Obituary

Michael Winter (1934–2020)

Meir Hatina

Department of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies, The Hebrew University,
Jerusalem, Israel

meir.hatina@mail.huji.ac.il

Michael Winter, a professor at Tel Aviv University and a widely recognized authority on the intellectual, social, and political history of the Middle East, passed away on September 1, 2020, at the age of eighty-six, leaving behind a rich research oeuvre. He learned Arabic and Middle Eastern Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in the late 1950s and early 1960s. There he encountered such luminaries as David H. Baneth, who instilled in Winter a passion for Arabic scripts, and Uriel Heyd, David Ayalon and Gabriel Bar, who sparked his interest in the Mamluk and Ottoman Empires and in the social history of the Middle East. In 1972, he completed his doctoral studies at the University of California, Los Angeles, under the supervision of Gustav von Grunbaum. During this period, he also enrolled in Turkish studies, mentored by Andreas Tietze. Winter's dissertation¹ illuminated social and religious life in sixteenth-century Egypt following the Ottoman conquest of 1517, as described by the celebrated Egyptian Sufi 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha'rānī (d. 973/1565). al-Sha'rānī's account sheds light on the transformation of Egypt from Mamluk imperial capital to Ottoman province, and the ramifications of that shift. Winter's ability to weave micro-personal biographies together with macro-historical perspectives became one of his scholarly hallmarks.

¹ Michael Winter, *Society and Religion in Early Ottoman Egypt: Studies in the Writings of 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha'rānī* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Books, 1982).

Upon returning to Israel 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 focused in particular on Egypt and Syria (including Palestine) under the Mamluks and the Ottomans, with publications dealing with Sufism and Islamic thought, *‘ulamā’*, *qāḍīs*, *ashrāf* (descendants of the Prophet), *dhimmīs* (Jews and Christians), Arab and Ottoman historiography, and education in the pre-modern and modern Middle East. The theme of education was of special interest to Winter. For several years before continuing his advanced studies in the 1960s, he served as an inspector in the Israeli Ministry of Education and Culture dealing with the Arab educational system. In this capacity, he became familiar with the practical uses of Arabic language and acquired in-depth knowledge of the needs and aspirations of Israel's Arab inhabitants. Notably, pedagogy in the Middle East was the subject of a published volume commemorating Winter's retirement in 2004.²

The wide scope of Winter's research, backed by his excellent command of Arabic and Ottoman Turkish, allowed him to explore a range of geographic spaces and social groups, from administrators and military officers to clerics and mystics, dervishes and beggars. Winter's diverse scholarship was manifested in his impressive list of publications, including dozens of articles, a considerable number of books and edited volumes, and numerous entries in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*. Winter was not only a prolific writer but also a great teacher and educator who trained many generations of students, Jews and Arabs alike.

Winter's publications intertwine religion, society, and state, elites and common people. His works reveal him to be a meticulous, yet sensitive, social historian who carefully examined the social manifestations of religion, both judicial and mystical. In this sense, Winter made an important contribution to the sociology and phenomenology of Islam, which went beyond a philological analysis of texts or of institutional structures to codify and place Islam in the human and social landscape, thus revealing its richness, dynamism and vitality.

Winter made major contributions to the study of Egypt in the Mamluk (1250–1517) and Ottoman (1517–1798) periods, mapping lines of continuity and change during the transition between the two eras. Winter's unique approach,

2 Ami Ayalon and David J. Wasserstein (eds.), *Madrasa: Education, Religion and State in the Middle East* (Tel Aviv: Moshe Dayan Center, 2004).

combining study of the Mamluk and the Ottoman Empires, was acknowledged in *Mamluks and Ottomans: Studies in Honor of Michael Winter*, a volume edited by A. Ayalon and D. J. Wasserstein (New York: Routledge, 2006). Winter's scholarly achievements also reflected his immersion in Arab and Ottoman sources, both archival and narrative. This enabled him to examine the interrelationship between the imperial centre and the provinces, especially with regard to networks of learning and mysticism, as well as mutual images and representations of the Arabs and the Turkish-Ottomans.

Yet another profound 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 is brilliantly illustrated in his book *Egyptian Society under Ottoman Rule, 1517–1798* (New York: Routledge, 1992).³ At the same time, he also displayed an impressive talent for drawing micro-biographical portraits of *'ulamā'*, Sufis, administrators, artisans and merchants, Bedouin chiefs or historians, and placing them in their broader social context, as he did for four key figures from the Mamluk and Ottoman periods: the Egyptians Zakariyya al-Anṣārī (d. 926/1520) and 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha'rānī (d. 973/1565), and the Syrians Muḥammad b. 'Arrāq (d. 933/1526) and 'Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī (d. 1143/1731). The same goes for Winter's writings on the Egyptian historian 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Jabartī (d. 1825). For Winter, as for other scholars (including Shmuel Moreh), al-Jabartī reflected the rise of the culture of self-criticism vis-à-vis Islamic institutions and norms, and the transition of Egyptian society from a traditional to a more modern one following the French occupation (1798–1801) and the rise to power of Muḥammad 'Alī in 1805. Notably, Winter was no stranger to the study of modernity and various modern issues. 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 *'ulamā'*, Sufis, and lay Islamists.

Winter was a perceptive social historian who showed great respect for the texts he explored, but who also sought to extract the human stories and contextualize them. He exhibited intellectual curiosity, sensitivity, and empathy towards his research subjects, with no hint of criticism or condescension. His descriptions of Sufism and its followers and rituals, for instance, always presented a multifaceted historical picture. Some of the Sufis he wrote about were ascetics and moralists, while others were wealthy and corrupt; some were learned and dignified, whereas others were ignorant and arrogant. Winter did

3 This book was translated into Arabic by Ibrāhīm Muḥammad Ibrāhīm, *al-Mujtama' al-miṣrī taḥt al-ḥukm al-'uthmānī* (Cairo: al-Hay'a al-Miṣriyya al-Āmma li-l-Kitāb, 2001).

not gloss over such practices as begging and idleness or strange rituals, but chose primarily to highlight the Sufis' productivity, close affinity to society, protection of the weaker sectors of society (including peasants, labourers, and women), and mediational roles in conflicts between social groups and authorities. He also made intriguing distinctions between Sufism in the Arabic-speaking world and Sufism in Turkey or Persia, and drew parallels between Sufism, Jewish Hassidim, and Catholic monasticism. 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 the modern era, despite the phenomena of modernization, secularization, and Islamic fundamentalism.

Winter conducted his research with a confident and eloquent hand. His writing was didactic and meticulous, but at the same time colourful and anecdotal when describing his "heroes", mainly *'ulamā'* and Sufis. He made extensive use of a variety of sources and genres including archival documents (with a pioneering work on Ottoman imperial archives), shari'a court registers, fatwa compilations, chronicles, treatises, biographical dictionaries, and travel accounts (written by Turkish, North African and European visitors). Still, he was fully aware of the pitfalls and limitations of some of these sources, such as official Ottoman documents issued by a centralist bureaucracy in charge of administering a province, or chronicles composed by Egyptians, which reflected a local view of events and personalities.⁴

He rarely drew on theories and research methodologies from the fields of 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. Winter also did not defy, at least explicitly, conventional perceptions that prevailed in the field of Middle Eastern studies but which have in the 1990s been challenged or revised. These included the claim that the Ottoman Empire began to decline in the late seventeenth century; or the view that Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798 heralded the entry of local society into the modern era. Nevertheless, Winter's works did portray a rich and dynamic Arab-Muslim culture well into the modern era, characterized by adaptation, reforms, and rejuvenation.

Some of Winter's publications, including those from the early 1970s and 1980s, were watersheds in the application of social history to the field of Middle East studies, and shed light on the Muslim public sphere,⁵ a theme

4 See, e.g., Winter, *Egyptian Society under Ottoman Rule*, xiv–vx.

5 See also M. Hoexter et al (eds.), *The Public Sphere in Muslim Societies* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002).

further developed in the research literature. In other works, Winter pointed boldly to ethnic identities and tensions that had existed in the Middle East, mainly in Egypt, even before the nineteenth century which witnessed the rise of nationalism. Hence, he also contributed to nationalist studies, mainly Anthony Smith's theory of ethnosymbolism, which emerged in the late 1990s. This theory defies both the modernist perception that nations are purely new entities and the primordialist idea that nations are ancient, insisting that the historical process by which ethnic groups have evolved is important to understand their modern nature as nationalist movements.⁶ Though careful to stress that the Ottoman Empire was an Islamic state and was accepted in Egypt as wholly legitimate, he argued that, over time, the Ottoman presence in Egypt was becoming burdensome. Moreover, local military and civilian elites were becoming more independent-minded, and by the eighteenth century, this triggered the crystallization of Egyptian identity vis-à-vis the Ottomans and Turks. A facilitating factor was the emergence of a distinctive and assertive Egyptian Islam, whose primary conduits and symbols were al-Azhar (mainly with the rise of the office of Shaykh al-Azhar in the late seventeenth century) and the Sufi orders (mainly via the dominant office of *naqīb al-ashrāf* in the eighteenth century).

Winter also endeavoured to deconstruct the stereotyped image of a centralized and tyrannical Ottoman Empire ("Oriental despotism"). He did so by focusing on local power centres that played an active role in regulating life in the Arab provinces of the empire by forging vertical linkages to dependent elements in the wider society and to the imperial governors or rulers in Cairo, Damascus, Aleppo, or Jerusalem. Through analyzing the roles of intermediary and patronage played by local notables in urban and rural-tribal orbits, and their engagement in competition for power and influence, Winter was able to pour historical substance and validity into Albert Hourani's ground-breaking thesis of "the politics of notables". This thesis, first published in 1968, provided a viable framework for social historians, like Winter, working on the Arab Middle East during the Ottoman era and beyond.⁷ Finally, in some ways,

6 Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism and Modernism: A Critical Survey of Recent Theories of Nations and Nationalism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998).

7 For an updated version, see Albert Hourani, "Ottoman Reform and the Politics of Notables", in A. Hourani et al. (eds.), *The Modern Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 83–109. The notables paradigm was questioned and revised in the early 1990s by a new approach centred on Ottoman history in the Arab-speaking provinces between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. This interpretation rehabilitated the Ottomans' record as rulers and cultural agents in these regions despite European colonialism and the rise of Arab

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.⁸

Michael Winter remained productive for years after his retirement in 2004, even right up to his death in 2020, as text, pen, and keyboard were among his best friends, often remaining with him until the late hours of the night. His frequent participation in international conferences instilled in him an enduring passion for writing. He was a prolific and visionary scholar, but also a “*mensch*”, who was gracious, inspiring and loved by all who knew him. We mourn the passing of a dear teacher and mentor. May his monumental scholarship guide us for many years to come.

and local nationalism. While the revised scholarship highlighted the endurance of Ottoman political culture in the Middle East (and North Africa), it did not relinquish or dismantle the prominent role that local dignitaries played in shaping the sociopolitical landscape in these regions, and to which Winter's writings were important. See, e.g., Philip S. Khoury, “The Urban Notables Paradigm Revisited”, *Revue du monde musulman et de la Méditerranée* 55–56 (1990), 215–28; James L. Gelvin, “The ‘Politics of Notables’ Forty Years After”, *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin* 40:1 (2006), 19–29; Ehud Toledano, “The Arabic-Speaking World in the Ottoman Period: A Socio-Political Analysis”, in Christine Woodhead (ed.), *The Ottoman World* (London: Routledge, 2011), 453–66; M’hamed Oualdi, “Mamluks in Ottoman Tunisia: A Category Connecting State and Social Forces”, *IJMES* 48 (2016), 473–90.

- 8 See, e.g., Michael Winter, “Islamic Attitudes toward the Human Body”, in Jane M. Law (ed.), *Religious Reflections on the Human Body* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), 36–45.