higher likelihood of resulting in illegal activity, the existing form of the Brandenburg test should detect it. Moreover, it is possible that certain kinds of speech are ‘esoteric’ – that is, designed specifically to be intelligible only to certain listeners – in order to conceal the speaker’s intent, violent or otherwise, from authorities. Indeed, some speech by religious authority figures may fall into this category. Guiora, however, fails to persuasively demonstrate that religious speech does so. Instead of exploring this more general line of argument, he takes his explanation for the mysterious potency of some religious language largely from religious extremists themselves – and at face value.

References

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In this volume, historian Anissa Hélie and anthropologist Homa Hoofdar bring together an interdisplinary collection of essays that interrogates the connections between gender, sexuality and ‘Muslimness’, specifically in the Middle East and Asia. The book fits into contemporary scholarship that addresses the agency of women in Muslim contexts. (Think, for example, of Abu-Lughod 2013.)

The book approaches the topic of sexuality from a broad perpective, focusing on women and sexual and gender minorities. The editors argue their reason for doing so is that existing scholarship on sexuality is dominated by the question of sexual orientation, but in my opinion research on sexual and gender minorities in Muslim contexts is still relatively limited. As the volume does not take religious identity as its main focus, another aim is to provide a corrective to essentialist constructions of ‘Muslimness’ as ahistorical, all-encompassing and homogenous, often backed up by conservative political agendas.

The chapters trace the myriad of ways women’s bodies, sexualities and sexual rights are policed under several regimes of constraint and systems of patriarchy and male supremacy in different historical periods across countries and regions. The authors uncover how socio-religious institutions, states and communities strategically utilize particular configurations of culture, history and identity (including notions of ‘Muslimness’ or what it means to be a proper Muslim) to curtail, control and manage the sexualities, bodies, and expressions of gender of women and men.

One historical example comes from Indonesia (discussed in the chapter by anthropologist Vivienne Wee), where women’s bodies were regulated under the
colonial policies of the Dutch empire. While in the beginning Balinese women were required to have their breasts covered, as officials feared it would morally taint their fellow colonialists, later uncovered breasts became an eroticizing and Orientalizing means to attract tourists.

Through various ethnographic and historical examples, the authors demonstrate how women in Muslim contexts ‘analyse, address and resist mechanisms of sexual control’ (p. 6). The historical examples go against androcentric historiography, because as Claudia Yaghoobi argues in her insightful historical overview of sexual ideologies in Iran, ‘female sexuality is almost invisible in documents of the period; it was not articulated publicly and was defined only with reference to male sexuality’ (61). The authors flesh out and bring to the fore the limited documentation that does exist, thereby showing how women in the past ‘managed to find ways to exercise sexual and social autonomy’ (62).

Contemporary examples highlight the multiplicity of strategies of resistance or contestation and the collaborative efforts women undertake to challenge male authority and hegemonic gender and sexual ideologies, and to gain more control and a voice over their bodies and livelihoods.

Taking a judicial or legal route to gain sexual rights is one such strategy. In his comparison of India and Israel, Yüksel Sezgin notes, for example, that while Muslim women in India historically maintained a secular strategy in family law reform, just like their counterparts in Israel, current efforts rely on hermeneutical strategies, by means of feminist and humanistic readings of the Qu’ran and hadith. Through a deconstruction of the ‘meaning of texts, historical narratives and tradition, hermeneutic groups are constantly altering the way we understand the legality of religious laws concerning women’s rights’ (117).

The importance of achieving gender equality from within and on Islamic grounds is a core argument that runs through the book: adopting this approach instead of a secular one is often more successful in Muslim contexts. This is repeatedly overlooked by Euro-American feminists, which is unsurprising in light of Western feminism’s history and genealogy, as philosopher Rosi Braidotti (2008:3) reminds us: ‘Like other emancipatory philosophies and political practices, the feminist struggle produced an agnostic, if not downright atheist position’.

A related main argument is how, in order to be successful, strategies should be grounded in their specific contexts and tailored towards the needs of the women in those particular localities. As opposed to, for example, a top-down approach that often starts from a very particular, i.e. Eurocentric, concept of what womanhood, sexual rights and female agency should ideally entail.

The authors equally stress the importance of non-organized strategies, which in some contexts are the only options women may resort to. In Homa Hoofdar’s analysis of the Iranian case, for example, it becomes clear how mundane practices such as sports have transformed into ‘locales of subversive political action that
have engendered social change’ (209). Another example from Iran are women who, to subtly express their disagreement with the regime’s compulsory veiling policy, do ‘improper veiling’, i.e. wearing an unconventional hijab or a tight and colourful manteaux and make-up (73). Such ‘hidden transcripts’, as Shadi Sadr calls it in her fascinating analysis of Iranian bloggers’ online debates on public veiling, make those in power feel increasingly uneasy (206). A third example, from Shuchi Karim’s chapter, is how non-heteronormative/non-heterosexual Bangladeshi women are able to carve out spaces for themselves because of prevailing norms of sex segregation and kinship structures that facilitate homosociability.

In my opinion, there were three omissions in the volume. As Muslim men remain a black box in studies of Islam and gender, I missed any chapters that explicitly addressed how men who do not live up to ideals of masculinity cope with the constraints of hegemonic systems of sexuality and gender. Another point that was not entirely clear to me, is how the editors define ‘agency’. It was my impression that agency was being equated with resistance, which seems a rather limited view (in light of recent work of, for example, Saba Mahmood). A third point that was rarely mentioned is, from a feminist and postcolonial perspective, how each author individually positions her –or himself vis-à-vis the topic at hand.

But these are minor complaints, because with its critical and in-depth ethnographic and historical examination of a variety of issues, the volume is a major contribution to our understanding of the intersection of gender, politics, and sexuality in Muslim contexts.

References

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Orientalism everlastingly continues to fascinate both Westerners and Easterners. In serious academic circles, there has been progress in deconstructing all kinds of fantasies, including the Orientalist ones. However, the adventures of Orientalism inspire new and critical researchers. Cultural studies, history and sociology offer the historians of Orientalism a variety of tools to refresh the inquiry. The outcome is largely different in quality. Dietrich Jung’s book is a thorough piece of the German