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## **“Identification and identity formations around shared shrines in West Bank Palestine and Western Macedonia”**

as "Processus Identitaires Autour de Quelques Sanctuaires Partages en Palestine et en Macedoine" in Albera, D., Couroucli, M. (eds) *Lieux saints en partage; Explorations anthropologiques dans l'espace méditerranéen*, Arles: Actes Sud. 2009. pp. 27-52

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**Abstract:** Popular assumptions about the fundamental exclusiveness of religious identities, practices and communities are thrown into question by shared shrines. In the Balkans and the Middle East these have brought Muslims, Christians and Jews together around objects, tombs and sites believed to deliver boons or spiritual protection. Here I look at Muslim-Christian interaction around sites in West Bank Palestine and in Macedonia (FYROM) in order to understand the various choreographies members of these communities engage to 'mix' around holy places both revere.

### **Introduction**

The recent wars in Yugoslavia, in which religious identities were foregrounded in ethno-nationalist confrontations, fixed the region's reputation as a 'fracture zone' between East and West (Islam and Christianity, Catholicism and Orthodoxy). Analogously, the 'Holy Land' – already viewed as a setting for religious warfare – has become, with the establishment of a Jewish State in a demographically-mixed territory, an icon of inter-religious antagonism enduring since 'time immemorial'. These developments support popular discourse, already legitimated by some academics, contending that persons' religious identities are fundamental and fundamentally antagonistic to other religions. However both regions, in living memory (and at some sites until the present day), have seen intensive inter-communal activities around both urban and rural religious sites. Such commingling was opposed by the religious authorities which 'owned' some of these sites; it was encouraged at others by, for instance, the Sufic Bektashi. Although both regions were part of the Ottoman Empire, the different systems of religious and secular authority in the two areas during the Ottoman Empire, the different forms of religious activity fostered or suppressed by post-Ottoman states, and the development of ethno-religious nationalisms provides grounds for comparative analysis of

the development of religious communalisms in different contexts. This paper will present beliefs and practices related to sites in southwestern regions of Former Yugoslavia and along Israel-Palestine's Jerusalem-Bethlehem-Hebron axis to assess the impact of such 'cohabitation' on cultural and political identities and understand the forces which work to undermine it.

### **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).<sup>1</sup>

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'? Robert 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). Thus apparent syncretism serves, for Hayden, to strengthen communalist identities rather than to dilute or meld them. 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. For the anti-syncretists, and Hayden, there is, despite appearances, no sharing; for assimilationists like Herskovits there is, after sharing, no going back. Identities are either fixed or irrevocably transformed.

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

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<sup>1</sup> This polarisation around 'syncretism' appears to be conjunct with larger 'culture wars' (see Rena Lederman's comments on 'the fault line, which cleaves contextualist and essentializing ways of knowing, [which] runs through American culture', Lederman 2005: 50, see also 74, note 2); the rhetorics of 'anti-syncretists' often seem to share ground with those of ethnic nationalists and religious fundamentalists while those who see syncretism as a good thing tend to sound like advocates of federalism, globalisation, and secularism.

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? To ascertain this we are forced to pay 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 (2002) 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.

### ***Mar Elyas and Bir es-Saiyideh: West Bank Communalisms***

My original interest in the topic of 'mixed shrines' was generated by observations in August 1984 at the *Mar Elyas* monastery located between Bethlehem and Jerusalem in the Israeli Occupied Territory of the West Bank (Bowman 1993). Muslims and Christians (both Orthodox and Latin), not only from the nearby cities of Bethlehem and Jerusalem but as well from surrounding towns and villages, gathered on the grounds of the monastery on the day preceding the feast of the Prophet Elijah to picnic with friends and family. In the midst of barbecuing, playing musical instruments, and socialising, small groups would leave the olive groves bordering the monastic buildings to join a queue culminating at large icon of Saint George at the right front of the main chapel. The attraction seemed less the icon -- although some (usually Christians) would kiss or touch the icon and leave small gifts in front of it -- than the length of chain looped before it. This would be lifted by one member of an approaching group and passed three times over the heads of others in that group -- adults and children alike -- and down the length of their bodies so that the enchainment had finally to step out of the loop.

What interested me were the very different explanations given by the various groups present at the monastery (priests, boy scouts, foreign visitors, Christian and Muslim Palestinians) of why they themselves were there, why members of other groups were in attendance, what the ritual of passing through the chain meant to them, and what they thought it signified to others (Bowman 1993: 433-439). While explanations of *why* the chain was efficacious differed between lay visitors of different religious affiliations (Christians said that

Elias or St. George acted protectively *through* the chain while Muslims tended to argue that the chain simply worked to ward off madness, other illnesses, and bad fortune), all agreed that they had come -- aside from for the good company of a summer feast -- to take a prophylactic blessing from the chain on one of the rare days when liturgical celebrations opened the church and offered them access to it.

Members of the *Brotherhood of the Holy Sepulchre*, the elite of the Greek Orthodox church in the Holy Land, variously explained attendance by local Palestinians and their 'binding' with the chain either as manifest testimony of dedication to the church and to God (those who rendered that explanation refused to acknowledge that Muslims were amongst those gathered) or as evidence of the pernicious superstition of uneducated 'Arabs' amongst whom even the Christians were 'no better than Muslims'. Although the priesthood and the laity had little if any contact other than bumping into each other in pursuit of their respective rituals, the interaction of local Muslims and Christians was friendly and open both in the vicinity of the chain and in the fields around. Lay members of respective religions freely asserted their differences, while simultaneously affirming their community around the holy place: 'the religious difference doesn't matter, we all come. It is for friendship and community as much as for religion' (Bowman 1993: 438).

Five years later, during the early days of the first *intifada*, I was taken to an underground cistern in the centre of the nearby mixed Muslim-Christian town of Beit Sahour where, in 1983, locals had reported sightings of the Virgin Mary in its shadowed depths. The Beit Sahour municipality, which was to play a significant role in organising non-violent resistance to Israeli occupation (Bowman 1990 and 1993), had subsequently built a shrine over the cistern expressly for the use of both Muslims and Christians of all denominations. This was operated by a committee made up of representatives of all the significant religious communities in the town (Orthodox, Muslim, Catholic, and Greek Catholic). The exterior of



the shrine appeared distinctly modern, and, aside from the cross surmounting it, it bore less resemblance to a church than it did to a traditional Islamic *maḳīm* (a building with a domed chamber characterising a Muslim shrine). Inside, the walls were covered with icons and paintings of Christian subjects given by worshippers but, profusely and randomly scattered among these, were a significant number of gifts, paintings and pictures which, in their avoidance of pictorial representation, appeared Muslim. The cross and the predominance of a Christian tone was not surprising; the site was, after all, dedicated to a figure highly revered in Christian worship (although also venerated in Islam). What seemed more important than a more thoroughgoing syncretism was the appearance of the devotional objects of other religions (objects which would be rigorously excluded in a church or mosque owned and operated by the religious institutions) and that no one visiting the shrine (and there was a constant flow of local people passing through it both individually and in groups) seemed offended by evident signs that a community wider than that of their own religious community used the place.

I was told by both the caretaker and the Greek Catholic priest who accompanied me on one visit to the site that religious practices at the shrine reflected this heterogeneity. As the shrine belonged to the municipality, representatives of all local religious communities were able to book time in it. Since the stories surrounding the Nativity of Jesus are celebrated by Muslims and Christians throughout the Bethlehem region as founding myths of the local communities, Muslims and Christians alike gathered at the shrine to celebrate their traditions in a place where the sacred had interacted with their locality. Sometimes these were shared celebrations, nominally organized according to the calendar of one of the religious communities (such as the Orthodox Ascension of the Virgin celebrated on the 15<sup>th</sup> of August), while at other times local Christian and Muslim officiants carried out ceremonies specific to their congregations. Moreover, as with the blessings available to all at Mar Elyas, water from

the cistern in the back of the shrine was taken by both Muslim and Christian Beit Sahourans as a sacred substance for healing, blessing and providing good luck. I asked the caretaker why the Marian shrine was owned by the municipality and not, as one would expect, by one of the Christian churches. He indignantly replied: 'we are here Muslim and Christian, and there are two Christian groups. The municipality builds for all the people, and the people all own and use the well.'

There was already, at *Mar Elyas* in 1984, sporadic evidence of a political logic of solidarity which, by the time *Bir es-Saiyideh* and Beit Sahour were caught up in the first *intifada*, came to subsume communitarian identities within an overarching, albeit temporary, nationalist discourse<sup>2</sup>. At Mar Elyas national identification had come to the fore only in response to aggression towards 'Arabs' expressed by the foreign priests and to the violent harassment by Israeli border police of Palestinian merchants who had set up booths to sell toys to children (Bowman 1993: 457). In Beit Sahour by 1989 religious identity had, in the face of repeated Israeli aggressions against the community, become -- at least in public discourse -- relegated to a secondary position behind national identity. In a context in which the existence of the entire community and the lives of all its members were perceived as being at mortal risk, differences between individuals, families, religious communities and political groupings were, at least in public *fora*, underemphasized:

"the bullets do not differentiate between Christian and Muslim, P.L.O., DFLP, etc.....If I want to throw a stone [at a soldier] I will not call to my neighbour to say 'become a Muslim and then we will throw stones together'. We forget our religion; we forget our political groups" (Bowman 1993: 447).

The shared character of the shrine of *Bir es-Saiyideh* both reflected the common everyday experience of a mixed community with shared traditions and expressed the political

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<sup>2</sup> This intercommunal solidarity was, as I show in my study of a political murder in Beit Sahour (Bowman 2001) and in an updating of my earlier *Nationalising the Sacred* (Bowman 2007), context dependent and faltered as, after Oslo, the political situation came to seem to favour sectarian interests over joint resistance to the occupation.

programme of a local leadership committed to defeating sectarian fragmentation. Subsequent developments, whereby formal Muslim participation in the *Bir es-Saiyideh* committee was terminated and moves were set in play to build a large Orthodox church over the site (Bowman 2007), reflected the collapse of that programme although I, in the spring of 2007, witnessed substantial popular Muslim participation in both praying at and maintaining the shrine.

### **Macedonian Mixing**

Within Macedonia I chose to look at three sites, two in Western Macedonia and one in the Northeast. The first 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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. The second, *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. Finally, the *Husamedin Pasha* mosque is an empty early 16<sup>th</sup> century mosque overlooking the city of Stip, 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 2<sup>nd</sup> of August for a priest-led celebration of

the Orthodox feast of the Prophet Elijah. The three sites, respectively, represent a Christian church in which Muslims and Christians alike engage in rituals which appear to be markedly Christian, a popular mixed shrine with evidence of both Christian and Muslim objects of reverence, 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 , 'sharing of practices', 'mixing of practices', and 'antagonistic tolerance'.

### ***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 -- 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. 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.

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 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 or give 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<sup>3</sup>.

Closer observation of Muslim visitors, as well as interviews with them, reveal that although they appear to follow the same practices of approach and departure 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 in need 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

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<sup>3</sup> A disused room near the monastery's main gate was formerly used for holding mad persons who were thought to be healed by that incarceration (a practice identical to that described by Taufik Canaan at the monastery of St. George at Khadr near Bethlehem [Canaan 1927: 79-80]).

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<sup>4</sup> or when Muslims want priest-blessed icons to keep in their houses<sup>5</sup>. 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

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<sup>4</sup> The priest indicated that by church law both parents must be baptized but that local priests baptize such children anyway 'so as not to damage the marriage community of the couple'.

<sup>5</sup> There is an echo here of the practices of 'Crypto-Christians' previously carried out in the Balkans under Ottoman rule (see Skendi 1967: 234 and *passim*) although the presence of Crypto-Christianity was neither implied by the priest nor would have been necessary in Macedonia since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.

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.<sup>6</sup> 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.

### ***Sveti Nikola***

*Sveti Nikola* hides 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

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<sup>6</sup> Whether there was truth to the legend, or whether the legend was generated to explain the architectural anomaly, the narthex at the western end of the church is undecorated and the only part of the church not ornamented with splendid frescoes.

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 had disguised himself as a Christian and who was subsequently buried within the *turbe* (tomb) in the church.

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, said however that until the early twentieth century Balkan wars Makedonski Brod was 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 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. 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 .

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.

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<sup>7</sup> 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'

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<sup>7</sup>. Initially these objects and images were 'hidden' behind the iconostasis on the floor of the apse, but I noticed, in the period leading up to the feast day, that someone (perhaps a Bektashi visitor) had later hung them on the apse's eastern wall amidst the icons surrounding the altar (and had placed the green ninety-nine beaded *sibhah* on the altar). These remained there until the town priest (who had seemingly ignored them whilst in the apse on the previous day), coming to the church on the morning of the feast day to perform the liturgy, removed them, placing them again on the floor with the images turned to the wall.

eggs to, and fill the water bottles of, Muslim visitors belies a purely economic 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*<sup>8</sup>), 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.

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.<sup>9</sup> 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).

On the day following Saint George's Day an Albanian speaking man spoke to me

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<sup>8</sup> There is, however, little uniformity in the Muslim practices; some pray towards the iconostasis of the church, others towards the turbe from its 'foot', while others perform zikir (a devotional choral chanting of Islamic texts) between persons kneeling at each corner of the platform. Most Muslim visitors, like most Christians, circle the turbe between one and three times.

<sup>9</sup> Another wealthier economic migrant, who returned from Australia annually with his family for summer vacations, had given the town a ten meter high cross to be mounted, like those being erected all over Macedonia, on the mountain above the town.

about the 'insult' of the cross over the gateway claiming that local people have no right to erect a cross over a place which has 'been Muslim for centuries'. Asked what form of Islam he followed he responded 'it doesn't matter; I am a Muslim'. He then approached members of the Church Committee gathered nearby saying

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?

The men responded apologetically, saying that they understood the problem and that they would talk with the man who paid for the cross who, they claimed, was absent even though he was in fact a member of the group. The Committee was clearly discomfited, acknowledging after the Muslim left that there was a problem but seeming uncertain how to address it.

### ***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 Stip 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. Throughout the year Christians inscribe crosses on the exterior of the mosque and burn candles on its porch. Until very recently local *Halveti* Muslims referred to the mosque as 'St. Elijah's Church'.

In the past three years the Islamic community, strengthened by substantial financial contributions coming into it from diasporic Stip Muslims in Turkey as well as other Islamic sources, has been revitalised, restoring the only operative mosque in the town and 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. 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<sup>10</sup>. 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*<sup>11</sup> is raised in the air, and everything takes place inside....Outside the anointment takes place....' The Orthodox priesthood, powerful in Stip, 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'<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> Insofar as Islam historically follows Christianity and, in Islamic thought, corrects and clarifies Christian interpretations of revelation, Muslims are able to attend Christian sites that, although manifesting an imperfectly understood divine revelation, are nonetheless informed by revelation. For Christians Islam is a heresy or deviancy, and attendance at a Muslim site is effectively blasphemous. As Hasluck points out 'a mosque, unless it has been (or is thought to have been) a church is rarely, if ever, taken over as a church by the Orthodox' (Hasluck 2000: 104).

<sup>11</sup> A small loaf of bread (prosphora) when stamped with an image of Mary as Mother of God becomes the Panagia which is blessed over the altar during the divine liturgy.

<sup>12</sup> My translation of the priest's phrase effects an echo of another quote in a story told me by a UN peacekeeper in Visegrad, Republika Srpska who recalled a Serb militiaman who, when

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 Stip held a *namaz* (prayer) inside the mosque. Afterwards the the *Halveti* had their *Ashura* feast inside the mosque. Subsequently the key to the mosque, normally kept by the curator of the Stip 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 became evident that that lock had been mounted by the Islamic Religious Community organisation and that no one present had a key. The Muslim organisation, when contacted, refused to remove the lock, 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.

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berated for taking part in the destruction of 'the beautiful and ancient Old City' of one of the mixed Muslim-Christian Bosnian towns, responded 'but we will build a new and more beautiful ancient Old City in its place' (Bowman 1994: 159)

## **Conclusion: Multiconfessionalism and Mixing in Orthodox Contexts**

In the 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 multi-confessional societies -- these boundaries are variously reinforced, opened, and transgressed. I would emphasise the multi-confessional context 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.

Nonetheless, the trajectory evident in the scenarios drawn from both Palestine and Macedonia 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 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 manifestations 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.



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