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Introduction

Sharing Sacred Places— A Mediterranean Tradition

Maria Couroucli

in Albera, D. and M. Couroucli (eds), *Sharing Sacred Spaces in the Mediterranean*, Indiana University Press, pp.

The presence of shared or mixed sanctuaries, sacred places where several religious groups perform devotional practices, often within the same space and at the same time, is a well-established phenomenon in the Mediterranean. This book outlines a comparative anthropology of these pious traditions from the *longue durée* perspective, combining ethnographic and historical analysis. Eastern Mediterranean societies have experienced a revival of the religious domain in recent years: in many places, religion, often accompanied by the rise of religious fundamentalism, has invaded everyday social and political life—all relatively recent phenomena of the postcolonial era. The present context is thus marked by the ultimate separation of ethno religious communities within most circum-Mediterranean nation-states, a victorious outcome of a long strife that began in the nineteenth century: Christians, Jews, and Muslims have finally achieved religious homogeneity within political territories, putting an end to a long history of living side by side. This happened progressively, as independent countries adopted the model of a homogeneous nation-state (one language, one religion, one—collective—identity) imported from Western Europe. We tend to forget that this was a monochrome model: photographs from Paris, London, Amsterdam, or Berlin in the 1950s still remind us that not so long ago Western European capitals were inhabited almost exclusively by white Europeans. Less than three generations later, the model is obsolete: globalization and massive migration to the metropolitan cities have transformed Western democracies into multicultural spaces.

Not so in the southeastern Mediterranean, where nation building is more recent and where memories of ethnic and religious wars have been revived by recent—or ongoing—conflicts. In this post-Ottoman space, ethno religious minorities have been banned from national territories many times over the last hundred years: for example, memories of three important events, the Balkan wars (1912 and 1913) and exodus of the Muslim population from the Balkans, the Armenian massacre in Ottoman Anatolia (1915), and the massive exodus of the Greek orthodox population from Kemalist Turkey (1924) were still recalled during the most recent wars and ethno religious “cleansing” in the former Yugoslavia (1990s). During such conflicts, entire communities were forced to abandon their homes and holy sanctuaries, to leave room as it were for the construction of homogeneous national territories. In the Balkans, the Muslim population almost disappeared at the beginning of the twentieth century (except in Bosnia, in the Albanian central and western regions, and in Greek Thrace). At the same time, Near Eastern Christian minorities in Muslim countries (from Turkey through Syria to Egypt) kept declining. All through the twentieth century, as nationalisms were rising in the Middle East and North Africa, Western European powers

became less efficient at protecting Christian communities, now minorities often fearing persecutions.

The weakening of the Christian communities and power in the Arab and Muslim modern world has been described as the reverse of the *Reconquista* (when Christian Catholic power gradually reestablished itself in the Iberian Peninsula between the tenth and the fourteenth centuries). Toward the end of the Middle Ages, it had become impossible for a Muslim to settle in the Western Christian kingdoms and territories. Thus, as Western Christianity lived confined in monocultural and monochromatic societies, the culture of sharing, multiculturalism, and coexistence, once pan-Mediterranean, survived only on its eastern shores.

Sharing and Mixing as Common Mediterranean Experience

Both the Byzantine (4th–15th centuries) and Ottoman (14th–19th) Empires were multiconfessional political constructs, and were culturally less homogeneous than their Western counterparts. From Morocco to the Middle East and from the Balkans to Anatolia, local communities often consisted of more than one religious group. Here the “Other” was the neighbor with whom one exchanged, not always peacefully and never on an egalitarian basis (Lory 1985; Anagnostopoulou 1997; Weyl Carr 2002). Ottoman religious plurality or “tolerance” was related to a specific political system, sometimes called “ottoman despotism,” a reference to Wittfogel’s “oriental despotism,” a model of agrarian empires that combined absolutist political organization and strong state structures. Within these societies, ethnicity and religion constitute social markers defining different social status for each group, while minorities, excluded from both power and honor, form specialized groups, socially mobile and politically privileged (Gellner 1983:103). In other words, social segregation and modes of cohabitation between majority and minorities were related to the presence or absence of privileges and implied important differences in social status; a situation quite far from modern Western conceptions of human rights, which stem from traditions related to individual freedom, such as the Habeas Corpus Act (1679). Historical case studies provide wonderful insights into the different ways of dealing with individual and social liberties in pre-national societies. In seventeenth-century Crete, for example, the three religious communities, Latin Christians (Roman Catholics), Oriental Christians, and Muslims, lived side by side (Greene 2000:5). The ways in which the two Christian communities coexisted during the first five centuries of Venetian domination were neither forgotten nor abandoned. When the Latins left, the urban orthodox population continued to interact with the “Other” in much the same ways, only this time these were Muslim settlers or Christians converted to Islam. Urban merchants from all these groups intermarried and sometimes lived as mixed families, where the parent/child bond cut across different religious communities. These porous religious frontiers characterized Ottoman Crete during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. But when the French merchants and diplomats arrived, they upset the balance, and under their influence local society was divided into well-defined religious communities, foreshadowing the era of nationalism (Greene 2000:207–208). Traditions of mixing and sharing began to disappear, and notions of mutually exclusive identities gradually became the new norm. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, within most circum-Mediterranean nation-states, Christians, Jews, and Muslims

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strived to achieve religious homogeneity within political territories, putting an end to a long history of cohabitation. The present configuration is marked by the ultimate separation of ethno religious communities.

A Tradition of Cohabitation

Most of the shared shrines of the Mediterranean that are still visited today are situated on its eastern shores; their presence reflects a common past, a long co-existence of culturally mixed populations, often expressed by notions of “tolerance” vis-à-vis the religious “Other” in daily interaction. A controversial term, “tolerance” needs to be contextualized whenever used, as it can convey more than one meaning. Hayden (2002a:205–231) distinguished between “passive” tolerance, meaning noninterference, and “positive” tolerance, an active term implying the acceptance of the other as different. The debate is far from being closed (Bowman ch. 1 in this volume).

Shared shrines within the larger Byzantine and Ottoman lands are traditionally situated on frontiers, on territorial boundaries where conversions and conflict have taken place. They flourish far from cities and central authority, where soldiers and church officials rarely venture—in other words, where local populations managed to live peacefully side by side. “Eastern” local configurations and customs are quite different from what takes place in nineteenth-century colonial lands, as in French Algeria for example, where local ecclesiastical authorities, despite the official prohibition against missionary activity, tolerated some form of proselytism, making it difficult to draw a line between evangelism and mixed practices (Baussant 2002:199–210).

What kind of patterns of interaction are implied between individuals and groups by the term “cohabitation”? This volume offers an ethnographic look at a number of ways of sharing and living together, different configurations that can be traced back to long and profound historical sequences. Mixing or sharing is not a simple affair. It does not imply an equivalence between groups or an absence of hierarchy; on the contrary, religious groups interact in a highly regulated space, where social status and rights are conferred on an individual as member of a particular religious community. In the broader Ottoman area, the most common form of sharing sacra is the one involving pilgrims and visitors of sanctuaries who belong to the two largest groups in this region, Muslims and Oriental Christians, and the most common configuration is Muslims visiting Christian shrines. The same pattern—Muslims visiting the Others’ sacra—has been observed in Jewish holy places in North Africa. This pattern is present in later sanctuaries, for example, Catholic holy places built on Muslim lands: mixed pilgrimage practices take place in and around sanctuaries dedicated to Christian saints. Thus far, shared ritual practices involving the coming together of Jews and Christians (Oriental or Latin) have very seldom been described. Why? We are just beginning to understand these phenomena. Comparative studies in anthropology and history could provide some leads, but we need more ethnographic facts and comparative analysis on symbolic patterns and actual ritual practices among the clergy, pilgrims, and visitors to these different shrines.

The *Longue Durée* Perspective

The present volume, based on ethnographic and historical research across time and cultures from the *longue durée* perspective, aims to be a first comparative study of mixed religious practices. As we compared notes during our seminars and conferences it became clear that, unlike contemporary Western European migration policies, traditional practices of sharing sacra were not informed by any top-down multicultural policy or ideology. They belonged to the historical heritage of Eastern Mediterranean societies, where the coexistence of more than one religious group within one territory, under one authority, represents a legacy of the Byzantine and Ottoman systems. The special ways in which this life together was experienced and practiced in what Western Europeans still call the Near and Middle East reveal a great deal about the social and symbolic organization of these traditional societies; religious practices of both Muslims and Oriental Christians are an important part of this common cultural heritage. Another aspect of our comparative research was to question the use and validity of terms and categories employed by historians and anthropologists in relation to the variety of the phenomena observed, by our insisting on the micro scale: contributors to this volume came to question notions such as “sharing,” “faith,” or “pilgrimage,” for example (Baskar, Couroucli, Driessen, de Rapper, Valtchinova). These considerations relate to wider questions in the anthropology of religion within literate/historical societies; for example, how useful is it for our analysis to distinguish between “popular practices” and “official religion”? Another interesting common element concerns religious institutions per se: they cannot—and do not—allow for mixing or hybridism; members of the high clergy know very well that pollution is above all “matter out of place” (Douglas 1970:194). *Hubris*, the ancient Greek term for defying the gods and provoking Nemesis, punishment for defiance, and *hybrid*, a creature resulting from mixing, share the same etymology. In the case studies presented here, representatives of the higher clergy—from all religious denominations—behave in a traditional, and predictable, way with respect to shared shrines, prohibiting “mixed” practices whenever these go beyond local frames, becoming “visible” from afar.

Mixed practices do not constitute a single model; they are symbolically and practically complex activities, and their variations can be traced to political, demographic, and social conditions prevailing at the time of observation, as the relative importance of the religious communities concerned is changing over time. In all configurations examined in this volume, the degree of “tolerance” toward these practices on the part of the authorities or on the part of the local population is directly related to the prevailing political context. As we begin to comprehend the general political patterns consistent with greater or lesser tolerance toward sharing sacra, we need more ethnographic knowledge, thick descriptions of the many forms these practices take today in distinct but nevertheless similar, or parallel, configurations.

Local Ways, Marginal Ways

Locality and marginality are two common characteristics of mixed religious practices, as many of these activities seem to take place at the margins of religious institutions, in specific holy spaces, associated with a saintly figure, usually named, who inhabits or occupies the place (Couroucli, de Rapper, Poujeau, Valtchinova). Mixed practices are indeed local phenomena organized along margins and interstices, where other types of

relations between people also have a chance of being established (Brown 1981:22). In the Balkan and Anatolian landscape of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, these holy places are more likely to be found outside towns and villages, beyond the reach of central religious and political authorities. Whenever such shrines are situated inside cities, as in Constantinople/Istanbul for example, they are usually outside spaces directly controlled by the higher clergy: the fountains or sanctuaries people visit do not lie *inside* a parish church or a mosque, but are situated in their vicinity (garden, courtyard, minor chapel). Churches and mosques are places of worship for the religious community as a whole; but those seeking healing and grace are pilgrims, who need to displace themselves, visit other places: tombs (*türbe*) of Muslim saints or chapels of Christian saints, but also caves, fountains, or sacred trees where the spirits of holy men can manifest themselves, chthonian spirits living in the underworld.

Another common characteristic that runs through the following chapters is that sharing is not an everyday practice: it is an exceptional modality, inscribed in local tradition, and as such is related to borders and margins (of institutions, village territories, or even customs). Sharing implies the blurring of religious frontiers and the opening up of specific spaces (limited in time and place) where the human community sharing common knowledge on ancestral holy places gets together. Baskar (ch. 3) points out the importance of human bonds within the local community in Bosnia, where help between neighbors extends to taking care of the other's shrines in their absence, even when they have been displaced by state authorities. In Egypt and Syria, sanctuaries become spaces of social interaction: during festivals and saints' days celebrations in the Orthodox and Catholic monasteries of the Syrian countryside (Poujeau, ch. 10) and outside villages in Egypt (Mayeur-Jaouen, ch. 8); de Rapper also underlines the marginal character of these practices in Albania today. Fliche and Albera show how the Catholic church of St. Anthony in Istiklal (Istanbul) also attracts visitors by playing on its marginal status. Unlike normal times in towns and villages, sacred time and space transcend frontiers and social barriers, facilitating—and legitimating—contacts between individuals who would otherwise not meet in the public sphere. For example, Coptic festivals (*mouled*) in Egypt are also occasions for boys and girls, Christian and Muslim, to meet, being at once within and without community boundaries. In the same kind of spirit, monasteries in Syria offer services that parish churches (who follow ecclesiastical regulations more strictly) cannot fulfill, such as celebrating marriage ceremonies during a mourning period (Poujeau).

Historians and folklorists have associated mixed religious phenomena with collective memories of conflicts, conquests, and conversions, quite frequent in peripheral frontier zones, the *marches* of the empire, where Christianity and Islam met and confronted each other. Hasluck (1929), who studied mixed shrines in the Balkans and Anatolia at the beginning of the twentieth century, described these phenomena as part of the long process of the Ottoman conquest of Byzantine provinces, involving conversions of local populations and the transmission—and sharing—of sanctuaries from Christian monastic heterodox communities to Muslim orders such as the Bektashi. For Hasluck, massive conversions took place as the Ottoman armies conquered these western lands: many monasteries built around sanctuaries, which used to form networks of Christianity in the countryside, lost their monks and became dwelling places for dervishes, holy men belonging to the religion

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of the new lords (Hasluck 1929:521). These isolated sacred places continued to be visited by the local population, as they still fulfilled important functions: people kept going there to seek healing, pray for a good harvest, or celebrate the changing of seasons. Most ethnographic examples from sanctuaries renowned for their healing power attracting both Christian and Muslim pilgrims are situated in the larger post-Ottoman space. This tradition goes as far back as Byzantine times: one of the earliest testimonies of similar practices (from the thirteenth century) is the miraculous healing of the emir of Sivas's wife in St. Phocas sanctuary in Trebizond (Foss 2002).

Mixing in Practice

Are mixed practices standard practices within pre-national societies? Stewart has suggested that “an anthropology of syncretism must comprehend how zones of purity and hybridism come into being. . . . This can be achieved through a combination of historical and ethnographic case studies where syncretism or antisyncretism are at issue.” When culture is not viewed as a stable structure but as the result of historical and social processes, “then syncretism can be used . . . to focus attention precisely on accommodation, context, appropriation, indigenization and a host of other dynamic intercultural and intracultural transactions” (Stewart 1999:55). In the chapters of this volume the reader will find out how the religious frontier is being crossed in both directions: first, and most frequent, Muslims cross into Christian territory by occasionally visiting their shrines. These one-way crossings are the most frequent configurations in the Eastern Mediterranean: in Turkey, in the Balkans, in Syria, Lebanon, or Egypt. Local narratives and discourses address this inequality by referring to religious majorities and minorities and their corresponding separate territories where boundaries are set to avoid pollution, separating pure from impure (Mayeur-Jaouen, ch. 8). Crossing in the opposite direction is done in a different mode: Christians and Muslims do not usually mix within a Muslim holy place at the same time. Thus, in the Balkans and the Black Sea area (at the beginning of the twentieth century) where sanctuaries have become Muslim holy places, Christians gather to celebrate a saint's day once a year, for a limited time, as guests of the *tekke* keepers (Baskar, Bowman, Couroucli, de Rapper).

It should be recalled that mixed practices concern two types of activities: individual devotional practices, related to a personal wish or demand (healing, or success in business, marriage, or school), can take place any day of the year (Albera and Fliche); on the other hand, taking part in a pilgrimage or mixed celebration is not such a strong act of devotion and does not always involve a formal exchange between pilgrim and the guardians of the holy place. Local terms distinguish these two kinds of activities: *ziyârât* (in Arabic) or *proskenesis* (in Greek) corresponds to individual acts of devotion, to be distinguished from being a visitor to a festival, *mouled*, or *panygeris*.

Cultural and religious modes of sharing are informed by specific time and space contexts: after having listed a number of “common” practices, one realizes that the “mixed” pilgrim corresponds to no single *habitus*. He is a person adapting to local custom, following a

specific path, reproducing gestures or repeating words or prayers of those who have preceded him. He becomes a *bricoleur*, manipulating objects and signs within a symbolic territory and combining these with his own cultural and religious singularities.