

Response to Ellen Amster's *Medicine and the Saints*

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Two descriptions, both quite violent, that bookend the first chapter of Ellen Amster's very fine work, *Medicine and the Saints*, seem particularly evocative. In the first, a seventeenth-century Sultan offends and dismisses two Sufis sent to him to mediate on behalf of the city of Fez. They curse him and use their religious power to the effect that his stomach is reversed and he vomits feces from his mouth for several days. He eventually sends for them and begs their pardon (p. 18). In the second, a twentieth-century Sultan, recently installed on the throne, has a prominent Sufi beaten to death, followed by the object lesson of amputating his disciples' hands and having the bloody stumps rubbed with salt (p. 49). Amster's narrative indicates that, in the political imagination of premodern Morocco and other Islamic societies, Sufi saints' miraculous power was an essential counterpart to the coercive power of rulers and other political elites. Moreover, both these groups exemplified their power through exercising it on human bodies in quotidian as well as dramatic ways. In the modern context, the Sufi side of this political arrangement has been displaced from the public sphere and relegated to the social margins, such as informal medical discourses and the self-understandings of particular groups. Amster's instinct is to regard "the Moroccan body as an archive, a repository of a lost form of political authority" (p. 27), leading to a history of modern transformations over the period 1877-1956.

I began this response by drawing attention to the violent images in order to underscore that if we are to take claims of religious power seriously, and understand pre-

modern sources on their own terms rather than on the basis of modern empiricism, then we must also understand religious agents such as Sufi saints as complex power brokers subject to the same grand array of personal and communal motivations that can be attributed to worldly ruling elites. Looking at Sufi narratives from a historical perspective, one finds them as filled with violence as contemporaneous political chronicles. The sources for this are many: confrontation with other political and sociointellectual elites; internal competition between different Sufi groups; and the general principle of hierarchical abjection encapsulated in the Sufi maxim that a disciple in front of his master should be like a corpse in the hands of a mortician. There is little that is egalitarian about Sufi social thought and, in the premodern context, acquiescence to claims of miraculous power stemmed from a combination of the overall social imagination and investment, whether this- or other-worldly, in the fortunes of particular individuals or groups as legitimate holders of such power. Beyond this, charges against one's opponents, Sufi as well as non-Sufi, that insinuate chicanery, unwarranted coercion, and abuse are as numerous in Sufi sources as in other types of pre-modern Islamic literatures that depict human lives. These factors make Sufis quite similar to other groups that were holders of power in pre-modern Islamic contexts rather than indicating any kind of an exception.

Still, the fact that the power of religious miracles has become marginal in the modern political sphere can make discussions of Sufi power sound like requiems. It seems to me that this issue points to the larger context in which we work as modern scholars of religion in general and Islam in particular. Interpreting complex religious worlds, deeply intertwined with matters social and political, requires an immense amount of work that is usually undertaken in conjunction with sympathy for the human subjects

we wish to depict. Further, this work happens against the background of a surrounding intellectual culture in which ‘religion’ is presumed to be coterminous with irrationality, whether implicitly or explicitly. The ‘positive way of knowing’ that Amster describes as having been the ideological cudgel used against Sufis in Islamic societies since the nineteenth century (pp. 45-48) has a tangent that touches our work as scholars of religious worlds as well. Rehabilitating the appreciation of imaginations and epistemologies no longer in the vogue requires empathetic and evocative narration, such as we see in this book excerpt as well as in other studies that have approached Sufism from the perspective of sociopolitical contextualization.

For scholars in Islamic studies, it is a particular challenge to walk the line between critique, sympathetic description, and romanticization. Given the prevalence of stereotypes about Islam, I have been asked, why not pursue only those topics that show Muslims making choices that appear salutary in terms of our contemporary biases? Often enough, this is expected to be the motivation behind the pursuit of Sufism, thought to be the ecumenical and non-confrontational face of Islam. However, this amounts to a myopic and reductive view. Reality is more complicated and, indeed, more interesting, and encompasses the full panoply of human behaviors. Exemplifying this perspective, Ellen Amster’s *Medicine and the Saints* is an important and impressive addition to the tradition of scholarship that highlights the intertwining of Islamic intellectual and social history.