Tanya M. Luhrmann. *The Good Parsi: The Fate of a Colonial Elite in a Postcolonial Society*

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run inevitable . . . and the idea of the phenomenological also will spread and deepen. This is where it is reasonable to be optimistic. Persistent irrationality and the espousals of mutual unintelligibility are bound to whither, and many will look back on modern thinking with contempt and amazement."

Smart's book is an outstanding piece of research on the world's religious belief systems. It indicates a direction toward bringing harmony among various religions by paving a way for the creation of a universal religion. Both scholars and students of religion will find something enlightening in this monumental work. This excellent book will be very useful in courses on comparative religion or the world's belief systems.

Ashok Malhotra


*The Good Parsi* is a curious book of modest dimension. The text contains seven brief chapters totaling two hundred pages, not counting a Preface, Prologue, the Notes, Bibliography, Acknowledgments and an Index. The author, Tanya M. Luhrmann, professionally an anthropologist, utilized materials ranging from literature and historical documents to religious materials and anecdotal observations derived from anthropological fieldwork. The Preface identifies the author's several visits to Bombay and western India from 1988 to 1994, during which she engaged in fieldwork that accounts for a major portion of the text's contents. In the Prologue, Dr. Luhrmann summarizes her purpose as a contribution "to the theorizing of the colonized subjects by describing a process in which members of a particular group chose a course to advance a morally desirable end, and yet, through the slow weave of circumstances, they became caught within the sticky web of their own symbolism and have come to accuse themselves of moral weakness.... Under colonial rule, the
attributes of the good Parsi became hierarchized, ...the good Parsi was more truthful, more pure, more charitable, more progressive, more rational, and more masculine than the Hindu-of-the-masses.... Now, in independent India,... they describe themselves with the critical condemnation the British would have used to describe Hindu others." (p. 15-16) The key points in this quoted passage may well be "theorizing", "moral" and "critical condemnation".

The first five chapters constitute what is valuable, interesting and meritorious in this book. Here Luhrmann offers (although not necessarily in this exact order) a survey of the origins of Zoroastrianism and its development as a religion in ancient Persia; how some Zoroastrians migrated to India, where they became known as Parsis (Parsees in some quotes); how this Parsi community, primarily located in Bombay, prospered under British colonial rule; and what happened to the community since Indian independence in 1947.

Let us first consider these more laudable aspects of The Good Parsi. Luhrmann provides a succinct and entirely readable account of the origins of Zoroastrianism in Persia, which is available in many other sources. Of greater merit is her summary of the history of the Parsi community in western India. What makes this so valuable is the variety of sources that inform her narrative. She groups this broad ranging information in deftly arranged subtitled sections such as "Biographical", "Ethnographic", "Literary", and "Cinematic" Vignettes. These Vignettes provide a wealth of intimate material generally unavailable elsewhere and they open fascinating windows on some personalities in India's Parsi community.

Luhrmann quite reasonably explains how the Parsi community achieved success in the period of British domination. Her generously quoted sources from British documents especially reveal how the Bombay Parsi community came to earn British respect as "collaborators". In the course of the 19th century the Parsis emerged as a unique community for a variety of reasons. They successfully cooperated with the British, they enjoyed financial success as a result of this cooperation, and they made impressive and worthy contributions in many aspects of India's modernization. Luhrmann identifies certain factors in Zoroastrian religious beliefs and practices, such as a community
outreach spirit, sharing with others, and social welfare projects that doubtless accounts for their success. Throughout Luhrmann emphasizes how some British lavished praise on their Parsi subjects as generally being the most westernized and progressive group within India's diverse racial, ethnic and religious communities.

The scope of Luhrmann's narrative extends far beyond the confines of India's Parsi community. She depicts in a more contemporary context how Parsis seem to have easily adjusted to life in Great Britain and North America. *The Good Parsi* may be one of the best sources of information on the Parsis in the western world. Her descriptions of Parsi organizations and their activities in the United States offer interesting insights into their remarkable adaptability. Her analytical assessment of the problems they faced, how they successfully interacted with peoples of other religions, and how they managed to retain their Zoroastrian traditions remains a significantly praiseworthy contribution. This section of the book contains the sort of intimate detail (such as the experiences of a Parsi woman who married an American man) that enliven the narrative and offers appreciated glimpses of Zoroastrian practices beyond previously described more formal matters of religious rites and official beliefs.

One matter of dubious merit surfaces early in the text. This is the revelation of a potential gender bias that cuts doubts on Luhrmann's objectivity. In the Prologue Luhrmann states: "...what I began to notice, as the ethnography will unfold, was an insistent, reiterated complaint that the Parsi men in particular were pathetic, spineless, cowardly and impotent." (p. 14) This attitude colors the tone of her narrative throughout all sections dealing with more contemporary conditions. It is difficult to imagine that any competent objective scholar could so categorically judge thousands of human beings as pathetic, spineless, cowardly, and impotent.

It is in Chapter 6 where Luhrmann begins to stray from her established cohesive historical focus into a new theorizing theme alluded to in the Prologue. It must be noted that this Prologue is subtitled: "Fateful Embraces". The general reader and anyone unacquainted with anthropological terminology, may feel this transition in Chapter 6 might more appropriately be entitled
"Fatal Attraction". The sixth chapter innocently commences by offering revelations concerning Luhrmann's personal relationship with a Parsi friend, Roshan, whom she met at an American university. This quickly degenerates into a psychoanalysis that rankles as injudicious and somewhat offensive. One wonders why Luhrmann determined to include some of these details in a text for publication and available to the general public? What follows becomes even more distressing. The narrative digresses into a mishmash of gibberish that makes little sense and serves no useful purpose. Luhrmann seems intent on displaying bibliographic acumen more appropriate for a doctoral oral examination than in a book of this nature. The theoretical intrusion offers little that is illuminating, nor does it contribute much of substance to what preceded.

If Chapter 6 contains an unfortunate digression, the final chapter, "Anthropological Repositioning" represents a fatal error of judgment. Here Luhrmann painfully (and somewhat naively) apologizes for the credibility of anthropology as an academic profession. She concludes on a high note of Pollyanna-ish trope that smacks of self-delusion. "There is an angry sense in contemporary academia that the strident emphasis on difference and domination will save us from easy political complicities.... Why should we imagine that if we grasp more firmly the 'historical' roots of conflict we will then choose the morally preferable alternative? And how can we have any viable notion of human rights if we do not believe precisely that 'people who are hungry and oppressed have meaningful lives'? ...the half-truths and blind sweetness of the images in National Geographic are not a palatable alternative. But surely anthropology is not asking that from us. Surely there is a route between the angry insistence on insufficiently engaged difference and the kindly platitudes of a bourgeois romance with poverty .... To hold doubt and yet to be curious; to want to know; to be surprised and awestruck and excited by something that we do not understand. To hold doubt, curiosity, and awe in tension is the engagement of fieldwork, and if we stick to the honest description of the fieldwork, we may do a powerful lot of good."

While all of this suggests Ms. Luhrmann possibly had some hidden motives for writing The Good Parsi, "Anthropological
Repositionings" represents an ill-advised appendage to *The Good Parsi*. Harvard University Press is a distinguished publishing enterprise in our nation. A good editor surely should have pointed out that this chapter simply had no logical justification for inclusion in a text dealing with her study of the Parsis. If anthropology as a discipline faces either externally threatening castigations or internal tension, this book is hardly the appropriate place to wash dirty linen in public. If Ms. Luhrmann was truly motivated towards finding some justification for her anthropological methodology and some common ground for the future of her profession, this final chapter failed to convince.

Ronald R. Robel