



Druze shrine dedicated to Nabi Habil, Abel, son of Adam, to the west of Damascus. The shrines has become part of pilgrimage tours organized for Iraqi and Iranian Shiite Muslims (Photo Dick Douwes, 2009)

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Sectarianism and shrine culture in the Middle East

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The popular assumption that historical antagonisms between various religious communities in the Middle East sufficiently explains the tensions of today is incorrect. Today's sectarianism is one of the consequences of the major destabilizing interventions of the West in the region, including recent ones such as in Iraq. Having said that, it is obvious that local dynamics, though not necessarily religious in origin, have to be taken into account in order to understand the intricate interplay between religion, community and politics.

Religious diversity in the Middle East is often depicted as being sectarian and associated with violence. Yet communities large and small have survived many centuries of Islamic rule, like the Samaritans close to Nablus on the West Bank and that other Jewish curiosity, the Mandeans - followers of John the Baptist - in the delta of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers. The latter even have seats in parliament in Iran.

The roots of religious diversity in the Middle East are premodern. Middle Eastern premodernity allowed for a high degree of diversity though not equality, that being a modern concept. The premodern rulers in the region, including the Ottomans, endorsed religious diversity both outside of and – albeit tacitly – within Islam. They built upon the Islamic principle of granting protection to non-Muslims, principally Christians and Jews. In return the latter paid a special tax, a major source of state revenue. Formally, their public visibility was restricted by regulations that prohibited certain forms of dress and the building of new or the restoration of old religious buildings ruined by earthquakes. This unequal treatment may have caused the gradual decline of some communities but a variety of traditions persisted. Some actually flourished such as the Jewish community of Bagdad and the Maronite Christians in Lebanon. Most churches in Lebanon were in fact built in Ottoman times. Unlike diversity outside of Islam, no formal arrangements existed that dealt

with the variety within Islam other than disciplinary measures. Nonetheless, the original diversity of the founding period of Islam, as well as later variations, has been preserved in what is considered to be Islam's heartland, the Middle East. Nowhere else is variation in Islam as pronounced.

The traditional system of communities of faith living next to and with each other, sustained by the autocratic but typically pragmatic nature of premodern Islamic rule, came under severe pressure from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. As a result of interventions by European powers claiming authority over Christian and Jewish communities, Ottoman sovereignty over its non-Muslim population weakened. Religious affiliation became political, offering access to power within but also beyond the state.

A clear case in point is the saint and shrine culture. This practice is at the heart of traditional devotion in the Middle East and, perhaps, a historically essential dynamic sustaining religious diversity by sharing the sacred. Shrine buildings, next to mosques, churches and synagogues, represent in stone and spirit the various religious traditions in public space. But also certain trees, wells and grottos are held sacred by many. Within Islam, shrine culture is closely connected to the Sufi tradition, a major supplier of holy men and a few holy women. But a whole range of biblical and koranic personalities, as well as numerous other characters, constitute a densely populated sacred geography harbouring thousands of sacred places. Major saints that transcend communal boundaries include Nabi Khidr, Mar Elyas (Eliah) and Mar Jurjus (St. George). The Muslim Khidr – or Hızır in Turkish – is closely associated with Eliah to the extent that they merge in the popular saintly entity of Hızirelyas in Anatolia and elsewhere. Maria – Miryam for Muslims – is the most venerated of shared female saints.

Many shades exist in seeking blessings from a saint as well as in expressing religiosity or religious identity. Reformist Islamic thinkers and activists criticise and often categorically reject Sufism and its ritual choreographies. In particular these reformists reject popular expressions of devotion which share with the Sufi tradition the notion of sacredness rooted in the 'knowledge' or 'secret' of a saint, the source of his or her *baraka* (blessing) which is the main commodity that is on offer at shrines. Nonetheless, shrines have become more popular over the last few decades and continue to be shared in the sense of being held sacred and visited by members of various communities. But the tradition of shared sacredness is also under pressure and, at times, under violent attack, for instance in Syria and Iraq where the Islamic State destroyed hundreds of shrines, mainly Muslim ones. Efforts to claim shrines for a particular community or to build new and exclusive shrines also reflect the

increased impact of what may be called sectarianization of shrine culture and the fostering of privileged access to devotional and, with it, social networks.



Detail of Druze shrine dedicated to Nabi Habil near Damascus. The Druzes constitute a small, heterodox community, often seen as not 'truly' Islamic within mainstream Islam (photo Dick Douwes, 2009)



Shiite shrine dedicated to Maria, located in an ancient olive tree, Sa'ida, Lebanon (Photo Dick Douwes, 2010)

Further reading

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