

John Eade and Mario Katić

Pilgrimage, Politics and Place-making in Eastern Europe: Crossing the Borders.

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Scholars have become increasingly aware of how deeply connected pilgrimage is not simply to religious behaviour and traditions, but to the political, cultural, economic and social dynamics of the societies in which it exists. This has led to a significant growth in studies of pilgrimage recently, albeit one with a predominantly Western, Christian orientation, with the bulk of available literature in English centred on Western Europe and, in theoretical terms, on Anglophone scholarship. In such contexts the book under review is a welcome addition to the literature, for it opens up the field in three ways. First, it focuses on studies of an area – post-Communist Eastern and South-Eastern Europe – which has received little attention thus far in the Anglophone world. Second, it pays attention to the political processes and dynamics in the formation and orientations of pilgrimage sites. Politics – from the attitudes of rulers to the activities of political cadres seeking to create or enhance issues of identity – have been an ever-present dimension in the formation, enactment and occasional suppression of pilgrimages, yet the literature thus far has not paid as much attention to such issues as it might.

Third, the book draws attention to how places without overt religious dimensions have emerged as especially important places to visit, often promoted as such by political and secular elites. This was particularly so under Communist rule, when states sought to suppress religion by offering as an alternative state-centred cults around heroes and places with political resonances. Post-Communism, too, many such secular sites continue to attract reverential visitors, and the book's essays that examine such issues thus make contributions to the study of secular pilgrimages.

John Eade and Mario Katić should be commended for bringing these themes to the fore and thereby enhancing the field. Their opening essay critiques existing pilgrimage scholarship for ignoring Eastern Europe and seeks to redress the matter by highlighting a series of interlocking themes evident in the research on pilgrimage in the region. In particular they discuss how religion becomes a marker of identity in the post-Communist era, how pilgrimage sites (both religious and secular) play roles in the construction of identity and belonging, how the construction of new monuments and landscapes plays a part in such identity formation and how economic processes play a significant role in such contexts.

The chapters that follow present individual case studies by scholars from the regions concerned. Mario Katić outlines how Bosnian Croats are united religiously and express their identity through pilgrimages, especially to Kondžilo, which has been transformed, since 2010, from a small chapel into a major national site with grand buildings. In showing how this site and its iconic painting of Mary have been elevated by religious and political forces (drawing as they do on themes of returning to their homeland and on images and stories from the bloody wars of the 1990s) Katić argues that Kondžilo “is becoming a religious-national theme park, where visitors/pilgrims can see and experience all the things that make them a part of the Bosnian Croat community” (pp. 32-33). Giorgios Tsimouris's chapter examines the feelings of Greek returnees visiting the contested island of Imvros, now under Turkish occupation, for

an annual festival on the island where they once lived. Welcomed by local Turkish authorities as tourists bringing income to the local economy, such returnees see their visits not as tourism but as pilgrimage, and they resent the touristic developments that have been added to their festivals. The chapter, being written very much from a Greek perspective, unfortunately fails to provide any insights into what the Turkish inhabitants think.

Marijana Belaj and Zvonko Martić discuss Bosnian pilgrimage sites through the lens of religious cooperation (for instance, between Catholics and Muslims) that they say is a prominent feature of sites such as Olovo – a Catholic shrine in a Muslim area and supported by people of both faiths. Their chapter indicates how historical cooperation can remain prominent even in zones of conflict, although their criticism of earlier scholarship is at times awry. They, for instance, criticise Mart Bax's (1995) work on Medjugorje, arguing that it fails to understand that competition around the site is "exclusively by internal contestation within the Roman Catholic Church" (p. 60). That claim is to me mistaken, since Bax provides plentiful evidence of how inter-village rivalries (the nearby village of Bijakovići had rival Marian apparitions) and secular agencies such as tourist organisations also were significant factors in the competition for hegemony of pilgrimage sites in the region.

Anna Niedźwiedź builds on the issue of competition in a fine chapter on Polish pilgrimage sites. While showing how Catholicism in multivalent forms is central to the religious and cultural identities of Poles after Communism, she discusses how two sites – Jasna Góra and Licheń, the former with a long history tied to national myths, the latter much newer – have attained the status of national shrines. Licheń has recently emerged as a national focus of pilgrimage – thereby challenging Jasna Góra's ascendancy – through assiduous promotion by its priests coupled with a building programme drawing on the grandiose styles of the Communist era, and through which Licheń has turned into something akin to a "religious theme park" (p. 94). Its success has had knock-on effects as Jasna Góra has incorporated new elements that clearly draw on the styles evident at Licheń. As such, Niedźwiedź provides an example of how the success of one shrine can challenge existing pilgrimage hegemonies and influence how other shrines operate.

Konstantinos Giakoumis takes up the issue of religious and secular pilgrimages by looking at how the Albanian Communist regime sought to proscribe Christianity by appropriating its sacred spaces and turning them into Communist secular shrines, many of which, after the fall of Communism, have been revived as Christian sites. While the chapter provides some information on this process, it is short on analysis, especially when noting that not all pre-Communist Christian sites have been successfully revived but not providing any analysis of why this has been so. Polina Tšerkassova looks at how Estonia's tomb of the Unknown Soldier has been moved since Estonia attained independence from Russia. The tomb was a focus of devotion for Estonia's Russian speakers, who are distinctly second-class citizens in the independent Estonia, but it was seen by Estonians as a symbol of Russian dominance. Hence it has been marginalised by the state, even as it holds significance for the embattled Russian speakers. While the chapter thus raises issues about how sites significant under one regime become marginalised under another, along with those who worship at them, it lapses into speculative realms, particularly in talking unconvincingly about and trying to draw parallels with labyrinths and other pilgrimage practices.

Nataša Gregorič Bon contributes a chapter on how local politics and identity operate in the border areas of Albania and Greece, examining issues of the local identity of Albanians visiting (or, as Bon puts it, performing pilgrimages) to Stavridi, a site redolent with images of homecoming, on the eve of the Feast of the Assumption. Bon suggests that what is going on here is predominantly a secular event, but in so doing does not really indicate why she chooses to portray it under the rubric of pilgrimage. In an afterword Glenn Bowman concludes

by affirming the importance of thinking about politics and identity formation, themes that, he notes, are not widely dealt with in the anthropology of pilgrimage but that are clearly important in Eastern Europe as it moves away from its earlier history of Communism and the suppression of religion.

The volume thus provides plentiful case studies of how pilgrimages and the concept of places with special significance and worthy of veneration have played important roles politically and religiously in Communist times and after. It is a valuable new resource that will broaden our understanding in geographical terms of pilgrimage. At the same time there are some problems that need to be mentioned. As my account above indicates, some chapters lack real analysis, with the result that while the book rightly shows the shortcomings of Western academic scholarship in its lack of awareness of the work done by scholars from Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, the same criticisms can be made the other way. In theoretical terms many of the authors appear unaware of much of the academic literature on pilgrimage (which in theoretical terms has largely been pioneered by Western scholars) and only a very small number of academic studies of pilgrimage beyond Eastern Europe get mentioned. This is especially evident in the various chapters highlighting the notion of secular pilgrimage, which rarely examine what is meant by the term and to what extent it may, or may not, differ from religious pilgrimages. Despite such problems the book is valuable in terms of the information it provides and hopefully will encourage Western scholars to broaden their scope and learn more about areas they have paid little attention to thus far while heightening awareness of the political dimensions that are so often important in pilgrimage.

Reference

Bax, Mart. 1995. *Medjugorje: Religion, Politics, and Violence in Rural Bosnia*. Amsterdam: VU University Press.