Good Bureaucrats and God. Or, the Ethical Labor of the Public

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The blurred distinction between the public and private, particularly in the Global South, has elicited extensive academic commentary. In this essay, I invert the usual order: the initial assumption of the public-private distinction. Instead, I examine how in particular bureaucratic spaces, the distinction is produced and to what ends. I do this by marshaling ethnographic evidence gathered during three years of fieldwork conducted with the Irrigation bureaucracy in Pakistan’s Punjab province – the country’s agricultural heartland, its most populous province, and home to the world’s largest contiguous irrigation network. While popular understandings of bureaucracy conceptualize it as a foil to democratic, ethical and legal enterprise, I show bureaucratic activity to be a form of ethical laboring. Working through my interlocutors’ attempts at being ‘good Muslims,’ I show how the pursuit of ‘private’ considerations furthers logics of the public.

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