Brannon Wheeler. *Mecca and Eden: Ritual, Relics, and Territory in Islam.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006. xi + 333 p. Paper ISBN 978-0-226-88804-0 US $25.00

Mecca and Eden is an intriguing and exceptionally well-researched book. Wheeler studies a wide range of Islamic rituals and relics in relation to foundational works in the sociology of religion. Following William Robertson Smith and Emile Durkheim, Wheeler contends that the sacred is best understood as a "social convention" that represents society to itself (1). The sacred, in other words, is understood as a socially designated object, action, or space that affirms the necessity of social authority. Religious rituals, places, and relics exist to affirm the irreversible loss of a primordial utopia and hence the necessity of state and religion to govern imperfect human affairs. Specifically, Wheeler writes that the Islamic rituals and relics he studies, "are not best understood as a supernatural link to the presence of the prophet Muhammad, but rather as reminders that the existence of the Prophet and the law he brought was made necessary by the loss of Eden" (98).

Mecca and Eden is an extensively researched book. The text proper consists of an introductory chapter, four main chapters, and conclusion, a concise 133 pages. The subsequent endnotes almost equal the text's length, adding up to 112 pages. Among the book's four chapters, all but the third have been previously published, though they have received extensive revision.

Wheeler argues that Islamic mythology and ritual function to remind Muslims of the necessity of religious and state authority. He begins with an outline of Islamic mythology on the origin of civilization and its relationship to the Meccan sanctuary. The Islamic exegetical tradition holds that the Meccan sanctuary was founded by Adam, maintained by Noah, re-discovered by Abraham, and consecrated by Muhammad. This association incorporates Muhammad and Islam into a narrative of prophets going back to the fall from the Garden of Eden, and the subsequent origin of civilization.

In chapters two, Wheeler explores how the absolute dichotomy of pure and impure in Islamic ritual law reflects the absolute separation of Eden and earth. Natural acts such as urination or touching of the

genitalia lead to a state of ritual impurity. Wheeler contends that the impurity of the natural highlights the fallen state of the world. Islamic tradition holds that, in Eden, Adam and Eve were unaware of their genitalia and did not urinate. Absolute purity has been lost with the Garden of Eden, and hence the need for religious ritual (and hence religious authority) to create a temporary, artificially induced state of purity on earth.

In chapter three, Wheeler explores relics of the prophet Muhammad, such as his hair and nail clippings. Referring to the ritual law surrounding the Meccan pilgrimage, Wheeler connects the prohibition of cutting hair and fingernails in the Meccan sanctuary to the pre-civilizational state of "wildness," or the primordial Edenic state (95). The ritual cutting of hair and nails at the conclusion of the pilgrimage serve to remind pilgrims that Eden can only be visited temporarily: the Garden is no longer the natural state of affairs. Hence the Prophet's hair and nails, believed to be those he cut at the completion of the pilgrimage, are symbolic representations of the fall. The historical distribution of these relics to outposts of Islamic civilization marks the limits of Islamic territory. The enshrining of these relics by the state legitimates state authority by connecting it to the Prophet and the motifs of the loss of Eden symbolized by the relics.

Wheeler contends that the distribution of the Buddha's relics to cities and stupas throughout Buddhist lands shares a similar function. Buddha's relics mark the absence of Buddha and hence the loss of nirvana (Eden). Wheeler inadvertently demonstrates the limits of his generalization with this example. The accuracy of describing nirvana as a lost utopia, or Eden, in opposition to civilization is certainly questionable. In the Mahayana philosophy embodied in the Prajnaparamita Sutras, for example, nirvana is exactly samsara, and samsara precisely nirvana. The dichotomy created by Wheeler is dissolved in this formula. Contrary to the concept of Eden, many traditions of Buddhism are based on the assumption that nirvana is possible for Buddhist practitioners in this life.

In the fourth chapter, Wheeler concludes his study with an exploration of the numerous long tombs in Islamic lands, some up to thirty

meters in length, believed to house the remains of giant prophets of the past. Their giant size was thought to be normative before the development of technology and civilization, which is associated with the shrinking of people down to their present size. In the Islamic exegetical tradition the development of complex technology and civilization is thought to require correspondingly complex laws, such as the laws of Moses, and later Muhammad. Hence the long tombs remind people of the lost state of simplicity, and the present state requiring religious law and state authority.

Mecca and Eden presents a novel and compelling perspective on the meaning of ritual, relic, and sacred space in Islam. Although Wheeler brings forth a significant body of evidence to support his thesis, one is left with the sense that too much stock is put in the social functionality of ritual and religion to the detriment of other factors. Wheeler acknowledges that participants in Islamic ritual do not necessarily buy into the state's attempt to legitimate its authority through ritual and relic patronage. However, the basic thrust of the text ignores these other reasons for ritual enactment and relic visitation. Michael Herzfeld describes the way participants in social activity such as ritual engage and re-form cultural structures and normative patterns through "social poetics".[1] This notion draws attention to an individual's agency in ritual and festival, a theme that functional theories of ritual and religion inadequately handle. One may be willing to agree that state and religious authorities use ritual, relic, and consecrated space to legitimate their existence, but it is difficult to follow Wheeler in his conclusion that religion's role in the perpetuation of authority is necessarily its most significant one.

Notes

1.Herzfeld, Michael. 1997. *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation-State*. New York: Routledge.

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