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## Gender and Religion in the Middle East

Michael Marten

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The authors are right to argue that many Palestinian citizens are belatedly rediscovering their Palestinian identity after the damaging decades of military government and in the face of the Shin Bet's continuing and pervasive interference in the minority's education. But this change is not obviously generational; it is a widespread phenomenon. It has emerged partly out of the significant role of satellite television in bypassing the deadening hand of the military censor and partly out of a realisation that Palestinian citizenship inside a Jewish state will always be temporary.

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### Gender and Religion in the Middle East

Inger Marie Okkenhaug and Ingvild Flakerud (eds.), *Gender, Religion and Change in the Middle East: Two Hundred Years of History* (Oxford and New York: Berg Publishers, 2005). Pp.230. Paperback.

There is a company in Britain that sells wood treatment products that tries to make its somewhat mundane wares more attractive by using the byline 'it does exactly what it says on the tin'. This book carries a somewhat mundane title, and although 'it does exactly what it says on the cover', it does so in a far more useful, interesting, and stimulating fashion than the title might initially suggest, providing a snapshot of the intersection between gender and religion in the broadest sense, surveying changes in a variety of specific areas over the last two centuries.

Essay collections often fall into one of two categories: those that focus on a relatively narrow theme and seek to illuminate it from various angles, and those that spread themselves widely, using broad definitions of terms to cover as much territory as possible. The danger with the former is that the collection will only be of interest to a relatively small group of readers, whilst the second category runs the risk that the essays, because they cover such a diverse range of topics, will of such a superficial nature that they will not be of interest to the specialist. This book belongs to the second category, but does not fall into the trap of superficiality.

Topics covered include gender in Sharia courts, men and women in the military, education and welfare, women and Islamism, gender and religious orders, women and political resistance, war and peace, and gender roles in a 'formal Islam' and 'popular belief' setting; it is worth noting that the publisher's blurb on the back does not accurately reflect the contents of the book when it speaks of the attempts to contextualise 'women and religion' in the Middle East – the authors understand their task much more widely, reflecting on both women's and men's roles in the region. The regional context, too, is understood widely, covering Afghanistan, Iran, Turkey and the eastern Mediterranean countries, with the authors being primarily engaged in anthropological and historical disciplines. This connection between the disciplines works well, so that whilst not every reader will necessarily expect to find every article of direct interest, the obvious connections that arise in the diversity of accounts and historical analyses invites the reading of many of the essays, making this a collection that works well as a complete book – a real compliment to the editors.

1, Author of *Blood and Religion: The Unmasking of the Jewish and Democratic State* (London: Pluto Press, April 2006).

The extent to which a number of the authors create links between themes is of particular interest. For example, Beth Baron, writing about women's social welfare organisations in Egypt, shows how these organisations were connected to political activism, at times exploiting the recipients of welfare programmes to protest the British occupation and other issues (e.g. p.93). Or in a different way, Nefissa Naguib's article on complex emergencies in the West Bank connects to the relevance of political conflict in the daily struggle of villagers to survive (and thereby reminds the reader, for example, of similar work undertaken by Diane Singerman in other contexts).

In summary, this is a book that will be of interest to a wide audience: it can serve as an introduction to the study of gender themes in the Middle East, offers essays that will be of interest to those with specific interests in anthropology, history or political science in the region, and makes valuable contributions to the furtherance of research in these areas.

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