

of past deviations from these patterns, and the impact of Gorbachev's reforms. In chapter four, Yaacov Ro'i is concerned with political education. One of his conclusions is that 'Central Asians accept the forms that are imposed upon them...but reject or ignore the more far reaching implications' (p. 60) and that therefore political education in Central Asia of the 1980s may be Marxist-Leninist in form, but Central Asian (Uzbek, Tajik...) in content. In chapter five, Bess A. Brown discusses the restructuring process in Turkmenistan, Kirghizstan and Kazakhstan in the 1980s, and in chapter six, Martha Brill Olcott, in 'Central Asian Youth Problems: the view from the youth press', focuses on social problems among young people in Central Asia through her survey of the Komsomol press. Problems related to socialization, training and employment of youth are singled out as the main areas of concern for the future. Chapters seven to nine focus on economy and change. Martin McCauley gives a brief survey of agriculture in Central Asia and Kazakhstan in the 1980s. One of his conclusions is that expanding family co-operatives may be the future route for agricultural development in the area but that this may strengthen the Muslim way of life and not fit in with European notions of efficiency. Stuart Thompstone looks at Uzbekistan's economic prospects and Alastair McCauley discusses living standards in Uzbekistan between 1960 and 1984. The article comprises useful data and analyses. Viktor I. Kozlov is concerned with the ethnodemographic problems of Central Asia, i.e. the rapid increase in rural populations and the problems it brings. Fitting the spirit of the 1980s, the author offers Soviet-style solutions to these problems. Chapters eleven and twelve are about Islam in Central Asia. Edward Lazzarini looks at the re-integration of Soviet Muslims into the world Islamic community and provides an inventory of Soviet/Islamic relations, both domestic and foreign. James Thrower gives a survey of Muslim theological education in the USSR in the 1980s. In the Epilogue, Akiner summarizes the political and social events in the area after 1989.

While some of the articles reflect how, in 1987, academics interpreted the social and economic situation of the area, others provide valuable data and analyses relating to the last days of Soviet Central Asia. As a whole the volume is a welcome addition to Central Asian studies and the data provided are useful for future research.

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**FAITH AND FREEDOM: WOMEN'S HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE MUSLIM WORLD.**  
 Edited by MAHNAZ AFKHAMİ. London, I. B. Tauris, 1995. xi, 244 pp. £12.95 (pb).

The articulation of women's rights as human rights represents a new feminist challenge to international human rights law and reflects a significant move from earlier calls for gender equality. *Faith and Freedom* is about women's human rights in the Muslim world. The book originated in a series of papers that scholars and activists were invited to prepare for a conference on 'Religion, Culture and Women's Human Rights in the Muslim World' organized by the Sisterhood is Global Institute (SIGI) in Washington DC, in September 1994.

The book comprises two sections: the first examines the patriarchal structures and processes that present women's rights as contradictory to Islam; the second provides concrete examples of violence against women in Muslim countries.

Afkhami's eloquent introduction highlights the dilemmas and complexities facing

Muslim women in their struggle for human rights. However, her main focus is on the Islamist position on women's human rights which invokes the sacredness of the religious texts and uses the notion of cultural relativism to justify restrictions on women's autonomy and rights. Adding to the challenge of the male interpretation of Islam, Afkhami maintains that Muslim women must forge an identity 'that is historically adequate, psychologically rewarding, and morally acceptable' (p. 4), and participate in the international discourse on women's human rights. She concludes that 'Fair and reasonable representation of Muslim women in international debate will also help correct a debilitating tendency among Muslim women to stereotype, label, and reject women's movements in the North despite their vitality, good will, and diversity' (p. 6).

That Islam is inimical to democracy and to the principle of equality of all beings is a claim that is contested by most of the contributors. In Part 1, Kandiyoti shows how 'the relationship between Islam and women's rights has been and remains politically contingent' (p. 22). In her chapter on Islam as religion and state, Mernissi considers as 'racist' the question of whether Islam and democracy are compatible, partly 'because it reduces a set of complex, multifaceted, and global contradictions between Muslim and Western states to an opposition between a medieval *religion* and a modern political system' (p. 33). According to Mernissi, although Muslim states claim religion as their base and source of legitimacy they remain inherently secular. Sunni Islam, in particular, has never recognized an intermediary between believers and God.

The chapters by An-Naim and by Shaaban call on the involvement of Muslim women in the process of reinterpretation of religious texts. According to An-Naim, the *shari'a* is not immutable and as a product of human interpretation it 'should be seen as an inherently and constantly evolving and changing ethical and legal system' (p. 58). In her cogent chapter on networking as a strategy for accelerating change, Shaheed further argues that 'the existence of one monolithic world of Islam is a myth deliberately propagated by politically powerful elements for their own benefit' (p. 84). While some similarities may exist between different countries of the Muslim world, the diversities remain conspicuous and pertinent. Finally, Mayer's chapter demonstrates how spokespersons from different countries use religious rationales to justify deviations from international human rights law while concurrently proclaiming that they accept the principle of gender equality.

In Part 2, Doumato's chapter on the ambiguity of the *shari'a* and the politics of rights in Saudi Arabia shows how women's rights can mean different things to different interest groups. Rights are 'dispensed not as something due to an individual but as something to be allocated according to religious, ethnic, national, tribal, or gender identity' (p. 136). Deviations from women's human rights tend to become more acute in times of war, political crisis and religious conflict. This is illustrated in the chapters by Haeri, Wali and Bennoune which focus on Pakistan, Afghanistan and Algeria respectively. The book ends with a glimpse of hope that democracy and respect for women's rights may prevail in the Muslim world. The last chapter and the appendix are devoted to Toujan Faisal, a prominent women's rights activist, who in 1993 became the first and only woman to serve in parliament in Jordan.

Although the book is about Muslim women's human rights, very little is said about what constitutes these rights or how they can be protected against violations by states or religious groups. Nor is there any discussion on women's rights in Islam which would have helped to clarify how interpretation of the *shari'a* has been affected by patriarchy. Nonetheless, for anyone interested in Muslim women, Islam, religious fundamentalism

and human rights, *Faith and Freedom* provides food for thought and interesting theoretical insights.

KUWAIT

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DECIPHERING THE SIGNS OF GOD: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH TO ISLAM. By ANNEMARIE SCHIMMEL. Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1994. 317 pp. £39.50.

This book is based on the Gifford Lectures at Edinburgh which Schimmel gave in 1992 and has two aims. One is to vindicate the phenomenological approach to religion established by Friedrich Heiler, and the other is to explore the notion that our everyday reality consists of signs of divine reality, which the Muslim needs to interpret if he or she is to understand both the world and what lies beyond the world. It is in every way a wonderful book. Those familiar with the work of Schimmel will not be disappointed at what they find here. There is yet again a combination of deep scholarship and attractive prose, and the product is outstanding in its contribution to the area. The advantage of the phenomenological method is that it seeks to give something of the taste of a particular religion by reporting on how that religion looks to its adherents, by contrast with the more 'objective' approach of bringing the phenomena of that religion under more general and impersonal categories. The phenomenological method tries to understand religion by examining its characteristics and then progressively going deeper into it, until we reach some understanding of the spiritual reality which the believer seeks to find. In many ways this theoretical approach replicates the practice of the believer in that it shows how a physical object or an aspect of everyday life can be a sign of something much deeper, a higher spiritual experience which is achieved via an ordinary object or experience.

This is exactly what Schimmel does. She argues that for the Muslim anything can serve as a sign of God, and she then proceeds to examine natural phenomena such as stones, plants and animals, concepts like number and writing, ritual activity and the comparative roles of the individual and the community, in order to show how plausible this notion of the need to decipher the world is for the Muslim. It is one of the problems of the phenomenological approach that it is difficult to describe how it operates without actually experiencing the operation, since that approach eschews the general concepts which are the prerogative of more 'scientific' methods. There can be problems with this, since the reader can be left with the impression that all that has been provided is a chaotic report of customs and opinions, without any linkage to central religious ideas and institutions. The reader of this book will certainly not be left with any such idea. Schimmel carefully builds up a picture of a variety of ways in which the Muslim is encouraged to see the apparently random aspects of everyday life as indications of God, and we move from the more particular and mundane to the more abstract and numinous, so that the idea emerges of a seamless web pointing as a whole to what is higher than this world.

One of the advantages of the phenomenological approach is that it is inclusive. It makes it difficult to treat a particular version of Islam as Islam itself, and Schimmel ranges widely through the Islamic world to give examples of a breadth of belief and experience which belie the notion of just one path to God being properly Islamic.