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# An Enchanted Modern: Gender And Public Piety In Shi'i Lebanon (Princeton Studies In Muslim Politics)



## Synopsis

Based on two years of ethnographic research in the southern suburbs of Beirut, *An Enchanted Modern* demonstrates that Islam and modernity are not merely compatible, but actually go hand-in-hand. This eloquent ethnographic portrayal of an Islamic community articulates how an alternative modernity, and specifically an enchanted modernity, may be constructed by Shi'i Muslims who consider themselves simultaneously deeply modern, cosmopolitan, and pious. In this depiction of a Shi'i Muslim community in Beirut, Deeb examines the ways that individual and collective expressions and understandings of piety have been debated, contested, and reformulated. Women take center stage in this process, a result of their visibility both within the community, and in relation to Western ideas that link the status of women to modernity. By emphasizing the ways notions of modernity and piety are lived, debated, and shaped by "everyday Islamists," this book underscores the inseparability of piety and politics in the lives of pious Muslims.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Lara Deeb successfully argues that Islamism is not static or monolithic, and that Islam and modernity are entirely compatible."--Nancy E. Gallagher, *Digest of Middle East Studies* "Lara Deeb's expansive and eloquent ethnography focuses on the community of Lebanese Shi'i who identify with Hizbullah. It is an excellent analysis of the way that women, in particular, live and define a modern, 'authenticated' Islam in the neighborhoods of al-Dahiyya.... Both theoretically and ethnographically, Deeb offers nuanced and thorough analyses, all the while being attentive to overlapping,

contradictory, and shifting viewpoints."--Anne Bennett, Middle East Journal

"In a well-organized manner, Lara Deeb conveys a multiplicity of ideas that challenge the existing stereotypes of Hizbullah and the Lebanese Shi'i.... 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, American Journal of Islamic Social Scientists

"An American anthropologist of Lebanese descent and raised Christian, Lara Deeb . . . 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, American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences

"Deeb provides insights into the complex understandings of the religious and the secular that inform individual and collective expressions of piety among Shia Muslims."--Amina Jamal, Journal of Middle East Women's Studies

"A remarkable book that opens new vistas on Shi'i Islam and offers the reader a richly textured and insight-filled excursion into a contemporary Shi'i community. It will become the source on contemporary Shi'ism in Lebanon."--A. R. Norton, Boston University

"Well-written, timely, original and extremely interesting. This book is at the cutting edge of scholarship on Muslim communities, particularly with respect to Shi'i Muslim women."--Nadje S. Al-Ali, University of Exeter

This is an impressive work, and a rare find as well. It is difficult to find very good analysis from inside an Islamic community such as the one written about here in the English language. I think Lara Deeb has done Western readers who are interested in getting a glimpse into this world a great service by doing this field work and writing this book. The power of this book is that the author focuses on the micro (a large community in Beirut called al-Dahiyya) which in so doing gives the reader a greater perspective on the macro. Of course this experience is not universal so the reader must resist the urge to apply this book to other areas, but it is a good look into what is happening within Islamic societies in general. What struck me most about this book was the duality in which women see themselves within this society. Not only must they present a pious face for their own community, but they also feel a responsibility to present a "modern" face for the West as well. This duality creates

an almost kaleidoscopic lense through which these women must see themselves. An ever changing set of values that they must represent to an ever changing audience creates an inordinate amount of pressure on these women. In the West Muslim women are seen as the measure of "modernness" that these societies have attained. Cross that with their own sense of religious duty and they are presented with an almost impossible dilemma. How to present a "modern" face to a Western audience that has a very different set of values and standards than their own set of values and standards. It was something I had not thought about, but this book thoroughly expounds upon. What I also found fascinating was the role women's activism was playing within this society. There seemed to be a duality at play here as well. These women felt that the charity work they did in the community represented their own jihad. It was their own struggle for their community and to a greater extent their country. This activism gave them a role outside of the home, and offered a vehicle to express their own talents in the public sphere. This greater role within the public sphere may be the vanguard to a greater feminist movement in the future, but what this book tells us is that this movement will not look anything like the Western feminist movements of our past, but will instead reflect these women's own unique set of values that will in all probability reflect an Islamic influence. The duality expressed within this movement comes from the fact that while women are finding a greater role within their society it seems that this greater role may be coming to the detriment of the individual. As this society becomes much more homogenized around an Islamic core, pressure builds on the individual to conform to the societal norms. This creates an atmosphere where the individual may be able to have a much more active role within the community, but they must suppress their own identity to do so. Also some people may feel as though they have no choice but to follow these norms which creates a situation where the public display of piety may simply be a facade. Of course this type of pressure exists within every society and community, but the description here seems a little more intense. One of the main points I came away with from this book is that for many women Islam is not a sexist religion. The problem is that it has been interpreted by traditional, patriarchal societies to the "benefit" of men and to the detriment of women. This is the intellectual jihad many of these women have embarked upon. They are pushing back against the traditionalist view of women and asking for greater equity if not necessarily greater equality. Not only have these women availed themselves of greater knowledge and understanding of their own religion, but there are some very powerful religious leaders who believe as they do. This book gives a picture of a very fluid society being influenced by not only national but international factors. This creates at times an almost dual personality for these women, but it also presents them with an enormous opportunity as well. In this revolutionary moment in Lebanese history almost

anything is possible. Things will change in Lebanon but what we in the West have to remember is that they are following their own path based upon their own values. Our rubric for judging our society is vastly different from the one they judge their own. No one can predict what will happen, but there is too much pressure on this community for change not to occur.

I read this for my Middle Eastern studies class. It's a great book: very insightful and shed light on the reality of life for Muslim women, and people in Lebanon which is tough to hear in American with all our propaganda against the region.

Sorry, I'm sure that this isn't the place for a discussion like this (this is after all a rather good book), but WHY is an electronically downloadable Kindle copy MORE expensive than an actual paperback version? After all, practically all the costs associated with this format - that is, the electricity, the internet line, the Kindle itself - are borne by the customer, and effectively none by the publisher. I appreciate that there is a legitimate copyright issue, but that would apply equally to the paperback. Turning an original word document into Kindle format is a free automated process, so what on earth is going on here?

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