

Ambiguous Spaces: a Contextualization of Shared Pilgrimage in Ephesus

Logan Sparks

This dissertation,¹ presented for doctoral candidature, highlights an issue in the study of ritual that is of increasing interest to many involved in ethnography, anthropology and the study of religions and ritual generally. It covers a wide spectrum of theory and data towards a synthesis of the major forces at work in the contexts producing shared pilgrimage practices with a particular focus on the area comprising the former ancient Ephesus, modern Turkey and neighboring societies with a similar ritual ethos present in the cultural/religious ambit. Towards that end, a number of subjects have been expanded upon and research questions addressed, all towards the central question: taking the House of the Virgin Mary in the modern day Izmir metropolitan area as a main example, why and how do Muslims, Christians and other non-Muslims converge on shared pilgrimage sites? The analysis draws on sources as varied as continental philosophy, Islamic studies, ancient and recent history, sociology and anthropology of religion, situated within the inter-disciplinary field of ritual studies.

The historical exposition centers chiefly on the ritual, political and geographical history of Ephesus, emphasizing the city's importance in the ancient world and its particular positioning as not only a formerly metropolitan city but as a location with an economy and importance largely based on its temple culture centered on a cult of Artemis Ephesia that produced one of the wonders of the ancient world. Christianity took early root here (as noted by those who consider it to be the Virgin Mary's resting place), not only because of its significance as an urban centre but also because it hosted a sizable Jewish community, especially dating to the era in which Jews of the Middle Eastern Diaspora were preferred by the Seleucids as loyal subjects to settle near important population centers. According to Christian sources, the Apostle Paul (among others) came to Ephesus and was driven out because of his public criticism of the Artemis cult, upon which many in the city relied for their income. After the end of the Artemis cult and the establishment of Christianity, Ephesus maintained its centrality for a time as an apostolic see and was the site of the Council of Ephesus, an ecumenical council declaring the Virgin Mary to be *Theotokos*, 'God Bearer'. The city, which had intermittently been disabled by the silting of its harbor, gradually declined and did not play as important a role for either the Seljuk or Ottoman Turks after their conquering of Anatolia. After being reduced to an

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area inhabited by only a few family in the last two centuries and invaded twice by Greece, it was to be slowly repopulated, eventually and became a centre of international interest from archaeologists after the re-discovery of the Temple of Artemis and as the claim developed (largely based on the writings of German Catholic visionary Catherine Emmerich) that the Virgin Mary had lived out her last days in a small house on Nightingale Hill outside the ruins of the former city. Although it was a new cult centre, a number of Muslims have, since that time, patronized the shrine, making it a busy centre of mixed pilgrimage in Turkey.

The House of the Virgin Mary, however, does not in any way stand alone as a shared pilgrimage site. Rather, it is a further example of ritual fluidity in both the Ancient Greek world and the modern Islamic context, having hosted the highly fluid varied and mixed ancient cults of a number of deities. In the context of more recent centuries, the Ottoman Empire (and the Islamic world generally) has hosted a variety of religious groups both at its centre and within its more blurry borders, all of which have, at various times, crossed mutual boundaries in pursuit of sanctity, healing and divine favors in the sanctuaries of another community. Christians have made offerings at the tombs of revered Sufis, Muslims have made entreaty at miraculous churches, Jews have incorporated Islamic North African style tomb veneration in their commemorations of saintly rabbis, and all three have converged at the tombs of significant Biblical/Koranic prophets. This is not to mention, of course, the further reaches of the Islamic world touching the non-Abrahamic traditions in places such as India and Sri Lanka where mixed pilgrimage is ubiquitous.

By and large, however, the concentration here has been on Ephesus and other locations within modern Turkey, such as Konya and Istanbul, with Istanbul still maintaining significant Greek, Armenian and Jewish residents, with a focus on ritual and space observation in addition to ethnographic field work interviews on identity and family mixed pilgrimage traditions. The sites observed included the Mevlana museum in Konya and a variety of shared pilgrimage sites in Istanbul. The main respondents have been those engaging in ritual on site, those with a family tradition of doing so and those decidedly against or ambiguous about such practices and religion generally. Across this spectrum a ritual negotiation process became evident, in addition to a focus on particular issues which begged further exploration as part of the contextualization process, some of, particularly on the side of more 'secular' topics such as identity, the history of Greek-Turkish conflict and the role of tourism in sacred places, arose spontaneously from experiences in the field.

Among mixed pilgrimage sites there are a varieties of types of sites (in addition to religious constellations such as Muslim-Christian sites, Jewish-Muslim sacred places etc...) and certainly all are not shared harmoniously. Indeed, some are amongst the most combustible religious locations, found in areas of war and

tension, leading to the eventual separation of the ‘sharing’ communities, others teeter on the edge of greater conflict, while yet others appear to host a level of harmony and hybridity leading to a near-blasphemous level (according to some) at times categorized as ‘syncretism’.

This very defining of terms is, of course, not as straight forward as it might seem and the complexity of the process is itself illuminative. For that reason, syncretism as a term has been interrogated from the point of view that it cannot be validly wielded without the understanding that full merging between religious traditions (as commonly understood by the term) is relatively unusual and all religious traditions have a history of grafting a variety of elements together in the formation of ritual, which is here understood as an act carried out in a condensed and sufficiently particular way to be read as special. It is a common feature of religious traditions, considered here to be productions of a chain of memory that are particularly concerned with meaning and, in most cases, spirituality.

Looking at the layering process of hybrid ritual and the historical layers at sites such as Ephesus, it is clear that a certain commonality between venerated figures (horizontally, as communities converge simultaneously or vertically as symbolic systems overlay one another across spans of time, from ancient goddesses to more recent transcendent female figures, for example) is an indispensable element of shared pilgrimage. Analyzing the role of imagination in religious culture and spatial practice can be undertaken from a number of directions, maintaining awareness that metaphorical and absolute spaces are inseparably implicated in one another. From within an Islamic perspective, there is a lineage of tradition that has seen imaginal space as the boundary between absolute divinity and humanness, as the space of religious devotion, with a concrete but contingent and liminal existence of its own, thus making the subject of religious imagination relevant to not only a western scholarly perspective, but also forming part of the emic tradition connected to holy places within the Islamic world. Imagination appears to be most key when it deals with the personages and beings venerated at a given site, so that, for example, Muslims and Christians envision the Virgin Mary similarly, while yet maintaining different beliefs and narratives about her. Similarly, symbolic links of imaginative overlap can exist in process with a different formation, so that pre-monotheistic figures mix with the characteristics of Christian saints, that in turn share symbolic similarities with Islamic prophetic figures, leading to what appears to be a process of ‘natural’ linkage across historical and communal lines. Imagination must coincide, in order for spatial practice to coincide. A sharing of metaphorical and absolute spaces is linked to a sharing of physical location.

Undergirding the hosting of the other in religious space is often an ethos of hospitality, particularly in the monotheisms. Hospitality is an element of *adab*, in an Islamic context, a flexible concept and value that can be applied to a wide

variety of circumstances, including how to be a good guest, a discourse that has been subtly articulated in the field on occasion, besides being ambient in the discourse of the Islamic world. Of course, such refined and compassionate forms of behavioral standards, while forming part of the milieu that supports shared pilgrimage, is also not immune to its own problems and limitations, nor can it be romanticized as a charming Middle Eastern panacea for social ills.

Adab and hospitality are, further, fundamental to the maintenance of relationship, another element that makes up the collage of influences converging in the largely grassroots, popular religious practice of historical multi-religious mixing at sacred places. Harmonious relationships between ethno-religious communities (with a reverse articulation possible for inharmonious circumstances) link themselves to narratives of historical relationships. In the wake of nationalist discourses that redrew maps and nation-states in the twentieth century, communities that had once had high levels of shared pilgrimage practice saw their extant mixed pilgrimage sites linked to an Edenic past in which conflict had not existed. This nostalgia (historicity aside) now plays an important role in shared pilgrimage narratives.

The divisions that lead to this often pivoted on a particular formulation of purity in identity, historical narrative, religion, and ethnicity, while shared pilgrimage evinces something of a greater historical ambiguity in the way that many communities operated before the advent of an emphasis on purity narratives, particularly in places like Turkey (and the heart lands of the Ottoman Empire, including the Aegean coast where Ephesus and many other shared pilgrimage sites are found). A tendency towards fluidity in ritual does not mean that differences in ethnicity and religion did not exist prior to this time but it does indicate different ways of constructing identity in different arenas (the political versus cultural, spiritual versus religious) and at different moments.

Taking these insights into consideration, it is clear that, while not all shared pilgrimage is harmonious or idealistic, it is certainly an important entry point for looking at the historical and cultural processes and issues at play in these very particular ritual circumstances, leading to insight into the range of elements that converge at sites of ritual convergence, such as the relationship of ritual to religious identity, religious imagination, post-modern notions of the relationship between space and activity and the core values of cultures not yet fully understood by outsiders, as evinced in undertakings such as that represented in this text, works of research fundamentally based on the surprise expressed by those (the constructed West, as it were) outside the ambit of traditional cultures towards religious lineages previously thought to be considerably more solid and opposed structures.