religion, locate themselves as pious women who can construct and define themselves in the modern world without succumbing to the pressures of western standards of modernity. Loosely associated with the Hizbullah political party, her subjects live in al-Dahiyya, an area of southern suburban Beirut (considered a Shi'i ghetto) that houses some 500,000 people.

In the West, these women are seen as religious fundamentalists akin to the Taliban. The goals of Deeb's book are to dismiss this gross inaccuracy, suggest that Islam is not a static and monolithic religion, and show that Islam and modernity are compatible. She describes how the women she interviewed perceived modernity in the western sense, as well as their own idea of what Deeb calls "enchanted ways of being modern." This "enchanted modern" form of piety emphasizes the importance of both material and spiritual progress as well as a "new kind of religiosity, one that involves conscious and conscientious commitment."

The author's second agenda is to explore publicly performed piety in the personal and communal lives of these women, who express their personal jihad through the public piety of social activism. Research for this book was conducted between 1999-2001 and was published in early 2006. Sadly, in August 2006, Israel bombed and destroyed many of the sites and centers in neighborhoods where she had carried out her research.

Deeb's term *authenticated Islam* expresses a new definition of public piety that includes practicing Islam through public visibility. Through social service, such as sacrificing one's time to help the poor and underprivileged and supporting the resistance against the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon, they form a strong identity for themselves. Authentication, which depends on textual inquiry and historical research, represents a found truth to oneself as well as a responsibility to the community.

Authenticated Islam rests in the sincerity and intention that develops and transforms consciousness. Pious women's identity is created through the visibility of their faith as seen in activism. For them, progress and modernity are not about materialism but about social welfare, where women are active agents in ending oppression and injustice through their centers that offer education and support. Deeb's clients suggest that they can make progress in the material world without losing a sense of their spiritual values. They highlight the ideas that spiritual backwardness hinders spiritual and material development and that there must be a new interpretation of Islam that supports women's rights as activists.

An Enchanted Modern, which is both instructive and timely, enhances the understanding of these Lebanese Twelver Shi'i women and depicts Hizbullah in a very different light than the one seen in the American media. She describes their service organizations' loose affiliation with Hizbullah. Deeb does an excellent job of representing the multiple discourses of her interlocutors by stressing their opinions, experiences, and convictions. Chapters focus on these women's explanations of piety, modernity, and the importance of institutional forms of resistance. Deeb also explains how they locate themselves in daily and religious rituals and how they experience and make visible their "women's jihad." She describes the grassroots efforts that developed orphanages, health clinics, and schools; writes about the women's religious rituals; and describes the reinterpretation of Prophet Muhammad's granddaughter Zaynab as a role model for Shi'i women. Zaynab possesses the qualities of piety through her devotion to Islam and her ability to fight and resist oppression. In contemporary times, women emulate her as they stand against the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon.

This book can be used in academic courses designed to study the Middle East, particularly those that focus on politics, religion, women's studies, and anthropology. It adds to a currently popular interest in ethnographic research that depicts the lives of individuals as they experience themselves, rather than how an outsider might interpret them. Precisely because the women thought that Deeb's outsider status would give her a kind of authority in translating their religiosity to the academy, they gave her a certain power to represent their views of resistance, piety, and empowerment through their commitment to Islam.

An American anthropologist of Lebanese descent and raised Christian, Lara Deeb also provides a novel interpretation of modern Shi'ism. Her book is written in an academically and scholarly fashion, yet her writing style is easy to understand. In a well-organized manner, she conveys a multiplicity of ideas that challenge the existing stereotypes of Hizbullah and the Lebanese Shi'i. Since she is not Shi'i, she does not express a religious agenda but instead wholeheartedly represents a group of people who have been widely misunderstood in the West. I would recommend this book for a variety of classes, ranging from undergrads to doctoral candidates, as well as for anyone interested in political and religious issues in Lebanon and the Middle East.

Bridget Blomfield
ABD, Claremont Graduate University
Claremont, California