

Bowman, Glenn (ed.). 2012. *Sharing the Sacra. The Politics and Pragmatics of Inter-communal Relations around Holy Places*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books. viii + 185 pp. Hb.: \$75.00 / £46.00. ISBN: 9780857454867.

The role played by religion in public life has become an ever more urgent issue around the world and has raised significant questions about the relationship between “modernity” and “secularisation”. Religion has not retreated from the public arena as some secular interpretations expected, even in Western European countries where formal religious engagement has declined. Debate about the continuing public significance of religion in the West has been accompanied by anxious concerns about the degree to which religious solidarities may encourage political and social conflict. This debate focussed particularly on Muslim settlers in Western Europe and North America and tensions associated with conflicts in the Gulf, Iraq, Israel/Palestine and Afghanistan and the backlash after the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Centre.

This is the background for this well-edited collection. It successfully critiques the interpretation advanced by Robert Hayden from 2002 that the tradition of sharing religious sites and syncretism would eventually succumb to the ‘processes of competition between groups’ (Hayden 2002: 228). Drawing on careful ethnographic research, the contributors expose the one-sided character of what Hayden describes as “antagonistic tolerance” and “competitive sharing”. It contributes, therefore, to the growing literature on shared religious space by bringing together those who have made a significant contribution to that literature since the 1990s and others who are drawing on relatively recent doctoral research. This broad range of experience is combined with a wide range of religious and territorial contexts – a welcome corrective to the tendency towards focussing on particular religions and regions.

The volume begins with a well-constructed introduction by Glenn Bowman. He explains the background to the volume, which partly emerged from his critical engagement with Hayden’s model based on his own lengthy research in both Palestine and former Yugoslavia. Despite the powerful influence of centralising forces that insist on homogeneous identities, he points to the local ‘minutiae of engagements, avoidances, mimickings, avowals and disavowals through which members of interacting communities manage the presence of others’ in and around sacred spaces (p. 4). He also argues that most of the contributors demonstrate the ways in which ‘the religious sites and their ritual body forth images of imagined communities – past, present and future,’ while some also reveal a ‘practical nostalgia’ about sharing, which ‘is often neither conscious nor ideological’ (p. 6).

Inevitably, the debate with “antagonistic tolerance” and the very useful suggestions made in this introductory chapter are not uniformly pursued through the volume. However, the subsequent chapters provide fascinating examples of local sharing as well as indications about their relevance to the wider debate. Dionigi Albera, who is also a well-established scholar on shared shrines in the Mediterranean area, shows how the history of Muslim pilgrimage to Marian shrines in the Mediterranean and the Near East

reveals an inter-communal interaction that calls for a ‘more balanced approach to mixed worship and shared sanctuary’ (p. 11) than the ‘somewhat unidirectional characterizations’ presented by Hayden and, earlier, by Hasluck (1929).

This neatly leads on to Anna Bigelow’s chapter on three Muslim shrines in the Indian state of Punjab, which was created after bloody communal strife in 1947. Despite the development of Hindu nationalism and essentialised notions of religious institutions since Indian independence, the pilgrims to these shrines often refuse to identify with such fixed categories as Hinduism or Islam. Moreover, they derive ‘spiritual and political benefit from the interreligious experience’ (p. 40) based on symbolic zones of daily exchange. In her conclusion, she draws on Bowman’s discussion of the “semantic multi-vocality” of sites shared by Muslims and Christians in Palestine to explain the pilgrims’ freedom from the national and transnational political forces, which are encouraging religious nationalism in India.

In the next seven chapters, the debate about antagonistic tolerance fades somewhat. It informs the excellent discussions of inter-communal relations by Will Tuladhar-Douglas and Rohan Bastin in the context of Nepal and Sri Lanka, respectively. However, the other chapters by Maria Coroucli, Dora Chau, Carpenter-Latiri, Aomar Boum and Heonik Kwon do provide strong ethnographic accounts of how people from different religious traditions continue to share rather than contest the same shrines in different parts of the world – Turkey, China, Tunisia, Morocco and Vietnam, respectively. A number of key themes emerge from these chapters: the continuing importance of local histories and attachments in conditions of multicultural narratives in Turkey; inter- and intra-ethnic relations, transnational migration and localities in Nepal; the rootedness of Jews on the Tunisian island of Djerba and the interplay between Jewish tourists, the Tunisian state and the Muslim majority in recently changing political conditions (the “Arab Spring”); the similarities between ritual events in China and multicultural Britain where New Age practices have emerged; miracle, boundary transgression and syncretism in Sri Lanka; Jewish-Muslim coexistence in the Moroccan town of Essaouira and its implications for the continuing conflict between Israel and Palestine; the revival of ancestral and death-commemoration rituals in Vietnam as local responses to national and global power-geometries.

Overall, this is an excellent contribution to the growing literature on shared sacred places. It shows what a carefully constructed edited volume can achieve in an academic world where researchers are under increasing pressure to only seek publication in journals with high global exposure. It also engages with a crucial issue in a world where religion has not retreated to the private sphere – the ability of pilgrims and others to co-exist at the same highly charged place despite the evidence of contestation which has been discussed well before Hayden’s intervention, most brilliantly by Michael Sallnow in *Pilgrims of the Andes* (1987). This longer history of debate about sharing of and contestation around sacred places needs further exploration but this volume is a constructive contribution towards our understanding of that history, not only in certain localities but globally.

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