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Comments on Robert Hayden's "Antagonistic Tolerance: Competitive Sharing of Religious Sites in South Asia and the Balkans"

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I am pleased here to see a careful reading of the term 'tolerance' which foregrounds the potential for malignancy undergirding its apparent benevolence. I have argued that "tolerance is the benign version of the will to exclusion, and is prone - when the space of autonomous identity appears threatened by the presence of an other - to rapidly transform itself into xenophobia" (Bowman 1997: 41). In that paper I suggested that contemporary anthropology's cultural relativism shares a rationale with political tendencies to celebrate and enforce exclusive nationalisms and ethnicities. It is unfortunate that Robert Hayden, after such a telling critique of the rhetoric of tolerance, gives credence to this suggestion by linking his analysis with an intellectual rationalisation for ethnic cleansing and the separation of populations. I believe that that articulation is both empirically and logically unnecessary.

Hayden refers to spaces and shrines in Israel/Palestine desired or revered by mutually antagonistic populations to illustrate his argument that syncretism is always competitive and latently exclusivist (Rabinowitz 1997 and Benvenisti 2000). In the instances he cites, however, the spaces are already segregated and the shrines already expropriated for the exclusive use of one of the two communities. Not only has the work of destroying co-existence already been carried out, but the communities involved are already opposed and mobilised nationalist communities. Such configurations are not, however, the only ones possible. In my discussion of Mar Elyas, a Greek Orthodox-owned shrine near Bethlehem (Bowman 1993), I showed that while the miraculous power seen to be resident there served as a general pretext for the gathering of local persons of Muslim and various Christian persuasions, the specific reasons people gave for attending ranged from the need for cures through the demands of religion to the pleasures of conviviality. Expressions of hostility towards other groups present seemed similarly unfixed, with some Christians and Muslims joining together to condemn the Orthodox clergy for arrogance towards the local population and others - again both Muslim and Christian - expressing anger towards the attempts of nationalist cadres

protesting against occupation to halt the festivities. Interestingly the only hostility towards the Muslims attending the shrine was expressed by the foreign clergy, who as well maligned local Christians for being 'like Muslims'. I saw no sectarian hostility or competitiveness amongst the crowds and, similarly, no aggressive assertions of ethnic or religious identity except when a group of Israeli soldiers attempted to disperse Muslim stall-holders selling children's toys. At this point the diverse sets of activities loosely gathered around the shrine crystallized in people's talk into interlinked expressions of a 'Palestinian identity' which they saw the soldiers' actions attacking. The participants in the festivities, who previously had announced themselves variously by family name, by town or village of origin, by religion, or by craft or profession, began to voice themselves as 'Palestinian' as, in the face of a common enemy, all of those various elements of identification - including Muslim and Christian (Catholic, Orthodox and other) affiliation - were subsumed and mobilized under the rubric 'Palestinian'.

The example of Mar Elyas suggests that identities at syncretic shrines can function with relative unfixity, only being forced towards aggressive articulation, closure and mobilization 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 unfixing 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. (see Bowman 2001). Such an idea of the impermanence of identity underlies F. W. Hasluck's theses on the struggle for supremacy over 'ambiguous sanctuaries'. In his study groups like the Bektashi come to dominate shrines previously shared with Christians not by ethnically cleansing the shrines and surrounding areas of Christians but by "absorb[ing] Christianity in[to] Bektashism"(Hasluck 1929: 586). Christians convert to Islam, either pragmatically or by real conviction.

At the heart of Hayden's thesis is an essentialist conception of identity whereby groups simply always already 'are' what they 'are'. If affiliations and identities cannot change or be changed then, of course, it is difficult and perhaps impossible for peoples to co-exist without antagonism and eventual extirpation of all but one of the groups. However the 'religious nationalism' which Hayden seems to believe is a necessary expression of primordial identity is itself a second order phenomenon,

articulated and crafted by elites and circumstances out of malleable materials - and susceptible to disarticulation. This is the implication of the "unfortunate exception" - the post-separation distintegration of a religiously purified Pakistan into "Punjabis, Baluchis, Sindhis and others" and into the two states of Pakistan and Bangladesh - mentioned in note thirty nine. We cannot doubt that the religious nationalisms active today are dangerous and powerful, and it may be that some of the unpalatable measures for which Hayden provides a rationale will prove to be the pragmatic means world powers adopt to cope with them. Anthropologists, however, need not - and must not - provide legitimacy for the construction and perpetuation of a world of ethnically pure nation states.

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