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# INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE: MULTIDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES TO SHARED RELIGIOUS PLACES: INSIGHTS FROM SOUTHEAST EUROPE

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This special issue is an invitation to reflect on religious sharing at large. It includes contributions dealing with natural or artificial sites that are claimed, socialized, inhabited, or attended by two or more religious denominations, namely Christians (Catholic, Greek-Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant) and Muslims (Sunni, Shia,

Sufism). It zooms in on Southeast Europe, an area that offers a wealth of case studies on religious coexistence and that is known for its diverse ethnic, religious and linguistic character. Southeast Europe is a broad geographical “contact zone”, where interactions between religious communities have been, and still are, extremely intense. We are convinced that the persistence of shared religious places is an avenue worth exploring to reflect on the role of religion in defusing or stoking conflict, the mutual transformation of ritual practice and socio-economic conjunctures, and the interplay of religious and political elements in the construction of collective self-representations.

The definition of “sharing” in the literature on shared religious places (henceforth SRP) differs greatly. Several lines of research have emerged throughout the years in the study of sacred places claimed by two or more religious organizations. In a recent special issue on mixed religion in the Mediterranean, Albera, Kuehn and Pénicaud (2022) provide an updated, thorough overview of this debate. In a way that resembles the divide between dark anthropology (Ortner 2016) and the anthropology of the good (Robbins 2013), scholars studying inter- and intra-religious interaction have ended up focusing on notions of conflict, enmity, antagonism, competition and dominance on the one hand, and on everyday diplomacy, syncretic practices and conflict resolution on the other. A focus on power imbalances characterizes sharing as “antagonistic tolerance”: rather than mutually embracing one another, religious actors are often subject to a competitive logic that requires at most passive tolerance—i.e., non-interference with religious activities (Hayden, 2002). Political scientist Ron Hassner has been even more pessimistic on the likelihood of peaceful inter-religious coexistence, arguing that important sacred sites cannot be shared without causing conflict (Hassner, 2003). More recently, this paradigm has evolved towards more nuanced positions, at the same time offering to the much widespread but value-laden term “sharing” alternatives like “mixed” spaces, where the latter indicates the presence of different religious groups without presuming the outcomes of multi-religious interaction (Bowman 2010; Hayden et al. 2016; Hayden 2022).

The “stochastic” (Reiter 2017: xv) approach, on the other hand, does not presuppose that the claims of different religious organizations toward the same place will inevitably result in a power struggle. Albera and Couroucli (2012: 243), while critical of the antagonistic tolerance model, admit that cohabitation, mixing and sharing are never fully separated from potentially competitive and conflict-ridden features. *Sharing the Sacra*, edited by Glenn Bowman (2012), takes a similar path. Several case studies describe peaceful administration of shared spaces, calling Hassner’s premise into question: sharing may occur even in sites of fundamental importance to a certain religious community. Likewise, Barkan and Barkey (2014)

have argued that the literature on SRPs has at times put too much stress on conflict rather than its resolution, at the same time underestimating what they define as choreographies of sharing. When applied to research in the Balkans, the two main strands of research here discussed—one more conflict-oriented, the other more focused on peaceful co-existence—tend to cast light on how inter-religious commonalities are often more presumed than real (Hayden and Naumović 2013) and on the invented absence of a shared past (HadziMuhammedovic 2018), respectively.

“Sharing” is also the main research focus of ShaRP (Shared Religious Places), a network of scholars interested in inter-religious interaction and its spatial dynamics. All the contributors to this special issue—except Katić, Reuter, and Valtchinova—are part of this network and have been involved in the organization of an international seminar series on SRP. ShaRP is a multi-disciplinary group, as it brings together historians of religions, geographers, art historians, Islamicists, theologians and anthropologists, among others. The manifesto of this research group (ShaRP Lab 2023) acknowledges that inter-religious relationships vary over time, thus invoking a diachronic perspective in the study of SRP. Likewise, it avoids any aprioristic conception of inter-religious interaction that leans unilaterally towards unavoidable conflict or harmonious coexistence, respectively. Lastly, it applies the concept of “sharing” not just to places that ended up being attended spontaneously by several religious groups but also to sites built *ad hoc* for fostering inter-religious dialogue (such as inter-faith chapels and rooms).

Following the principles of the ShaRP Lab project, the articles in this collection expand on the study of shared religious places in Southeast Europe, granting specific attention to epistemological, theoretical and methodological issues. Such a wealth of methodological approaches—all of them combine heuristic tools from different disciplines—begs the question: how do multi, inter- and transdisciplinary approaches relate to the study of multi-religious interaction? If these three categories differ in the degree of separation between the different disciplines involved, they all converge on the fact that tackling social facts from different angles has become an essential precondition in the social scientific study of religion. Alongside the common denominator of ethnographic research and a focus on the emic perspectives of religious representatives and practitioners, the contributors to this special issue reflect on the benefits of multi-sited field research (Reuter), data gathering and fact-checking in multi-ethnic and multi-religious contexts (Valtchinova, Mammarella), the employment of GIS technologies and the role of digital humanities in data collection, visualization and outreach (Federici and Omenetto), theologically-informed anthropology and spatial analysis (Tateo, Cozma and Massenz), and the interpretation of social dynamics through scalar analysis (Bria and Giorda).

## Reappropriating, Claiming, Sharing Religious Representations in Southeast Europe

The scenarios discussed in this special issue include shrines, natural landscapes, dwellings, sanctuaries, tombs, houses of worship hosting a wide array of religious representations. This umbrella term encompasses images, cult objects (icons, crosses), and verbal (prayers, expressions mentioning sacred things) and nonverbal practices (fasting, kneeling) that circulate within and outside of cult spaces and are transmitted and negotiated by ministers, practitioners and tourists alike (Heintz 2004: 2). In light of the “sharing turn” in religious studies, David Henig (2014) has observed how sacred sites in Southeastern Europe are often a stage for rehearsing nationalist narratives. It is thus no surprise that all the articles deal—more or less directly—with the aftermath of socialist atheism in the area and the overlapping of national and ethnic identities with religious belonging and practice.

The appearance of national movements and inter-ethnic conflicts after the fall of the iron curtain immediately posed the question of whether socialist rule had indeed suppressed ancient ethnic hatreds. Agreeing with Verdery (1993, 1999) that—both in former Yugoslavia and socialist Romania—the nationalist discourse rehearsed by communist party leaders prepared the ground for national and ethnic confrontations after the demise of socialism, we identify one overarching theme in the contention and reappropriation of SRPs. Determined to re-establish their prominent position as in the pre-socialist era, or to regain legitimacy after decades of disbandment and persecution, different religious authorities advance their claims over shrines and sacred objects by adopting a variety of narrative and spatial strategies or by rewriting history. Yet, in many of the articles here presented, at a grassroots level practitioners of different religious and ethnic belonging engage in joint practices of veneration, prayer performance and procession.

In a recently published special issue on Orthodox pilgrimage in Eastern Europe, Zoe Knox and Stella Rock have warned against applying Catholic-centric “assumptions about the nature of pilgrimage as centered on walking, or at least travel rather than veneration” (2021: 13). The pilgrimages and processions recounted in several contributions—often to worship saints renowned for their healing gifts—indeed underpin the “kaleidoscopic combinations of people, places, rituals, texts, and ... objects” (Knox and Rock 2021: 14). Whether reaching the tomb of St Naum in North Macedonia (Reuter), that of Arsenie Boca at Prislop (Tateo, Cozma and Massenz), or the shrine of St Anthony of Padua in Laç (Bria and Giorda), pilgrims remind us that the *raisons d’être* of a pilgrimage might well be much more than a journey to a holy place (Eade and Sallnow 1991: 6).

When the object of veneration is an icon (or the prototype to which it refers), the oral histories of the faithful and the narrative strategies of religious ministers reveal the political capacity of such sacred artifacts. The miraculous tears of the icon of the mother of God at Nicula, northern Romania, are interpreted by Orthodox clerics and official historiography as a reaction to the unjust formation of the Uniate Church in Transylvania. Another icon of the Theotokos (*Sveta Bogorojca/Bogorodica*), currently enshrined in the village of Konče, North Macedonia, is attributed the ability to fly and be heavy or light according to its own will.<sup>1</sup> The agency of this icon—Galia Valtchinova remarks in her article—does not just illustrate the interaction between human and non-human forces: more importantly, it encodes the shifting relations between Eastern Orthodox and Muslim and between the communities of Bansko and Konče over time. It is no coincidence that the miracle of flying is performed in such heterogeneous contexts: the crossing of physical boundaries reveals the porosity of ethnic and religious boundaries while confirming their very existence, as in the case of the flying saint of Kanifnath/Shah Ramzan in Maharashtra, India (Hayden 2022).<sup>2</sup> Thus, sacred icons, bodies and places matter beyond their strictly devotional relevance as they index inter-ethnic, inter-religious and intra-religious relationships.

Both divine agency and divine intervention are ultimately concerned with how humans distribute responsibilities around them (Valtchinova 2009). The attribution of a healing power to holy waters—or to a sacred place more generally—is another recurring aspect in most of the SRPs here discussed. The Dobrujan monastery of Derwent, for instance, is a popular destination for its life-giving springs and for its miracle-working cross, which attracts both Christians and Muslims. In Derwent, as much as in Laç and Bansko, the practice of incubation is still alive, enjoys vast recognition, and crosscuts religious and ethnic boundaries. If the cross of Derwent is a catalyst for a variety of pilgrims in an area renowned for the peaceful coexistence of Christians and Muslims of different denominations, the procession of the cross of Vladimir of Dioclea / Jovan Vladimir—revered

1. This is a common characteristic attributed not just to sacred objects but to the bodies of saints as well: together with the apparent incorruptibility of the dead body of a saint, another well-known proof of sanctity is the capacity to make the coffin incredibly light to transport (or heavy, in case the saint is unwilling to be moved somewhere else).

2. “The generally accepted story is that the saint was born a Hindu and became a holy man, Kanifnath, possessed of great powers, including the power to fly. However, when he flew over a Muslim holy man, the latter, offended, brought Kanifnath to earth, whereupon the saint converted to Islam and became Shah Ramzan. Even as a Muslim he displayed Hindu traits, such as keeping a pet cow and playing the flute, seemingly reminiscent of Lord Krishna, and he had Hindu and Muslim devotees. Such saints, with both Hindu and Muslim identities, are common in western India, as is competition between the holy men of both communities” (Hayden 2022: 75).

as the first Serbian and Montenegrin saint—has recently become highly controversial (Mammarella). Orthodox pilgrims have carried the cross up to Mount Rumija alongside Catholics and Muslims in southern coastal Montenegro, where the saint's relic is revered by all faiths. Discouraged under communism, the ceremony was reinstated in the 1990s. The decision by the Serbian Orthodox Church to erect a metal church on the mountain's crest compromised multi-denominational participation, as it was perceived by the Montenegrin side as a usurpation of a shared sacred place with a well-recognized heritage value.

The political significance of heritage and its value as a repository of national and religious identity is a theme lying in the background of all contributions. Federici and Omenetto bring it to the forefront as they discuss two mosques and three Serbian Orthodox monasteries in Kosovo, the latter being enclosures in a mostly Albanian-Muslim landscape. Here the authors reflect on the methodological and epistemological challenges of not just safeguarding but even revitalizing endangered cultural and religious heritage. Leveraging digital tools and a mixed-methods approach is ultimately one of the novel contributions this special issue aims to add to the study of religious sharing.

## Contents Overview

Two overarching themes bring together all six articles: the analysis of religious sharing, or, more generally, the engagement of different religious groups in devotional practices at a number of sacred sites in Southeastern Europe; and the benefits of methodological and theoretical multidisciplinary. Galia Valtchinova's insightful study examines the interweaving of official religious discourses, multi-faith cohabitation, and grassroots popular devotions. Her article proposes an overview of the religiouscape of the Strumica area: in the villages of Bansko and Konče Muslims and Christians live side by side. The epistemological novelty of this contribution resides also in its declaredly "asymmetric" ethnographic positionality, as the author zooms in on the unlikely coexistence of nationalist imaginaries and everyday diplomacy among local Orthodox believers. Religious sharing and the construction of more or less rigorous barriers coexist in the religiouscapes developed as Islam and Christianity meet and overlap. According to the author, the presence of local religious virtuosi mediating divine agency—who remain outside of institutional religion—seems to fundamentally facilitate the inter-religious dialogue in the villages.

Religiouscapes are also the focus of Evelyn Reuter's eminently methodological reflection. She employs multi-sited ethnography to address shared religious spaces as linked nexuses in space which reveal multi-framed social interactions. The author examines locations where different religious traditions manifest as a

nexus in space, hence producing religioscapes, employing the St Naum monastery as a case study. The exceptional importance of the ancient monastery and the uniqueness of the merging cults of Naum and Sari Saltuk are shown by a comparison with other locations honoring Naum. Different religious groups link many locations, for instance, via traveling and forming a network within the religiouscape of a given region. Reuter suggests investigating shared and mixed religious locations in the frame of a whole religioscape to cast light on individual and communal actors, discourses, symbols and narratives, ideally from a standpoint that combines a diachronic and synchronic focus.

The pioneering integration of Digital Humanities (DH) in the field of religious studies is brought forward by Angelica Federici and Silvia Omenetto. Their article draws attention to a few chosen locations famous for the contested narratives over the local religious architectural heritage, covering the time span between the Kosovo war and the outbreak of violence against Serbians in Kosovo in March 2004. The authors emphasize the critical role that these cultural assets play in promoting communication, understanding and reconciliation in post-conflict societies by integrating DH methodologies with religious studies and peace and conflict studies. Following a highly innovative methodological framework centred on DH and the use of Geographic Information Systems (GIS), the purpose of this study is to guarantee the long-term accessibility and relevance of these sacred locations which are the target of ideological and symbolic quarrels between the Serbian Orthodox communities and Kosovar Albanian Muslims.

Equally inspired by a multidisciplinary orientation, Giuseppe Tateo, Ioan Cozma and Giulia Massenz mix ethnographic tools with spatial analysis, cartography and the usage of archived satellite photos. As they juxtapose three popular Romanian monasteries in Transylvania and Dobruja, they remark on the political significance of purportedly miraculous artifacts, corpses and objects—a stone cross at Dervent, a Virgin Mary icon at Nicula, and the burial of the eminent monk Arsenie Boca at Prislop—attracting pilgrims from regions historically marked by ethnic and denominational heterogeneity. Their work highlights the various re-appropriation strategies pursued by the Romanian Orthodox Church to reaffirm its primacy *vis-à-vis* other religious competitors, namely Greek Catholic in Transylvania and Hungarian Roman Catholics in Dobruja. The spatial politics of the Orthodox church are further illustrated through GIS maps that highlight the expansion of the religious infrastructure in post-communist Romania.

A similar strategy of appropriation and expansion by a single religious group is highlighted by Massimo Mammarella in his article which investigates the pilgrimage to the cross of Vladimir of Dioclea, known as Jovan Vladimir among the Serbians. Annually held on Trinity Day in June near the city of Bar in Montenegro, this

pilgrimage must be seen in light of the continuing ethno-religious conflict that currently permeates Montenegrin politics. Given these conditions, it continues to be one of the most talked-about events, as a result of the contentious history surrounding the church's renovation as well as the subsequent loss of its multi-confessional nature. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, this article emphasizes the political appropriation of sacred objects and materials by a distinct religious group (Montenegrin Orthodox), stressing the symbolic significance related to the reworking of pilgrimage rituals.

In-depth ethnographic research on the shared materiality throughout a pilgrimage was carried out by Gianfranco Bria and Maria Chiara Giorda. Their article focuses on the yearly pilgrimage (12th and 13th June) to the Sanctuary of St Anthony of Padua (Kisha e Shna Ndout) in Laç, northern Albania, built there and ministered by Franciscans, which is frequented by Catholics, Muslims and Orthodox. The main focus is on the spontaneous material religious practices that are lived and portrayed by various religious communities who consider body-to-body, and body-to-object contacts as the privileged religious experience. If participant observation tracked down the people gathering in the shrine's sacred space, both indoors and outdoors, the stories and practices surrounding Laç's sacred place are through two distinct scales of access. The first is a top-down narrative approach that incorporates the official line of authority framing the materiality of the structures as Christian in terms of aesthetics, symbolism and architecture. The other is an inclusive bottom-up practice that is infused with religious mixing and is a prime example of so-called popular practice.

Pilgrimages are events notoriously prone to the transformative power of communitarian religious practice, often questioning ethnic, linguistic and denominational boundaries. If the Turnerian tradition recognized their political significance as a collective force that at once reaffirms and contests the existent social structure, more recent developments in this field are invited to address local specificities rather than indulge in all-encompassing generalizations. In the afterword, Mario Katič takes inspiration from this debate to ask an important question: why is it that even neighbouring domains like pilgrimages studies and the study of shared/mixed religious places have become bounded domains of study, rarely talking to one another? It is in the same spirit of renegotiation of disciplinary and epistemological boundaries that this special issue has brought together the articles that follow.

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