

ISLAM, SPIRITUAL EMPIRICISM, AND THE GENDER OF REASON IN IRAN



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Since the early twentieth century, Iranians have constructed various pathways for approaching the realm of the “spiritual” in terms that they themselves recognize as rational or even scientific. At the heart of these attempts stands an image of so-called “gullible women,” a category of social persons who must be reformed or excluded if rational understanding of the spiritual is to become possible. While the circumstances of Iranian women have undergone drastic transformations over the past century – among other things, they are more educated, publicly visible, and socially active than at any other time in history – the figure of the “gullible woman” still erupts into public discourse from time to time. In my presentation, I will examine this image in relation to a series of shifts in forms of spiritual inquiry and the social contexts within which they are pursued. The “gullible woman,” I argue, indexes two very different sets of anxieties at the two ends of the twentieth century. By understanding these anxieties, we can gain analytic purchase on the ways in which hegemonic forms of rationality have been constituted, and the specific challenges and resistances they have engendered.

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