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## Michael Winter, 1934–2020

Professor Michael Winter, a widely known scholar in the field of the intellectual, social, and political history of the Middle East, passed away on September 1, 2020, at the age of 86. He was a devoted family man and gave generously of himself to his students, colleagues, and friends. He leaves a rich research oeuvre that dates back to his student days in the late 1950s and early 1960s, when he was enrolled in the Arabic and Middle Eastern Studies Department of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. There he encountered such luminaries as Uriel Heyd, David Ayalon, and Gabriel Baer, who sparked his interest in the Mamluk and Ottoman Empires and the social history of the Middle East. His doctoral dissertation, awarded in 1969 by the University of California, Los Angeles, was written under the supervision of the renowned Islamic scholar Gustave von Grunebaum. In his dissertation (which was published in book form in 1982<sup>1</sup>), Winter analyzed the writings of the celebrated Egyptian Sufi ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha‘rānī (d. 973/1565), thus shedding light on aspects of Egypt’s social and religious life in the sixteenth century after the Ottoman conquest in 1517.

In 1972, he joined the Department of Middle Eastern and African History at Tel Aviv University and became one of its pillars until his retirement in 2004. Winter was highly prolific in a variety of fields but concentrated in particular on Egypt and Syria under the Mamluks and the Ottomans. His publications deal with Sufism and Islamic thought, ulama, qadis, *ashrāf* (descendants of the Prophet), Arab and Ottoman historiography, the Jewish community in Ottoman Egypt, and education in the pre-modern and modern Middle East.

The wide scope of Winter’s research, backed by his outstanding command of Arabic and Ottoman Turkish, enabled him to explore a broad swath of geographic spaces and social groups including clerics, administrators and military officers, dervishes and beggars, Jews and Christians. Winter’s diverse scholarship is manifested in his impressive list of publications (see below). Winter was not only a prolific writer but also a great teacher and educator who trained numerous generations of students, Jews and Arabs alike.

Winter’s publications intertwine religion, society, and state. His works reveal him to be a meticulous and sensitive social historian who carefully examined the

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Winter, *Society and Religion in Early Ottoman Egypt: Studies in the Writings of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha‘rānī* (New Brunswick, 1982).



social manifestations of religion, both judicial and mystical. In this sense, Winter made an important contribution to the sociology and phenomenology of Islam that went beyond a philological analysis of texts or an analysis of institutional structures by codifying and situating Islam in the human and social landscape. In so doing he injected richness, dynamism, power, and vitality into his depictions of Islamic institutions and how their representatives coped with serious challenges and bitter rivalries, especially in modern times, as embodied mainly by Islamic fundamentalism.

Winter also made major contributions to the study of the Mamluk (1250–1517) and the Ottoman (1517–1798) periods, which enabled him to map lines of continuity and change in the transition between the two eras in the key areas of religion, society, and politics.<sup>2</sup> Winter's unique combined study of the Mamluk and Ottoman empires was acknowledged in a volume published in his honor by A. Ayalon and D. J. Wasserstein (eds.), *Mamluks and Ottomans: Studies in Honor of Michael Winter* (New York, 2006). Winter's scholarly achievements also included his familiarity with both Arab and Ottoman sources, archival and narrative, which enabled him to examine the interrelationships between the imperial center and the provinces, especially with regard to networks of learning and culture, as well as the images and representations of the Other, the Arabs, and the Turkish-Ottomans.

Yet another sterling quality of Winter's scholarship was his ability to sketch a panoramic picture of historical processes that captured social groups (urban, rural, and tribal) and interfaith relations (Muslims, Christians, and Jews). This was brilliantly illustrated in his book *Egyptian Society under Ottoman Rule, 1517–1798*. At the same time, he also displayed an impressive talent for drawing micro-biographical portraits of ulama, Sufi shaykhs, and administrators, and placing them in their broader religious and social contexts, as he did for the Egyptians Zakariyā al-Anṣārī (d. 926/1520) and 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha'rānī (d. 973/1565), and the Syrian 'Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī (d. 1143/1731), three key figures from the Mamluk and Ottoman periods. The same goes for Winter's writings on the Egyptian historian 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Jabartī (d. 1822), who, for him as well as for other scholars, reflected the transition of Egyptian society from a traditional to a more modern one against the background of the French occupation of Egypt (1798–1801) and the rise of Muḥammad 'Alī to power in 1805. The study of modernity and its key issues were not foreign to Winter either. He enlisted his vast expertise in the fields of classical and medieval Islam to explore contemporary phenomena such as Islamic political thought and the charged relationship between ulama, Sufis, and lay Islamists.

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<sup>2</sup> *Egyptian Society under Ottoman Rule, 1517–1798* (London, 1992). This book was translated into Arabic by Ibrāhīm Muḥammad Ibrāhīm (Cairo, 2001).



Winter was a perceptive social historian who showed enormous respect for the texts he explored but also sought to extract the human stories and contextualize them. He exhibited great intellectual curiosity, sensitivity, and empathy toward his research subjects, with no hint of criticism or condescension. His descriptions of Sufism and its followers and rituals, for instance, always presented a complex picture of this popular culture that noted the marginal effects of begging and idleness or strange rituals, but which primarily reflected the Sufis' productivity, close affinity to society, protection of the weak, and their mediational role in conflicts between social groups and authorities. Winter identified Sufism as a quiet retreat and an intimate connection to faith, both of which were assets he thought had not been lost even in an era of rising Islamic fundamentalism, with its puritan mindset.

Winter conducted his research with a confident and eloquent hand, making extensive use of a variety of sources including archival documents, chronicles, fatwa compilations, biographical dictionaries, newspapers, and others. He rarely drew on theories and research methodologies from the social sciences, sociology, anthropology, or the psychology of religion. This does not, however, detract from the wealth of data he let unfold before the reader's eyes and the quality of his insights and observations, which were often the impetus for interdisciplinary studies and works in comparative religion.

Some of Winter's works, including those from the early 1970s and 1980s, were watersheds for the growing field of social history of the Middle East, and shed light on the lively Muslim public sphere,<sup>3</sup> a theme later developed in research. In other publications, Winter pointed to the existence of ethnic identities in the Middle East, mainly in Egypt even earlier than the nineteenth-century rise of nationalism. He also highlighted the emergence of a unique form of Islam in the Nile Valley, whose main conduits were al-Azhar and the Sufi orders. Winter contributed immensely to the deconstruction of the stereotyped image of a centralized and tyrannical Ottoman Empire ("Oriental despotism"). He did so by characterizing the local power centers that played active and constructive roles in regulating the life of the Arab provinces of the empire, in a give-and-take relationship with Istanbul, a phenomenon Albert Hourani called the "politics of notables." Finally, in some ways, Winter was ahead of his time and paved the way for new approaches to topics such as Islamic conceptions of time or the human body, which later became important research genres.<sup>4</sup>

Michael Winter remained involved in research years after his retirement in 2004, and right up to his death in 2020, as text and pen were among his best

<sup>3</sup> See also M. Hoexter et al., eds., *The Public Sphere in Muslim Societies* (New York, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> See for example Michael Winter, "Islamic Attitudes toward the Human Body," in *Religious Reflections on the Human Body*, ed. Jane M. Law (Bloomington, 1995), 36–45.



friends. His frequent participation in international conferences instilled in him an enduring passion for writing. He was a sharp, prolific, and visionary scholar, but also a “*mensch*,” who was pleasant, gracious, and loved by all who knew him. We mourn the passing of a dear teacher and mentor. May his monumental scholarship guide us for years to come.

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