

# Everyday Life in the Muslim Middle East

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A very important point raised in this collection of texts is the relationship between the Middle East and the West and the threat posed by Western thought and technology to traditional Muslim scholarship and belief systems (p. 6). Islamic education is centered on adherence to the Sunna and Hadith, while Western education focuses on empirical knowledge. This "collusion of reason and faith," says the editors produces an intellectual dilemma (p. 6). They ask a crucial question: How does a tradition of faith compete in a world based on rationality? Especially that this rational Western World is associated with colonization and humiliation (Arab-Israeli wars).

Middle Easterners, say Bowen and Early, are ambivalent about the West, opposing it and at the same time trying to emulate its technological achievements and to avoid its "failures" which are: materialism, family breakdown, drugs, consumerism and loss of religion (p. 7). As for Westerners, Bowen and Early say, they tend to lump all Islamic groups together under the banner of "Islamic Fundamentalism," which is a western description that does not exist in Arabic but comes from Christian terminology. Moreover, this religious "fundamentalism" has been associated with po-

litical violence, which is not true of all Muslim parties. Some Muslim groups focus on religious learning and are not politically motivated, the editors say (p. 7).

Finally, the Middle East with its varied geography, increasing urbanization, industrialization and population growth is a changing place. Its infrastructure is changing and the entire traditional system of operating is being challenged. How do Middle Easterners keep going ask the editors? What values guide them nowadays and what do they worry about most? This collection of articles aims at answering these questions.

The anthology is divided into five parts. The first one dealing with family life, and life passages from birth, to circumcision, to marriage and death. The second deals with gender relations, women and sex, the dilemmas of adolescence, personal status law and the veiled revolution. The third part deals with home community and work, the rites of hospitality, the concepts of lying and honor, and the Suqs of the Middle East. The fourth part deals with the popular expression of religion, excerpts from the Quran, the sound of the Quran being recited and the Hajj, accounts of minor pilgrimages and new year's day customs at a

holly shrine. The last section deals with performance and entertainment in the Middle East, with humor and humorists, films, filmmakers and singers, and of Bedouin women's sad songs and entertainment in the market place.

The focus of our analysis in the remainder of the paper will be gender and the articles in the book that raise the issue of gender relations or cover some aspects of women's life in the Middle East. Most of these articles of course are found in the section two of the book, however some very interesting issues on the way Muslim women are carving themselves a niche in religious celebrations, are found in section four, entitled "Popular Expression of Religion".

The most interesting article in my opinion is that of Elizabeth Fernea on the "Veiled Revolution" where she challenges the western assumption that those who are veiled "suffer from the same exclusion as those of us who look at the veil" (p.119). Fernea says that we have no right to make such an assumption because much depends on who makes the decisions to wear the veil, i.e. whether it is imposed by patriarchy or chosen by women as a statement. Fernea also says that for centuries the veil has been used for political, religious and social purposes to

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donate the chastity of women and their exclusion from political and social life, except within the family. Now the veil is used for a different purpose: it is a clear statement by women of their respectability, a return to Islamic values rather than Western ones, a protest against Westernization that did not bring the desired results and most importantly, a way women can reenter mosques not just as worshippers but as students of the Koran. These points are stressed in Fernea's documentary on the Veiled Revolution where she shows how women in Egypt are not returning to their old traditional dresses of the "milaya" and the long black dress worn by "baladi" women but are designing their own modern modest style dresses and this style implies "new expressions and new implications" she says (p.120).

The expressions suggest that it is a middle and upper-class phenomenon rather than a working class one, that most of the wearers are young educated women whose grandmothers revolutionized society by taking off the veil in the 1920's. It is also a political statement, a "non-violent protest against the establishment and its policies, as well as against the West" (p. 120). It is an individual choice that comes from "inner religious conviction and it relates to the individual's sense of her own identity" (p. 121). Islamic dress has practical advantages says Fernea because it allows women greater freedom of movement and circulation since families implicitly lower their vigilance over girls who wear

it. She quotes a woman saying that "people respect you if you wear it and my family trusts me now that I wear this dress." (p. 121)

The veil then is a complex symbol that has multiple implications and different impacts, says Fernea (p. 122) In one way it can become a symbol of conservatism and in another it can become "the symbol for an Islamic approach to the solution of both old and new problems" (p. 122). Thus it means different things to different people within the society and it means different things to Westerners than it does to Muslims.

Another fascinating account on the role of women in local pilgrimage in Iran is written by Anne Betteridge, who observed women's "ziarat" to shrines in Shiraz. She observed that first of all women make pilgrimages to local shrines more often than men, which enriches their lives both spiritually and socially. Second, women's local pilgrimages have a cultural aspect that reveal to us the way these women view the world. Moreover, says Betteridge, local pilgrimage "is regarded basically female in character, it is a suspect and beloved ritual practice, not totally orthodox but to which many Iranians have a deep-rooted emotional attachment" (p. 239).

One of the attractions of visiting local shrines says Betteridge is that its not being a formal highly structured religious activity. Women in general have traditionally had a marginal role in the life of a mosque (same point raised

by Fernea); going to a "ziarat" allows women to find their own patterns of religious behavior rather than integrate themselves into the male pattern where they are often assigned the role of spectators and kept on the ceremonial sidelines (p. 241).

Shrine visiting, says Betteridge, allows women to get involved in their own forms of religious activities such as preparation and serving of ritual meals, listening to sermons recited by and for women, attending classes for women and girls. On these occasions, says the author, women are not relegated to peripheral positions and passive roles (p. 241). Even when men are attending, women are not cut off from participation, says she, because there is no formal activity involved, such as a sermon, from which they might be excluded.

Most importantly says Betteridge, while shopping or visiting (both traditional forms of female activities outside the house) women might be frowned upon by extra strict husbands or families, visiting shrines can hardly be objected against. Also women go to shrines for emotional comfort from fellow women visitors and friends and find great solace from female saints with whom they might form a special lifelong relationship.

Finally, Betteridge quotes a young man saying that much of the behavior at a shrine, such as expressing deep emotion and stating one's needs and shortcomings publicly, "is not in keeping with notions of manliness" and seems to fit better with the traditional view of

women as "emotional creatures"(p. 244-245). Thus, concludes the author, much of what takes place in a shrine "involves a female mode of behavior regardless of whether the pilgrim is a man or a woman. It is these 'female' aspects of the pilgrimage which are often called into question" (p. 245). Therefore, just "as the men's behavior suits the character of the 'official religion', so do women behave in a way more consonant with 'the religion of the shrine'." (p. 246)

So the fact that women are associated with local pilgrimage in Iran is neither accidental nor incidental says Betteridge. Men are associated with the mosque, religious texts, reasoned theological discussions, formal ritual assemblies..... and women are bound with things of the heart, "the troubling aspect of life which questions, unsettles and answers obliquely" (p. 246). In sum, "Ziarat" allows both men and women to express their feminine side, and allows women especially "to grieve and wail in an approved setting and to celebrate joyously with others" (p. 247). A form of Muslim female solidarity equivalent to the Western women's empowerment groups I would add.

I have chosen those two articles as most enlightening in the book and richest in material for thought that could lead to endless discussions. The other articles, although interesting did not give me much new insight into the condition of the Muslim women in the Middle East but are valuable for Western students who know very little about that part of the world from which I come.