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Orthodox-Muslim Interactions at 'Mixed Shrines' in Macedonia

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In his profoundly influential 'The Clash of Civilizations?' Samuel Huntington asserts that 'Islam has bloody borders' (Huntington 1993: 35). Throughout all but the first three centuries of its existence, Orthodox Christianity has shared borders with Islam across immense stretches of territory extending at times from North Africa to the steppes of Asia. In this paper I look at Muslim Christian interaction in one small portion of that shared borderland, examining inter-communal interaction in the context of religious shrines used by both communities in Macedonia (*a.k.a.* FYROM). In so doing I demonstrate the potential range of interaction between Islam and Christianity -- from amicability to antagonism -- and analyse the grounds of both neighbourliness and inter-communal antagonism. I also, in investigating Orthodox communities in their encounters with 'their other', draw out elements of Orthodox belief and practice which prove less notable in more homogeneous settings.

Antagonistic Tolerance

In 2002 I was asked by the editor of *Current Anthropology* to comment on Robert Hayden's ideas concerning 'antagonistic tolerance' (Hayden 2002). Hayden contended that the acceptance of others in a shared holy place is 'a pragmatic adaptation to a situation in which repression of the other group's practices may not be possible' (Hayden 2002: 219). His presumption, made explicit throughout the paper and in the reply to discussants which subsequently followed, was that the presence of another -- unless that other represented an

insignificant and powerless minority -- is necessarily perceived by communities with which it shares the relevant site as a threat which must, wherever possible, be obviated. In Hayden's construction the other, if it cannot be either converted to sameness, reduced to relative impotence, or driven out, has to be 'tolerated'. At the heart of that tolerance, however, is a fundamental potential for violence that can be activated by the slightest shift in the balance of power.

Hayden's observations did not concur with my own experience of inter-communal interactions around shared sites in Palestine, whether at *Mar Elyas* (the Monastery of Elijah) outside Bethlehem, at *Bîr es-Saiyideh* (the Well of Our Lady) in Beit Sahour, or at the church of St. George in nearby 'Khadr (see Bowman 1993: 433-439,450-451 and 435). At these sites local Muslims and Christians had gathered and, rather than making explicit their sectarian affiliations, had identified situationally, discovering and connecting with whomever they were speaking through shared webs of association pertaining to locale of origin, connections through kin, friends, or neighbours, common or associated occupations or employers, and the amity-inducing like. The focus of their interest, nominally various wonder-working elements contained within the sites, seemed for the most part to be the pleasure of communal mixing *per se*; antagonisms only tended to come to the fore -- unifying Palestinian Muslims and Christians -- when others (for instance Greek Orthodox priests or Israeli police) aggressed against them as 'Arabs'. I consequently argued against Hayden's conception of a fundamental antagonism by saying that

> identities at syncretistic shrines can function with relative unfixity, only being forced towards aggressive articulation, closure and mobilisation by the perception of an other setting itself against the inchoate identity it focusses and brings to expression. That perception can be propagated by political and/or religious elites, or can result from antagonistic activities by another community or people. More often, however, identities are unfixed and contingent with certain circumstances bringing one element of the field of identifications which constitute the social self to dominion and other circumstances

overturning and reshaping that hierarchy (Bowman 2002: 220).

To me identities were contingent and as capable of being aggressively mobilised against other groups as of being subsumed within other forms of identification such as, in the Beit Sahouran instance, pan-sectarian nationalism. The antagonism Hayden stressed as foundational in inter-communal relations was for me a contingent result of situations and the powers and inequities at play in those situations. Mixing was thus neither necessarily a consequence of 'antagonistic tolerance' or amicable syncretism; close attention to the context, and the dynamics operative therein, seemed vital to any understanding of what was going on at shrines where communities mixed.

Syncretism and Anti-Syncretism: Teleologies of Culture Contact

It is impossible to avoid the term 'syncretism' in discussing inter-communal mixing at shrines. Syncretism is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as the 'attempted union or reconciliation of diverse or opposite sets of tenets or practices' (the *OED* furthermore notes that its usage is 'usually derogatory'). As Stewart and Shaw point out in their introduction to *Syncretism/ Anti-Syncretism: the Politics of Religious Synthesis* (1994),

> 'syncretism' is a contentious term, often taken to imply 'inauthenticity' or
> 'contamination, the infiltration of a supposedly 'pure' tradition by symbols and
> meanings seen as belonging to other, incompatible traditions' (Stewart & Shaw
> 1994: 1).

They locate the roots of this pejorative usage of the term in the reaction of both Catholic and Protestant theologians to seventeenth century efforts to reconcile Lutheran, Catholic and Reformed denominations. Such ecclesiastical reactions were themselves examples of 'anti-syncretism', defined as "antagonism to religious synthesis shown by agents concerned with defence of religious boundaries' (Stewart & Shaw 1994: 7). Stewart and Shaw and their contributors

demonstrate how it -- and the charges of 'inauthenticity' and 'pollution' it mobilises -- has opposed

syncretism in academic, political, and popular debate to the present day. Nonetheless Stewart and

Shaw also discern a laudatory approach to syncretism in modern anthropology, initially emerging

in Herskovits's portrayal of syncretism in *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1941) as a mode of

assimilation in 'melting pot' America, and visible today in post-modern celebrations of 'the

invention of tradition' and 'cultural hybridity' (see Stewart & Shaw 1994: 5-6 and 1).

This 'war of words' between syncretists and anti-syncretists tends to efface the original

sense of syncretism, and, when extended to the analysis of 'shared shrines', distracts attention

from what actually happens at those sites. Is a shared shrine necessarily 'syncretistic'? Hayden

certainly does not believe it is; for him sharing serves -- since the presence of the other appears to

threaten the integrity of self -- to fortify further the frontiers between sectarian communities. He

writes that 'processes of competition between groups that distinguish themselves from each other

may be manifested as syncretism yet still result, ultimately, in the exclusion of the symbols of one

group or another from a religious shrine' (Hayden 2002: 228). If, however, we take up

Herskovits's assessment of syncretism as instrumental in the progressive 'acculturative

continuum' (Herskovits 1941 cited in Stewart & Shaw 1994: 6) proceeding from culture contact to

full cultural integration, then syncretistic 'sharing' at holy places forges new and irremediable

'hybrid' or 'creole' identities. In the first instance there is, despite appearances, no sharing; in the

second there is, after sharing, no going back. Identities are either fixed or irrevocably transformed.

Neither approach adequately encompassed what I'd observed in the shared shrines I'd studied.

Syncretism as a term first appears in *Peri Philadelphias* ('On Brotherly Love'), one of the

seventy eight essays of various dates which make up Plutarch's *Moralia.* Here the Roman

historian (46-120 C.E.) described 'the practice of the Cretans, who, though they often quarrelled

with and warred against each other, made up their differences and united when outside enemies

attacked; and this it was which they called "syncretism"' (cited in Stewart & Shaw 1994: 3). This

definition, which Stewart and Shaw note 'anticipated Evans-Pritchard's concept of segmentation' (Ibid: 4), circumvents the issue of identity transformation which renders incommensurate the two approaches to mixed shrines discussed above. Plutarch describes a situational assumption of a shared identity which, subsuming those which preceded it, can nonetheless be shed when the assault which brought it about has been overcome. Although Plutarch's usage does not explicitly pertain to religious practice or refer to sites constituted as 'syncretistic' by shared practices, his definition easily extends to sites where common interests give rise to shared practices and even shared identities. Identities are mobile without being either fixed or amorphous; amity is possible but neither necessary nor binding. Here issues of agency, and of those things which restrain or impel it, come to the fore. Unbinding the discussion of mixed shrines from the constraints of particularly 'loaded' definitions of syncretism enables us to navigate between the Scylla of fixed, conflictual identities and the Charybdis of 'evolutionary' transformations of blended identities. Shared practices at mixed sites may entail antagonism and may forge novel identities, but neither is necessary; sharing may just as well be the practice of a moment engaged by persons who return, after that 'communion', to their traditional selves and ways.

That passage through definitional straits does not, however, simplify but rather complicates the approach to mixed shrines. If syncretistic shrines cease to be exclusively either arenas for 'competitive sharing' or sites of a 'mechanical mixing' (Stewart & Shaw 1994: 6), then we need to know much more of what goes on in them if we are to characterise them at all. Once commonality is disentangled from the 'politics' of syncretism and anti-syncretism generic discussions of mixed shrines become problematic and we are forced to pay close attention to the particularities of the field. What is the character of that mixing or sharing if engaging in common practices at the same site neither necessarily solidifies identities antagonistically nor opens them to transformation?

Delineation of the 'field' is itself problematic. The presence of agency necessitates close attention to what people are doing -- and saying they are doing -- while they are in the process of doing it. It is vital to attend to *who* is saying *what* to *whom* and *who* is listening*;* long term historical processes may bring about observable and documentable effects, but what actually occurs in reaching those ends, and what sorts of silencings and debates take place in the process, are important to note if we want to really know what goes on in 'sharing'.

Hayden's study examines historical accounts as well as court records of an extended struggle over a shrine at Madhi in Maharashtra revered by Muslims and Hindus alike, and compares this case with the historical and ethnographic record of struggles between Muslims, Catholics and Orthodox Christians in the Balkans leading up to the frenzy of expulsions and destructions which marked the Yugoslav 'Wars of Secession'. In all the cases he discusses he extrapolates the character of previous *in situ* inter-communal interaction around the respective shrines from processes taking place well after legal or literal conflict had become the sole form of interaction. If, however, we are not to assume 'end results' are pre-determined by the initial moments of mixing at shrines, then we must attempt to see what happens on the ground *while* syncretistic practices are occurring. *Ex post facto* descriptions, even when they are not themselves extensions of the struggles, are always shaped by what preceded them; we all know what happens when the victors tell the story, but even when recounted by victims it rarely accords with what preceded the crime. Furthermore, once we assume the role of agents and agency in activities around mixed shrines, we must also consider questions of power and resistance. It is likely that some persons or groups will work against sharing while others engage in, if not actively promote, it; only close attention to the discourses operating around shared or mixed sites will allow us to know which of the multiple positions around the issue of sharing were occupied and how one of those, if that is the case, overcomes others and becomes hegemonic.

Field Agenda

My encounter with Hayden's arguments in the pages of *Current Anthropology* provoked me to examine contemporary instances of communal mixing around religious shrines, and as these have, for the most part, ceased in West Bank Palestine as a consequence of political developments there (see Bowman 2007) I turned to Macedonia (*a.k.a.* 'The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia') where I had, during earlier field excursions, witnessed such 'sharing'. Macedonia, like Palestine, has a mixed Muslim-Christian population which uses, often concurrently, the same holy places, but the new nation is also very different in having a dissimilar confessional demography, a 'national minority' (Albanian-speaking Muslims) which took part in a nationalist uprising in 2001, and a government which has only recently retreated from being aggressively pro-Orthodox in practice and policy.

I had, by the time I left for the field in April 2006, programmatically abandoned the term 'shared' in the delineation of shrines and replaced it with 'mixed'. While I could not abandon the term 'shrine' (by which I meant a place associated with a divinity, sacred figure, or relic, usually protected or signified by some sort of edifice) without extending the matter to be examined to absurd dimensions, 'shared' already seemed too strongly to connote an amity that I would be wrong to presuppose. I knew, from an earlier exploratory visit (July 2005) that Muslims came to Orthodox sites and that, at one site, Orthodox Christians worshipped in a disused mosque. Prejudging such interaction by labelling it 'sharing' seemed problematic, while categorising it as 'mixing' -- a term capable of embracing interaction ranging from antagonistic mobilisation to amicable mutuality -- allowed the nuances of each case to emerge.

Within Macedonia I chose to look at three sites, two in Western Macedonia and one in the Northeast. The first, *Sveti Nikola* (Saint Nicholas)*,* is a tiny Macedonian Orthodox church on the outskirts of Makedonski Brod, a rural municipality of approximately 6000 inhabitants (all Christian). What designated the church for selection was the presence *within* the church of a *turbe*

(tomb) of a *Bektashi* saint, *Hadir Bābā*, which was visited by *Bektashi* and members of other Sufi

orders as well as by Macedonian Albanian Sunni Muslims not only from neighbouring mixed

villages but also from more distant sites. The second site is *Sveti Bogoroditsa Prechista* (Holy

Mother of God Most Innocent) outside of Kicevo (a mixed city in a region with a profoundly

mixed Muslim-Christian population). *Sveti Bogoroditsa Prechista* is a large active Orthodox

monastery whose spectacular 19th century church contains within it a well over which is a pierced

stone through which both Muslim and Christian visitors crawl prior to taking away water from

the well. Finally, the *Husamedin Pasha* mosque is an empty early 16th century mosque

overlooking the city of Stĭp, a city with an Orthodox majority which nonetheless contains

significant populations of Sufi *Roma* as well as Macedonian-speaking Sunni Muslims. The

mosque contains within its grounds a *Halveti* Sufi *turbe* where *Ashura* celebrations are carried out

by the town's Sunni and *Halveti* Muslims, and the mosque itself is opened on the 2nd of August

for a priest-led celebration of the Orthodox feast of the Prophet Elijah. The three sites,

respectively, represent a popular mixed shrine with evidence of both Christian and Muslim objects

of reverence, a Christian church in which Muslims and Christians alike engage in rituals which

appear to be markedly Christian, and a Muslim place of worship which Christians and Muslims

both seek to expropriate, ritually and physically, as their own. The three allow for observations of

what at least formally seem to be 'mixing of practices', 'sharing of practices', and 'antagonistic

tolerance'.

First Scenario: Sveti Nikola

Sveti Nikola is a small Orthodox church hidden within a grove of trees overlooking the

town of Makedonski Brod. One approaches up a long flight of stone steps which carries the

visitor from the old Ottoman period houses at the base of the hill, past concrete communist period

housing blocs, to a gateway flanked on the left by a niche containing a simple painting of St.

Nicholas -- worn around the mouth from continuously being touched -- and surmounted (at least

on our initial approach) by an eight inch high cross surrounded by simple iron scrollwork. The

church itself is a small square building (six and a half metres on each side) with an apse on the

south wall that, from the difference in roofing materials, appears a later addition. There is no cross

on the roof of the church, although a small indented cross is worked into plaster above the narrow

window of the apse.

The interior of the church is simple, with a stone slab floor covered with a multitude of

diverse and overlapping pieces of carpet. The wooden iconostasis is covered with pictures of

saints, apparently locally done. On the right of the church, running parallel to the south wall, is a

flat-topped platform approximately two meters long by three quarters of a meter wide raised about

forty centimetres above the floor level and covered with multiple layers of cloth (the top covering

green with a gold piece beneath it). Closer observation shows that, particularly in the vicinity of

this platform, the carpets and the pictures on and leaning against the wall are Muslim and

represent Mecca, Ali and Hussein, and moments of what is in effect Shi'a history.

There are two ways to approach the *Sveti Nikola* church and its function as a mixed shrine.

The first is to perform an archaeology of its history. This is not something that can easily be done

from the shrine, or even the town, itself. Local Christians, asked about the shrine, related stories

of how an old bearded man 'in the past' saved the townspeople from plague by having them kill an

ox, cut its hide into strips, link them together, and mark out as much land as could be contained

within the resultant rope for dedication to a monastery (see Stahl 1986: 178 on magical

boundaries). People, when asked, often said that the old man -- *Sveti Nikola* -- is buried beneath

the raised platform within the church. Visiting Muslims told exactly the same story except that in

their version the old man was *Hadir Bābā,* a *Bektashi* saint, who is buried within the *turbe* (tomb)

in the church.

Other stories told of the local *pasha* who, during the Ottoman period, found as he attempted to build his house at the bottom of the hill that each evening everything erected during the day collapsed. He then -- depending on who was telling the story -- dreamed of either the Christian or the *Bektashi* saint who told him to build either a monastery or a *tekke* (Sufi monastery) on the hill above. When he did he was able to complete his house, which still stands at the foot of the stairs.

Makedonski Brod today is completely Christian and local people, talking in and around the church, speak as though it has always been. A local historian, formerly a communist and still a secularist, speaking in town (not at the church) told us however that until the early twentieth century Balkan wars Makedonski Brod had been a hub of Ottoman administration known as *Tekkiya* because of the *Bektashi* monastery built above the town. This version of history, suggesting that the *Sveti Nikola* church is in fact the *turbe* of the founder of the *Bektashi tekke,* is supported by an archaeological note in a Skopje museum newsletter asserting that 'on that place today can only be seen the *turbe*, in which, according to the stories of the local population, was buried the founder of the *tekke, Haydar Bābā*' (Stojanovski 1979: 53). Other conversations in the town -- *not* on the grounds of *Sveti Nikola* -- brought up mention of the 1994 consecration of the building as a church by the local bishop and the removal, 'sometime a while ago', of a triangular frame which had for years sat on top of the tomb of Saint Nicholas (see below for images of the 'platform' in the church and traditional Sufi tombs). From this approach it seems evident that *Sveti Nikola* church was, at one time, the central feature -- the founder's tomb -- of a *Bektashi* monastery and that it, in the wake of the flight of 'Turks' from the town after the Balkan Wars and then through the long period of post-1945 state disapprobation of formal religion, had sat -- 'disenfranchised' -- above the town, approached by different communities who remembered it in different ways until, in the nationalistic fervour following the collapse of Yugoslavia and the formation of 'Orthodox' Macedonia, the church expropriated it .

Picture

Turbe in *Sveti Nikola/Hadir Bābā*

The diachronic analytic suggests an inexorable movement towards expropriation of the site

by one of the communities which currently seem to 'share' it. Another way of examining *Sveti*

Nikola is to look synchronically at the relations taking place at the present time within the shrine,

and that perspective, while not denying the trajectory indicated by the historical view, offers

insights into forms of interaction between communities around a mixed site that a 'teleological'

interpretation would render invisible. I would like here to offer two vignettes which respectively

indicate the symbiosis involved in 'sharing' a shrine and some of the forces which work to

dissolve that sharing.

Dragina is the Orthodox caretaker of the *Sveti Nikola* shrine and, as she is getting old, she

is assisted in keeping the place clean and functional by her son Boge, who works as a

schoolteacher in the town, as well as by a number of men who make up the 'Church Committee'.

On the fifth of May, the day preceding the Orthodox Feast of St. George, Dragina, Boge, and

those with time to help work to prepare the church for the 'pilgrimage' to the site that local people

will enact for the feast. Preparation involves rendering the site much less like a mosque and more

like an Orthodox church, and thus the carpets are taken up from the floor and the various Muslim

images and objects are hidden from the view of visitors. Green 'Muslim' ox tallow candles and the

Muslim prayer beads [*sibhah*] which visitors step through for blessings (similar to those at *Mar*

Elyas and at *Sveti Bogoroditsa)* are removed from the 'tomb' of St. Nicholas and replaced with

white 'Christian' candles and a smaller rosary. The site, thus 'Christianised', is ready for the

hundreds of visitors, all but a few Orthodox, who visit that evening and throughout the following

day. At dawn on the seventh, however, Dragina and Boge are busy in the church 'returning' the

site to its normal mixed state. Carpets are carefully relaid and intense discussion takes place around where exactly the image of Ali with his sword, *Zulfiqar,* should be placed and how to arrange the cloth that partially covers it. Prayer rugs are laid around the *turbe,* the *sibhah* are replaced, and the tallow candles are lit because 'they' are coming and must be made to feel at home.

There is, of course, an issue of economics involved in this; 'the others' leave generous gifts and, Dragina says, 'we benefit from it'. Nonetheless the affection she shows for visitors and the easy generosity with which she and others, including the priest, give red 'St. George' eggs to, and fill the water bottles of, Muslim visitors belies a purely economistic reading. Women Muslims ask Dragina to pass the *sibhah* over them for blessings and, when a respected Sufi *derwish* from Kicevo comes to the shrine (praying with his wife in the direction of the iconostasis rather than towards the *turbe*), Dragina -- concerned about her son's continuing failure to find a wife -- asks the man to pass the beads over Boge so as to read his fortune.

Insert picture of Boge having his fortune told

Whereas the description above suggests an easy sharing of the site, and an institutional and personal openness by Orthodox keepers towards the presence of Muslim 'others', the following suggests ways that, without even being provoked by 'higher' powers, that sharing might disintegrate. When we visited *Sveti Nikola* a week before St. George's Day, the gate to the grounds of the church was surmounted by a small metal cross surrounded by ornamental scrollwork. While interviewing people who were gathered in the grounds I asked about the absence of a cross on the roof of the church itself. One man responded aggressively 'I'll show you the cross' and left the grounds, returning twenty minutes later with a six foot high gold-coloured anodised cross. This, it turned out, was a gift he, a *Gasterbeiter* returned to his hometown for a vacation, was presenting to the church. A week later the small cross had been angle-ground off and thrown aside while the gold cross had been welded in its place, overwhelming the entryway and the icon of Saint Nicholas (see illustration).

Insert photo of entrance + cross

On the day following Saint George's Day an Albanian speaking man and his wife came to *Sveti Nikola* to pray at the *turbe,* leave gifts, and take water from the shrine. They were clearly uncomfortable and while the woman left quickly, returning down the stairway to their car, the man stayed behind and insisted on speaking to me, evidently a foreigner, about the 'insult' of the cross over the gateway. He told me that the site is a Muslim holy place and that local people have no right to erect that cross over a place which has 'been Muslim for centuries'. I asked him what form of Islam he followed and he responded 'it doesn't matter; I am a Muslim'. Elizabeta Koneska and I asked him to speak to the members of the Church Committee who were gathered nearby, and he went to them, politely commending whomever had been generous enough to make a gift to the shrine, but suggesting that person should, if he wanted to make a present, instead have helped to pay for a better road to the place:

> this cross separates us; no Muslims will feel comfortable coming to this big and
>
> historical place which we used to come to visit. We have been here for years
>
> and have felt good to come here, but this is a barrier to us...How would you
>
> feel if I came to your church, to your home, and put a minaret there? I will
>
> never put a mosque in a church.

The men responded apologetically, saying that they understood the problem and that they would talk with the man who paid for the cross. They claimed he was not around at the time, although he was in fact a member of the group addressed. After the Muslim left the group was clearly discomfited, acknowledging that there was a problem but seeming uncertain how to address it.

Second Scenario: Sveti Bogoroditsa Prechista

There is no doubt that *Sveti Bogoroditsa Prechista* is an Orthodox monastery but this does not prevent a continuous flow of Muslims -- Sufi and Sunni alike (the Albanian speaking man discussed above claimed to be a frequent visitor) -- from coming into its chapel, circumnavigating

its icon dense interior, crawling three times through the small passageway beneath the icons of Mary and Jesus, and collecting water from the well beneath it to take back to their homes. While Muslim visitors to *Sveti Nikola* had occasionally spoken of coming to the shrine for healing, they generally claimed to come to give respect to the saint or because they had forged a bond with, or been called to visit, *Hadir Bābā* in a dream. Muslim and Christian visitors to *Sveti Bogoroditsa Prechista* claim to come explicitly for healing; the shrine, through the well water, is renowned for inducing fertility in the sterile, returning sanity to the mad, straightening bent limbs, and other thaumaturgic cures. Even the *imam* in the central mosque of nearby Kicevo sends members of his congregation to *Sveti Bogoroditsa Prechista* when he feels they are afflicted by 'Christian demons' that can only be driven out by beneficent Christian powers.

Insert picture of the pierced stone at Sveti Bogoroditsa

Whereas at *Sveti Nikola* Muslim visitors carry out Islamic forms of worship around a *turbe* they see as being not of St. Nicholas but of *Hadir Bābā*, in *Sveti Bogoroditsa Prechista* Muslim visitors appear to carry out the same sorts of ritual activities as do the many Christian visitors to the site. Like Christians, Muslims will light candles and approach the icons throughout the interior of the church, particularly those lining the *iconostasis,* and will leave before them small gifts (sometimes money, often towels or new, packaged articles of clothing such as socks or shirts). Then, as do the Christians, they go to the rear left of the church where an icon of with Jesus's healing of the paralytic at the Pools of Siloam (*John* 5: 8-10) surmounts an artificial hole through a wall. On the left of the icon is hung a long string of cross-inscribed beads (the Mother Superior claims they were left by a Russian predecessor) that are passed over supplicants three times before they crawl, again three times, through the hole in the direction of the west wall of the church. Having done this they collect themselves, or have given to them, water which has been drawn from the well below which they first splash on their faces three times and then take to their

homes to drink it or give it to others who are ill (when the water runs out the sickness returns, and people come back for more). Some visitors, both Muslim and Christian, will decide to stay in the monastery where they do work to support the church and are healed by that residence.

Closer observation of Muslim visitors, as well as interviews with them, reveal that although they appear to follow the same practices of approach and deportment as do Christians, they succeed, by holding back from Christian groups while moving through the church, in masking small but significant differences. In approaching icons they do not kiss them, they do not cross themselves, and, in praying, they silently mouth Muslim prayers and hold their hands open and palm up rather than clasped in Christian praying mode. Nonetheless they have no hesitation in acknowledging that the powers they approach are Christian; this is a healing place that is known to work and therefore when one is ill or needful of help it is one of the pre-eminent places to approach (many of those interviewed – Muslim and Christian alike -- said they had visited several places, both Muslim and Christian, in search of cures, fertility, etc.).

There is here an intriguing practical logic operative; people visiting sites whose powers are renowned as efficacious (particularly for healing) will, at those sites, carry out the rituals appropriate to those powers as far as is possible without explicitly violating the dictates of their own religions (Muslims, for instance, will not cross themselves). Knowing that certain visits and the rituals involved therein have worked for neighbours of other religions, they mimic those activities as far as possible without 'self-harming' in the hope that such copying will produce the same effects for them, despite confessional differences. This is not a syncretism insofar as identities are not transformed, but it is a sharing. It is also a sharing acknowledged and legitimated (perhaps because they know people will do it regardless of whether or not they approve) by religious leaders, like the *imam* of the Kicevo mosque, who themselves would never think of entering the holy places of another religion.

In the Church of the Apostles Peter and Paul in Kicevo we were told by the priest that

many local Muslims (Kicevo is half Orthodox and half Muslim) came to the church not only for holy water and to ask for blessings but also, to provide specific examples, when a Christian man has converted to marry a Muslim woman but nonetheless wants their child baptised or when Muslims want priest-blessed icons to keep in their houses. The priest prays over Muslims with a special prayer -- that designated in the prayer books for the unbaptized -- and instead of laying his cope over their heads raises it in front of them.

This 'space' for the unbaptised, and the non-Orthodox, is interestingly paralleled in the legendry and architecture of *Sveti Bogoroditsa Prechista.* The Mother Superior of the monastery told us that 'in the past' the Superior of the monastery and a *pasha* were discussing the respective virtues of Christianity and Islam. They decided to test whose faith was the right one by filling two glasses with water and dropping them some five meters off of a balcony, whereupon the glass of the pasha broke, while that of the Superior remained intact and its water did not spill. The pasha consequently decided to donate 120 hectares of land in the vicinity of Brod to the monastery and the Superior, in appreciation, promised that part of the church would be built for Muslim use. Although the current Superior stressed that the narthex was not 'intended' for Muslims, she stressed that it is the part of the church 'they can come to'. It is not clear what the Superior meant by this insofar as it was clear that Muslims frequented the whole of the church, but this part of the church, like the analogous part of the prayer book, was evidently deemed 'appropriate' to those who were neither Orthodox nor Christian.

The 'sharing' occurring in the church is, however, vulnerable precisely because of that space which is designated as open to the other. While none of the Muslims we interviewed at *Sveti Bogoroditsa Prechista* mentioned this, one of the nuns -- a novice recently graduated from university in Skopje -- stressed vehemently that 'Muslims' claimed that the undecorated part of the church belonged to them and asserted that they were organising to 'steal' it from the church. She, when asked for water by Muslim visitors, would tell them either that there was

none or that they could get it themselves from the fountain outside.

Third Scenario: Husamedin Pasha Mosque

While, in the previous two scenarios, we have observed forms of mixing and forms of sharing, both potentially threatened by tendencies towards fission, in the case of the *Husamedin Pasha* we observe a site in which there is no mixing and all that is shared is the same site at different times.

Insert illustration of the Husamedin Pasha mosque

The mosque, now fairly derelict, is an early sixteenth century 'central' mosque that was seriously damaged during the Balkan Wars yet functioned as a mosque for the minority Muslim population until 1945 when it was closed. At that time the local *Halveti* Sufi community, an order quite close to Orthodox Sunni Islam, began to celebrate the feast of *Ashura* in the grounds of the mosque where a *turbe* (that of *Medin Bābā*) stands. In 1953 the mosque was reopened as a secular building and used as a gallery space for the Stĭp Museum. In 1956 that closed, and the mosque has generally been unused since that time, although for a while the 'Children's Embassy', a Macedonian NGO established in 1992, held events in and around the building.

At the same time (1992), allegedly because of the intervention of the nationalist Christian Democratic VMRO (Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity) government, access to the mosque was given to the local Orthodox Church that began celebrating the Feast of the Prophet Elijah *inside* the mosque. This celebration, based on the idea -- for which there is no firm evidence -- that the original mosque was built over an Orthodox Church, uses the mosque's interior both for a liturgy with icons set in the *mihrab* and for a subsequent communal meal. Christians inscribe crosses on the exterior front of the mosque and burn candles on the porch around the entryway throughout the year. Up until a year or so ago local *Halveti* Muslims referred to the mosque as 'St. Elijah's Church'.

Recently the Islamic community, strengthened by substantial financial contributions coming into it from diasporic Štĭp Muslims in Turkey as well as other Islamic sources, has been revitalised, not only restoring the only operative mosque in the town but also building an Islamic school. A number of its members have been discussing the desirability of restoring the *Husamedin Pasha* as the central mosque, have gained access to a document issued by the *Macedonian Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments* announcing that the mosque is a protected monument (which they interpret as indicating that the mosque belongs to them as the appropriate cultural minority), and have stopped calling it St. Elijah's church and begun referring to it as the *Husamedin Pasha* mosque. One man we interviewed in April 2006, an activist in this movement, told us that the Christian celebrations as they were currently being carried out were 'inappropriate for a place of worship'. The year before he and a friend had walked by during the feast and, afraid to enter the mosque, had seen through the door 'Christians eating and drinking *rakia* (a distilled fruit alcohol) around a table they'd set up in the middle'. Despite their sense of the mosque's desecration, he asserted that when the mosque is turned back to 'what it should be' he 'will share it with Christians on the day they want to use it'.

We spoke as well with a priest from the Church of Saint Nikola, the town's main church, who told us that *Sveti Elia* (the mosque) was built over the foundations of a destroyed church as the cruciform shape of the mosque shows. The priest told us that

> according to the ground-plan, this is a church, but when the Osmanli Turks came, they turned it into a mosque. The foundation is still a church. We want to make it a church again, but from Skopje they would not give us permission. Otherwise, it would have been a church by now. Now we don't know what it is any longer: neither one nor the other. We want it to be a church, and we will make it a church. We are asking for a permission to dig inside and see what will be revealed, but they know it is a church in the foundations, and that's why they deny us the permission. It will be a church. Why should it be a mosque?

They have one already.

For him the mosque is no more than an historical excrescence occluding access to the real holy site that lies beneath it. Accordingly to his description the Christian worship that takes place there proceeds as though the Muslim intervention were invisible: 'during the ceremony a prayer is sung, a bread *panagia* is raised in the air, and everything takes place inside....Outside the anointment takes place….' The Orthodox priesthood, powerful in Stĭp, intends, when it convinces the government to allow it to carry out the archaeological survey which will, in its eyes, legitimate its 'restoration' of the church, to tear the *Husamedin Pasha* mosque down and build over it 'a new and more beautiful ancient church'.

In February 2006 members of the Macedonian *Roma* community, for the most part *Halveti* Sufis, had unofficially gained temporary access to the mosque during preparations for the *Ashura* feast at the neighbouring *turbe* of *Medin Bābā*. These Muslims, who as a community had not had access to the mosque since its closure in 1945, removed accreted rubble from the mosque (leaving the Orthodox ritual materials, including icons of Elijah, in place in the niche in which they were stored between feasts, swept and washed it, and laid carpets on the floor. They then, with members of the Islamic Religious Community of Stĭp who they had notified by mobile telephone, held a *namaz* (prayer) inside the mosque. Afterwards the delegation of the (Sunni) Islamic Religious Community left and the *Halveti* had their *Ashura* feast inside the mosque. Subsequently the key to the mosque, normally kept by the curator of the Stĭp Museum, was found to have gone missing.

Little was thought of this until the eve of the feast of the Prophet Elijah (2 August 2006) when, as local Christians gathered for the two day celebrations and began setting up in the grounds their booths for selling food stuffs and candles, it was discovered that a second lock was welded to the doors of the mosque. Late in the afternoon, as the priests from the Church of St. Nikola arrived to prepare the interior of the mosque for the *panagia* and the saint's day liturgy, it

was realised that no one present had the key for the second lock. It was soon realised that that lock had been mounted by the Islamic Religious Community organisation. Its members, when contacted, refused to remove it, claiming that the site was a mosque and theirs. Amidst muted muttering and assertions that the site had been used for the feast since time immemorial, the *panagia* and the anointing were held on the portico while local people leaned candles against the doors and piled small gifts of cloth and flowers in front of it. Throughout the evening and over the following day locals came, prayed before the locked door, and left angry.

Conclusion: Multiconfessionalism and Mixing in Orthodox Contexts

In the three cases set out above I have attended to the boundaries between Orthodox Christians and their Muslim neighbours, and have considered the ways in which -- in a multi-confessional society -- these boundaries are variously reinforced, opened, and transgressed. I would emphasise the multi-confessional context here insofar as in Macedonia -- as in Palestine and in contradistinction to Greece -- the close proximity of communities that are not Orthodox strongly influences the ways in which Orthodox Christians and Orthodox institutions deal with heterodoxy. Not only will lay persons here, used to interacting in various contexts with others who are not of their religious persuasion, be less prone to xenophobia (in the literal sense of 'fear of strangers or foreigners') but also religious authorities will find it more difficult to impose conceptions of ritual purity on sites traversed by the beliefs and practices of heterogeneous peoples.

Furthermore although such authorities may strive to influence state policies, the marriage of church, state, and people discussed by Renée Hirschon in this volume is bound to face objections (ofttimes militant) from populations threatened with disenfranchisement by such a union. This is not to say that moves towards expelling alterity and homogenising shrines and communities are not being made at present and will not be made in the future; the fate of much of

the rest of what is now 'Former' Yugoslavia, as well as that of early twentieth century Greece and Turkey (Clark 2006), testifies to the fragility of inter-communalism. Nonetheless, it is important to observe and note, in situations where inter-communal mixing continues to occur, the ways in which such mixing takes place and the structures of belief and practice that support such interaction. In concluding I want to focus on the ways in which lay Macedonian Orthodox Christians and their clergy relate to the presence of Muslims in shrines they consider their own.

A straightforward response of denial and exclusion is evinced towards Muslims at the *Husamedin Pasha* mosque by the Orthodox priest of Stĭp. His attitude, which may or may not be echoed among his parishioners, is theologically correct; Muslims are doctrinally defined as followers of a false prophet and are thus, in ontological terms, either heretical or null entities. In the religious context of the '*Sveti Elia* church' the works of Muslims are effectively obliterated, both in the imaginary (the mosque counterfactually 'is a church') and in the attempts to block access of Muslims to the interior. There is, furthermore, a *sur*-text. The second of August is not only the feast of the Prophet Elijah in the Orthodox calendar; it is also the anniversary of the *Ilinden Uprising* of 1903 during which the *Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation* orchestrated a revolt against the Ottoman state which, though rapidly crushed, resulted in the establishment of provisional governments in three localities and the declaration of the *Krushevo Republic,* an icon of subsequent Yugoslav and then Macedonian nationalism (see Brown 2003: 1-21 and *passim* and Poulton 2000: 48-62). The Christian occupation of the semi-ruined mosque and the displacement of its Muslim users here replays the religio-nationalist victory of *Orthodox* Macedonians over Muslim oppressors. It is this resonance which, one suspects, not only prompted the 1992 appropriation of the *Husamedin Pasha* mosque by the Orthodox Church -- supported by a Macedonian nationalist government -- but also leads the priest to believe, perhaps rightly, that in time the current government will abandon its concessionary attitudes to the Muslim Macedonian population and allow the full erasure of an emblem of past Muslim sovereignty. The

recent moves by local Muslims to reassert their rights of possession over the mosque has great potential to re-ignite a history of inter-communal violence that has fitfully smouldered over the past century.

The second possible response is that of the abbess of the *Sveti Bogoroditsa Prechista* monastery and the priests of the Church of Saints Peter and Paul in Kicevo. Whereas for the Stĭp priest the mosque has to become -- in both space and time -- fully Christian, for the abbess of the monastery and the priests of the church Christians and Muslims can coexist separately -- performing parallel rituals -- in contiguous spaces within the holy places. The narthex, which in early Christian church architecture is the part of the church to which the catechumens and the unbaptised (those literally not part of the congregation) were restricted, becomes 'the place' for Muslims just as a general prayer for the unbaptised substitutes for the particular daily prayers said over Orthodox Christians and the priest's cope is raised before Muslims rather than laid over their heads. These diacritical settings and gestures are observed more in discourse than in practice, however; the abbess, who claims Muslims restrict their attentions to the narthex of the church, knows from observation that they circulate throughout it just as the priests, who claim that Muslims and Christians are addressed with different prayers, will nonetheless baptise the child of an Orthodox man who has converted to Islam to marry a Muslim woman.

The Orthodox theology of the icon, so central to belief and practice, provides a means of understanding this seeming contradiction. For the Orthodox Adam and Eve's original sin of being devoted to the world rather than to its creator insinuated a breach between the human world and the divine. This breach can be bridged by various *sacra*, among which the icon is pre-eminent but which include as well the liturgy and the churches in which icons are displayed and liturgies performed (Galavaris 1981: 5). Fundamental to relations with these *sacra* is faith. As numerous interviewees have made clear to me over my years of working with Orthodox communities, an unbeliever looking *at* an icon will see nothing more than an image made from pigment on wood

while a believer looking *into* an icon will see the saint looking back at him or her (Bowman 1991: 103-104; 108-112). Muslims in this sense do not participate in the same world as Christians when they move through a church, approach the icons, and carry out seemingly identical rituals; the Orthodox Christian here stands at the gates of paradise looking in, while the Muslim remains enmeshed in the corporeality of the world.

This 'inclusive exclusion' does not prevent Orthodox hierophants from appreciating and benefiting from the presence of Muslims in their holy sites; the abbess of *Sveti Bogoroditsa Prechista* spoke at length of how she had come to love the Muslims, appreciating their honesty as well as their dedication to and generosity towards the monastery. These virtues were, however, very much of this world, and the abbess' appreciation of them was neighbourly and pragmatic; when it came to 'the final things' Muslims and Christians did not, in any way, occupy the same places.

Orthodoxy seems to be far more situational at *Sveti Nikola.* The preparation of the shrine for the feast of St. George is certainly indicative of this tendency to render a shared space 'properly Christian' for feasts, but perhaps more telling is the anomalous hanging -- in the wake of that cleaning -- of *Bektashi* devotional pictures (of Ali and of the tombs of Sufi holy men) around and above the altar behind the iconostasis (in the holiest domain of the church) and the placing of the Muslim rosary on the altar. Despite the frequent presence of the priest and of members of the Church Committee in the apse in the twenty four hours between the time I noticed the placement of these objects and the commencement of the feast day liturgy, they were not removed until that liturgy -- which is believed to transform the space behind the iconostasis into an icon of paradise -- commenced. Such situational sanctification was duplicated by visiting *Bektashi* and *Halveti bābās* who would, before inviting those accompanying them into the shrine to perform prayers, ask everyone to leave the building, close the door, and carry out an [unobserved] preparatory ritual.

While such oscillation between sacred and secular moments serves to keep the Christian liturgy free of the Muslim elements the crowded around it in this mixed shrine, the boundary between Christian and Muslim practice seems far less prophylactic on the popular level. Orthodox Christians, observing Sufi visitors circumambulating the *turbe* for blessings, themselves followed the practice even while believing they were asking a blessing from *Sveti Nikola* rather than *Hadir Bābā.* Muslims visiting the shrine seemed as likely to pray towards the iconostasis, as Christians did, than towards the *turbe* of *Hadir Bābā.*

In his fascinating study of popular conceptions of *exotika* on the Greek island of Naxos Charles Stewart shows how 'doctrinal religion draw[s] upon local concepts and transpos[es] these into its own more literate terms' (1991: 244). He also demonstrates how islanders, in formulating responses to local afflictions and dilemmas, draw elements from Orthodox Christianity and reshape these into popular beliefs, representations, and practices suited to their particular needs and situations. On Naxos both doctrinal and popular religion appear profoundly 'Greek':

> consistencies between doctrinal and local religion are perhaps to be expected in a culture such as the Greek, where Orthodox tradition has been elaborated over the centuries by Church fathers, many of whom were themselves members of a Greek-speaking society and who were reared in culturally Greek local communities (Ibid).

The Naxions use Orthodox forms and elements in elaborating their spells and superstitions because these are available in everyday life; Macedonians, in working their cures and prognostications, use both Christian and Muslim beliefs and practices for the same reason. In Macedonia, where a multiplicity of communities jostle in everyday life and occasionally meet around sites variously deemed holy, locals will draw practices of approaching 'powers' from others they perceive as having been efficacious in *their* approaches to the *sacra.* In mixed communities and mixed shrines those emulated will not only be priests and other Christians but also, when 'orthodox' approaches have proved ineffectual, Muslims. Dragina, growing old and --

despite her prayers -- watching her son remain unmarried, was not uncomfortable asking a renowned Sufi *dervish* to do for Boge what she had witnessed and heard of him doing for many others. Here Orthodox Christianity engages with the heterodox and we distinctly see something akin to sharing.

Nonetheless, the trajectory evident in these three scenarios indicates that mixing and sharing are at increasing risk of being replaced by separation and antagonism. The contemporary tendency, promoted by discourses of both nationalism and resurgent scripturalism, is to mark inter-communal activities such as those described at *Sveti Nikola* and *Sveti Bogoroditsa Prechista* as at best unorthodox and at worst blasphemous; there is a strong possibility that in bringing them to wider attention by describing them I will expose them to forces analogous to those that have worked to extinguish similar manfestations elsewhere. However insofar as both inter-communal amity and inter-communal antagonism are discursively constructed it seems vital, in the midst of the war of words evident in debates over the 'clash of civilisations' and 'antagonistic tolerance' to show that there is nothing natural or necessary in hating your neighbour, and that people, when they perceive interaction and amicability as working for rather than against them, are fully capable of mixing with, and embracing, the other.

30 September 2007

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