Review

Reviewed Work(s): Moral Knowing in a Hindu Sacred City: An Exploration of Mind, Emotion, and Self by Steven M. Parish

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Robert Desjarlais, whose *Body and Emotion* covers related themes (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996). The critical anthropology of development in Nepal suggests that these processes are not limited in their application to Sherpas but characterizes bilateral and multilateral efforts to construct Nepal as a beneficiary of development. Although these processes are neither totalizing nor untested, the burden for the ethnographer remains that of recognizing Nepal’s ecological, political, and...
ritual particularities without reifying these into the ubiquitous governmental and touristic narrative of shiny, happy, mountain people.

Parish's rich and layered ethnography is in no way reducible to such processes. Yet the possibility of his ethnographic moment—in which the horizons of a moral world seemed resolutely confined to Hindu Bhaktapur as a sort of Shangri-La of moral discourse, out of time and space—suggests broader forces overdetermining the ground of inquiry.


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Ever since the publication of Clifford Geertz's Islam Observed (Yale University Press, 1968), Morocco has occupied a special (if rather peculiar) niche in the anthropological imagination. It has become the chosen site for sweeping historical-cum-ethnographic narratives about the nature of Islam, the relationship of Islam to the exercise of princely power, and ultimately the ambivalent confrontation of Islam as a religion and of the putatively Islamic state with "modernity." Ernest Gellner, Elaine Combs-Schilling, and, in the volume under review, Henry Munson Jr. each script very different scenarios for the broad sweep of Moroccan— if not even more grandly of Islamic—history. It is very much to Munson's credit that he does not claim to generalize about Islam on the basis of his experience in only one (or, in Geertz's case, two) Muslim nation. He aptly takes his predecessors to task for their propensity to arrive at the most sweeping conclusions on the basis of insufficient and poorly contextualized evidence. Geertz is his primary target; indeed, Munson's entire book is an extended critique of Islam Observed.

Munson begins by systematically taking apart Geertz's portrayal of the 17th-century saint al-Yusi as an exemplar of what Geertz calls the "classical style" (p. 23) of Moroccan Islam, appropriately contending that "[Geertz's] interpretation illustrates the danger of trying to interpret specific events without adequate attention to the conceptual structures and historical contexts in which they are enmeshed" (p. 10). Instead of relying largely on legendary accounts of the saint's confrontation with the reigning sultan, Munson draws attention to a justly famous epistle addressed by al-Yusi to the ruler, taking the latter to task. For Munson, al-Yusi epitomizes not "Moroccan Islam" in general but rather the "archetypal righteous man of God" (p. 25), the holy man who courageously denounces oppression who is unlike the majority of ulama (Islamic scholars) who, through pusillanimity or opportunism, support the powers that be.

Munson contends that the ideological background to the oppositional role of these "righteous men of God" is framed by the conflict between two Islamic conceptions of rule, namely the hierocratic and the contractual. According to the first conception, the hereditary caliph is "God's deputy and shadow on earth" (p. 38); according to the second, the Muslim community, as represented by the ulama, has an obligation to designate a just successor. Munson traces this conflict from the Middle Ages to the present, although the lion's share of his work is given explicitly to the modern era. Munson's heroes are those righteous holy men—from Ibn Yasin and Ibn Tumart in the 11th and 12th centuries to al-Kattani and al-`Alawi in the 20th—who, have, at the peril of their lives, denounced the injustice of rulers in the name of the contractual principle.

Munson's opposing principles of hierocratic and contractual rule bring uncomfortably to mind the Enlightenment controversy between proponents of the divine right of kings and proponents of the social contract (especially Locke). Munson's sense of history is fortunately far too acute to allow him to turn al-Yusi entirely into an epitome of Moroccan liberalization before the letter. Yet Munson's liberal biases surface most clearly in his treatment of the religious dimension of contemporary Moroccan politics. He very justly takes Geertz and Combs-Schilling severely to task for uncritically reproducing government propaganda about the religious legitimacy of Hassan II's rule, and for failing to mention his use of force (and, indeed, terror) to maintain his rule. As a liberal, however, he is equally uncomfortable with the "fundamentalist" opposition to the Sultan. To his credit, he takes great pains to demonstrate how broad the spectrum of "fundamentalism" is in Morocco. Nevertheless, he globally reproaches fundamentalists for their insistence on the essentially political nature of religion—a view inconsistent with Munson's liberal construction of the contractual conception of Islamic rule. Even when a fundamentalist writes a denunciatory epistle to Hassan II, thereby earning three years in a lunatic asylum (a light punishment under the circumstances), Munson is only prepared to admit that this critic "evokes[s] the classical image of the righteous man of God" (p. 178), but not that he embodies it.

Munson is absolutely right to condemn his predecessors for elaborating sweeping historical narratives without bothering to consult the available sources, particularly in Arabic. Yet he marshals all this evidence only to construct a curiously sweeping alternative story. In Munson's version, sultans rule as much through brute force as through attempts to impose hierocratic notions of hereditary succession, backed by the mass of religious scholars (who are either too timid or too avid for royal patronage to oppose them), and only exceptionally countered by the indignation of a righteous holy man who thereby captures the popular imagination. At times, Munson can be every bit as anachronistic as the colleagues he criticizes, for example by characterizing al-Yusi as "a brilliant social historian and ethnographer whose reflections on religion, language, society, and politics enable us to understand how seventeenth-century Moroccans saw the world and lived their everyday lives" (p. 184). By privileging the longue durée at the expense of the conjuncture, and by divorcing politics from political economy,