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Book Review: Die Mehrdeutigkeit Geteilter Religiöse Orte: Eine Ethnografische Fallstudie zum Kloster Sveti Naum in Ohrid (Mazedonien)

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Evelyn Reuter, *Die Mehrdeutigkeit Geteilter Religiöse Orte: Eine Ethnografische Fallstudie zum Kloster Sveti Naum in Ohrid (Mazedonien)*. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2021, 410 pp. €45,00, ISBN 978-3-8376-5519-3.

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One of the predominant characteristics of Christian-Muslim relations in the Balkans is the foundational element of its century-old historic heterogeneity, the appropriation and reinterpretation of an assortment of traditional customs, as well as the proclivity toward sharing the same religious sites. To understand this entangled reality of religion and spirituality, politics, identity, pragmatism, questions of authority, economy, and tourism, Evelyn Reuter set out in her new book to make an important multilayered ethnographic contribution. To attain her goal, Reuter concentrated her investigation on the monastery of St. Naum (Sveti Naum), in Macedonia and in the vicinity of the border with Albania. It is here that Christian visitors maintain the traditional belief that St. Naum was buried. At the same time Muslims are also firmly convinced that the pre-Ottoman Muslim missionary Sari Saltuk found his final resting place in this location. While both groups share a corresponding religious space, they simultaneously derive their understanding from contradictory narratives. Reuter investigates this phenomenon of interpretive ambiguity by consulting archival and historical sources. She also engaged in eleven months of extensive ethnographic fieldwork predominantly at the monastery itself, but also extended her investigation to other relevant sites that encompass more than 40 cities in the region.

Although an increasing number of scholars have been looking at the phenomenon of contention surrounding shared sacred places by diverse religious groups, there remains an evident scholarly gap in research. This is due to the fact that the predominant emphasis has tended to be a rather narrow focus on historical, architectural, and literary questions. While these macro strategies can generate useful information, they must be supplemented by grassroots empirical research endeavors in order to complete the picture. Through her exploration of religious interconnectedness that is necessitated by sharing the same physical space, Reuter intends to shed light on the dynamics of religion in general, but especially the significant localized role of Islam and Christianity for the mutual interaction and peaceful coexistence of the people in the region. Situating such larger questions within a specific contemporary setting offers a more nuanced understanding of the fluidity and negotiated ambiguity that lies at the heart of every lived religion.

The book has a clear structure divided into two major parts. After a brief introductory chapter, where Reuter concisely presents the necessity for her interdisciplinary research regarding the question of shared sacred spaces and possible pathways for the generalizability of her findings to related fields, come the two main parts of the book. Part one (chapters 2 – 4) analyzes in detail the historical background and influence of the monastery of St. Naum. Reuter additionally surveys the theoretical background and current state of research regarding the various layers of ambiguity and creative choreography of a shared sacred space, as well as the complex intersection of religion, economics, tourism, and politics in the region. Reuter develops the idea that the monastery, due to its geographic setting as a cross-border territory that placed it historically under diverse political and imperial powers, displays a unique religious location for the development of ambivalent and often multiple discrepant cultural and spiritual interpretive processes (p. 81). For these reasons and due to the local ever evolving dynamics of saint veneration, the monastery of St. Naum displays today all those interesting multifaceted layers, which are creatively condensed into one spatially demarcated religious locale. Throughout the book it becomes evident that Reuter displays a keen knowledge of her field and constantly remains in critical dialogue with relevant scholars such as Hayden, Bowman, Knott, Koch, and several others. She consistently locates her own unique contribution within the gap of existing research. Moreover, Reuter is sometimes even able convincingly to argue that certain elements of her study are both transferable and generalizable, usually a quite difficult accomplishment for any localized empirical study, in light of current and potentially future related research.

In part two (chapters 5 – 9) Reuter presents the manifold findings of her comprehensive ethnographic field research. From the expert synthesis of her empirical data, it becomes plainly perceptible that this part of the book exhibits superb methodological and interpretive rigor. One of her goals in the section is to correlate the role of the monastery in terms of its cultural influence, the intricate web of motivating factors among the vast variety of visitors, as well as the complex economic and political dimension within the local, spatially defined context (p. 254). Specifically, the disclosure of the significance regarding the tourist industry, merchants and vendors who offer goods for sale, and the festive atmosphere of Roma musicians circumambulating around the church during the annual “folk festival,” contribute helpful new insights of the material dimension and general well-being that sacred spaces provide for people from a multiplicity of backgrounds. Moreover, there is also a reciprocal dynamic that is here at work. The shared sacred space not only provides material and spiritual blessing for the recipients, but it, in return, also undergoes a perpetual cultural reconstruction and

reinterpretation that sustains and augments its impact and influence. Overall, it becomes obvious that the predominant factor that endows a place with multiple, even contradictory meanings, is the fact that participants themselves enjoy subjective emancipation to independently determine their own preferential emphasis (p. 357).

Overall, this book succeeds on several levels. Not only does it present an exemplary instance of the impressive usefulness of good ethnographic work for the examination of entangled sociocultural phenomena. It also achieves the desired objective of understanding how common sacred spaces within a trans-regional and multiethnic context provide superb interdisciplinary research settings for a variety of scholarly focal points ranging from cultural anthropology, sociology, and religious studies. By generating an original synthesis of these various disciplines Reuter shows how important it is for a more nuanced appreciation of religious phenomena to engage in a multiplicity of research methods. In conclusion, this book is commendable for all these and other reasons and will hopefully be an inspiration for future scholars who wish to investigate the hidden and manifold meanings and paramount significance of shared multireligious sacred sites. Reuter's extensive bibliography also presents a resource and useful springboard for researchers wishing to conduct further studies. It would, however, have been helpful for the reader to have an index page for easier referencing.