



**SACRALITY AND DIVERSITY IN THE CAUCASUS:
A Review of TSYPYLMA DARIEVA, FLORIAN MÜHLFRIED,
KEVIN TUIITE (EDS.), SACRED PLACES, EMERGING SPACES:
RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN THE POST-SOVIET CAUCASUS.**

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(Space and Place, 17)

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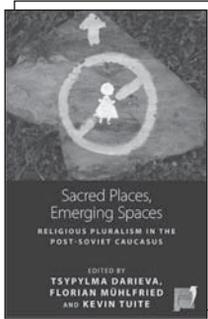
Abstract: This is a review of a volume on the anthropology of sacred places in the Caucasus. The chapters written by leading authors in the field provide an analysis of rural and urban sacred places, their evolution, redefinition and reinvention within the dynamic sociopolitical context of the post-Soviet Caucasus. All chapters draw upon abundant first-hand material from authors' fieldwork and sound qualitative methodology. Theoretical coordinates of the volume include the concept of 'great' and 'little' traditions, the so-called 'sharing the sacred' by groups of different religions, the mechanism of appropriation of the sacred in ethnic and national imagination, and the instrumentalisation of the sacred in political practices. The opposition of 'great' and 'little' traditions — or official religious institutions and vernacular practices — seems somewhat simplistic as the authors tend to profile only hegemonic pressure (from the institutions) and the resistance of the local agents, while in fact a more complex negotiation between the two levels might be acknowledged. Nevertheless, according to the reviewer, overall, the volume provides high quality scholarship both in terms of fresh empirical data and conceptual engagement.

Keywords: sacred places, Caucasus, 'great' and 'little' traditions, lived religion.

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Tsypylma Darieva, Florian Mühlfried, Kevin Tuite (eds.),
*Sacred Places, Emerging Spaces: Religious Pluralism
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This is a review of a volume on the anthropology of sacred places in the Caucasus. The chapters written by leading authors in the field provide an analysis of rural and urban sacred places, their evolution, redefinition and reinvention within the dynamic sociopolitical context of the post-Soviet Caucasus. All chapters draw upon abundant first-hand material from authors' fieldwork and sound qualitative methodology. Theoretical coordinates of the volume include the concept of 'great' and 'little' traditions, the so-called 'sharing the sacred' by groups of different religions, the mechanism of appropriation of the sacred in ethnic and national imagination, and the instrumentalisation of the sacred in political practices. The opposition of 'great' and 'little' traditions — or official religious institutions and vernacular practices — seems somewhat simplistic as the authors tend to profile only hegemonic pressure (from the institutions) and the resistance of the local agents, while in fact a more complex negotiation between the two levels might be acknowledged. Nevertheless, according to the reviewer, overall, the volume provides high quality scholarship both in terms of fresh empirical data and conceptual engagement.

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Sacrality and Diversity in the Caucasus

This collection, which is the outcome of a three-year research project, is a detailed, scrupulous and dense ethnography of sacred places in various parts of the Caucasus, on either side of the Caucasus mountain range: nine chapters dealing with nine specific cases. The extent to which the Caucasus may be regarded as a cultural unity, knit together by a common 'nervous system' other than its geography, is a debatable one, but the authors take that unity as read. However, one obvious imbalance should be noted at once: only one of the nine chapters deals with the Russian North Caucasus. While the unity of the Caucasus may be questionable, there is no question at all about its diversity. This is not only a matter of its bewildering ethnic, linguistic, cultural and religious mosaic, but also of the millennial pressure of powerful, very different, rival civilisations.

The title includes the words 'religious pluralism', a term which requires discussion. Diversity and pluralism are different things. Diversity is the fact of plurality, pluralism is the attempt

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to make sense of it, organise it, reduce it to order. For the book under review this distinction between diversity and pluralism is no idle question. It is not only a matter of the richness of religious facts as such, but also of how people connect these facts, how they share them and challenge them, interpret them differently, arrange and rearrange them in accordance with their own wishes, interests and imagination, create hierarchies of power around them and incorporate them into translocal and national symbolic systems. When religious ‘givens’ are instrumentalised by various institutions and actors (up to state level), diversity turns into ‘pluralism’, and this whole book is devoted to the relationships that surround the sacred in many dimensions and on many levels.

What is *the sacred*? In the majority of the chapters it is a matter of local, ‘popular’ holy places. This is the sacred in its original sense, assigned to it at the beginning of anthropology in the spirit of Durkheim — condensations of a powerful force that promises miracles and holds society together. The cases described in the book are of this sort: the healing cult of the urban saint Mir Mövsüm ağa, compared with typical *pirs* and *ziyarat*s, the cult localities in Azerbaijan and Dagestan; the village rituals of breaking of bread in the mountains of Svanetia; the pilgrim sites (other than churches) in Armenia, *matur*s and *surb*s; the lately revived Abkhazian pre-Christian holy places, *ldza-nyh*; the rituals for the commemoration of the dead in the Russian Cossack settlement of Zakubanskaya in the north-west of the Caucasus; or the informal shrines of the Armenian Yezidis.

The authors have thus discovered and recorded these examples of the sacred — the vernacular, popular, spontaneous and informal sacred. In many cases the central role of women in ritual practices is stressed, for example the ‘female ritual networks’ in the Svan village, which are opposed to the ‘masculine’ altar of the local church and the ‘masculine’ domestic hearth (chapter 2); female *ziyarat*-pilgrimages in Azerbaijan (chapters 1 and 6); the role of elderly women in preserving the tradition of funeral rites in the Cossack village (chapter 6).

All the authors do what the logic of their research demands of them: in the spirit of classical symbolic interactionism à la Geertz they reveal the multiplicity of meanings and relationships with which these nodes of the sacred are imbued and into which they are woven. And here we see the book’s two main aims, which are inevitably connected with the factor of dense pluralism mentioned above.

The first aim is an analysis of the ‘horizontal’ interaction of different religious systems and their adherents. For example, the so-called *sharing the sacred*, the joint use of a shrine, described in detail by Glenn Bowman [Bowman 2012] using material from the Balkans

and the Middle East. In the book under review, Christian recourse to the healing power of Sufi *ziyarats* in Azerbaijan, or the mixture of Islam and Christianity among the Georgian-speaking inhabitants of the İngiloy region Azerbaijan, may be referred to this phenomenon. But as far as one can see there are not many such instances in the book, even in the Caucasus. More often encountered is what Robert Hayden, arguing against Bowman, has called *antagonistic tolerance* [Hayden et al. 2016], a conscious tolerance by its neighbours of a different form of the sacred, and, therefore, of one community by another as an unavoidable but essentially *other* given. Here there arises in passing the question of the nature and consequences of this sort of tolerance; it is examined in detail by Florian Mühlfried in the chapter on relations between Georgians and Jews (of whom there are now very few) in the city of Oni (in the historical region of Racha in northern Georgia). This text digresses from the topic of the book, even though it is called 'Not Sharing the Sacred'. In fact Mühlfried's chapter is not about the sacred, but about interethnic relations. Mühlfried gives an interesting account of 'the phenomenology of distance', and argues that 'antagonistic tolerance', which assumes distance without intermixing, is the best means of keeping the peace between groups and even of putting into practice the Georgian national narrative of hospitality (p. 152, *passim*). However, this conclusion does not appear convincing to me: there cannot be any strict rule here, and well we know that there are many notorious, textbook examples of the failure of conscious and implemented distancing to prevent violence.

Even more frequently than joint or shared sacrality we encounter what certain authors, particularly Igor Kuznetsov, call *hybridity*. In Kuznetsov's text, hybridity is the key concept for describing the shrines of Abkhazia. By this he means the combination of heterogeneous cultural elements in a single object or cult. The first example of hybridity in the Abkhazian case described is the linking of Christian and archaic pre-Christian elements at the shrines (for example, the use of an analogue to the eucharistic chalice in a non-Christian rite). If we are to speak of a long historical genealogy for such mixing, with its 'nature of a palimpsest', as the author writes, then it is hard to distinguish hybridity from syncretism. But the phenomenon acquires a totally different meaning when we learn that the sacral hybrid is constructed by 'cultural entrepreneurs' and the local authorities, that is a modern postcolonial construct which is needed in order to legitimise a separate, independent Abkhazian cultural identity as opposed to the 'big players' — Christianity as a world religion (in the form of the Georgian Orthodox Church, but not only) and the state (most likely the imperial state as such with its colonial pretensions). Kuznetsov reminds us that the revived cult of the so-called 'seven traditional shrines' (pre-Christian holy places,

represented by the stars on the flag of the unrecognised republic) is a modern, political, and ideological phenomenon, and, therefore, the 'hybrid' is to an extent a deliberate project.

And here we come to the book's other research aim, which emerges of itself, of which the authors are conscious, and which, in essence, becomes central. Here it is no longer a matter of the horizontal combination of various elements within and around the sacred, but of vertical hierarchies of subjects and meanings which are in fierce competition for possession of the sacred. Here the vernacular practices are challenged by two chief institutional systems, the church and the state, which are moreover in competition with each other.

Theoretically at least two classical viewpoints may be discerned here. The first is the theory of hegemony and the religious field (though the book makes no mention of Antonio Gramsci or Pierre Bourdieu). The second is Robert Redfield's theory of the opposition between the 'great' and 'little' traditions, which occupies an important place in the argumentation.

The theme of the struggle for hegemony in the religious field runs through the whole book. First of all, this is to be seen in a struggle between religious institutions and spontaneous popular religion, alongside which the state, in its search for a solid ideology, relies on institutionalised religion and in return supports this. Three powerful churches, the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Georgian Orthodox Church, and the Russian Orthodox Church, are striving to take control of the sacred. Religious authority in turn relies on the power of the relevant state. *Nation-building* as a dominant agenda demands uniformity. This agenda tries to grind everything down and normalise it, to discipline and punish, and to discredit vernacular practices as 'pagan' (see the examples below). There are some similarities in the effects of the criticism of informal practices by the new Islamic purists (the chapters by Darieva and Ayzvashvili on Azerbaijan), but in this case there is a significant difference: the state inevitably fears religious radicalism, and will not form an alliance with it. The example of Abkhazia discussed above, where the state itself constructs a 'hybrid' and thereby mitigates its opposition, looks like an exception to the general rule, which is that institutions inclined towards doctrinal and ritual rigidity, with the bureaucratic support of state rationalism, aim to eradicate the field of 'pagan superstition' over which they have no control. (Is there not also here a sort of gender reaction against the vernacular religion sustained by women?)

This creates a specific sort of methodological trap. Like true anthropologists, the authors are unflinching in sympathy with their vernacular informants and unflinching (implicitly or even openly) accuse of aggression the religious or secular institutions that trespass upon the popular field with which they sympathise. The four authors who

wrote the chapter on Armenian pilgrimages state the question in its most conceptual form. They passionately defend 'lived religion' against the neglect and condescension of the religious and state institutions. They ask: should popular (*zhogovrdakan*) Christianity be regarded as some sort of periphery to the tradition or is it really 'a basic component of the national religion', insofar as the 'official' Christian tradition, despite its criticism of popular practices, has been forced to incorporate certain of them (pp. 73–4)? Ultimately, the authors affirm, Christianity has always been many-layered. It is interesting that they several times accuse the official church of 'fundamentalism', which seems terminologically inexact (because fundamentalism is a particular mode of religion which is incompatible with conservative institutions), but it does allow them to make their position clear.

Hege Toje, who writes about the Russian Cossack settlement, is just as harsh in accusing a Russian Orthodox priest of creating a hegemonic regime in the religious field, forcibly drawing a new sacral topography, and introducing distinctions in communal links (pp. 140–4), that is, effectively dissolving the traditional religious idyll founded upon an age-old system of commemorative rituals. Even so are the authors who write on the Islamic field (Tsypylma Darieva and Nino Ayvazishvili) concerned about the growing criticism by purists of the popular veneration for *ziyarat*s and *pirs* (pp. 11, 36). Any attempts to separate orthodoxy from heterodoxy, authentic practices from 'survivals', true believers from false, are perceived by the authors as a threat to the practitioners of 'lived religion' so dear to their hearts.

Although some of the chapters of the book are committed in this way, the research does reflect an actual process: the tendency towards the affirmation of an orthodox hegemony which is evident in the Caucasus. But this process seems to be universal and by no means new; it can hardly be presented as the unprecedented onslaught that it sometimes appears on the pages of this book. The colonisation of shifting popular archaism is a historically repeated, cyclic, eternal vector of the dynamics of society. The most important factor in the revival of this tendency in recent decades has been the suppression of religious institutions in Soviet times, when the sacral was squeezed out into everyday practices. After the collapse of the atheist empire, the sacral again became the object of a deliberate ideological ordering on the part of several forces, sometimes (but not always) acting in concert: religious institutions, religious purists, states and sections of the national intelligentsia (which the editors rightly note in the introduction (p. 11)).

Nevertheless, imagining *lived religion* as a sort of phenomenon sui generis, existing all by itself and subject to outside aggression seems an oversimplification. There have always been arguments about

authenticity and struggles for hegemony, there are now and there always will be, and they *always* assume mutual influence, pressure and resistance, the formation of complex hybrids and compromises. It may be noted that the book treats Redfield's concept of 'great and little traditions' in a paradoxical twofold manner. At first sight the glorification of 'lived religion' as central, real and genuine exalts the rights of the 'little tradition' and does away with that disdainful attitude to it that seems to be contained in Redfield's dichotomy, and, in fact, rejects the very dichotomy as unprofitable. However, such a harsh opposition between 'lived' and institutional religion, which is visible on the whole in the book, leads to the opposite result: it *reinforces and reaffirms* this simplistic dichotomy.

From my point of view, Redfield's concept should neither be overthrown nor simplified as it is in this book. Tsypylma Darieva, in her in many ways excellent chapter on the urban invalid-saint of Baku, criticises the dichotomy and tries to get away from it on the grounds that the cult of Mövsüm ağa is woven into the fabric of the modern city and therefore cannot be considered the sort of rural, oral archaism with which she associates Redfield's 'little tradition' (pp. 23–5). I am sure that Redfield's dichotomy is quite capable of withstanding this criticism: the 'great' and 'little' traditions should, naturally, be understood as ideal types which should not be treated in a static and simplified manner, especially if the critic is not proposing any other explanatory model instead.

In fact the constant interaction between the 'great' and 'little' traditions as *ideal types* is the actual process that takes place around sacred places. This process involves not only the adherents of the 'high' religion, but also the state and individual 'cultural entrepreneurs', and the influence of all these forces together on the constant reformatting of the tradition is entirely inevitable and natural.

The last chapter of the book deserves particular attention. Though it seems at first sight rather marginal to the discussion, it in fact represents a clever redeployment of the overall concerns. This is Silvia Serrano's article about *Rabati*, an ancient fortress in Akhaltsikhe, southern Georgia, that was extensively reconstructed in 2011–2012 and turned into a centre for shoppers and tourists, with a non-functioning church and mosque in its interior. Serrano discusses the 'neutralization of religions by turning them into cultural heritage'; thus religions are integrated into the 'Georgian dream' and what Foucault termed a 'heterotopia', part of a (supposedly) European, neutral and tolerant, modernity (pp. 215–8). Critics of the complex complain that it is artificial, but for the anthropologist, this state intervention into the national imaginary represents a striking example of the symbolic construction of reality. This is a case where the Georgian state in the era of Mikheil Saaka-

shvili self-consciously subordinated *the old sacrality* of traditional religions to *the new sacrality* of the inclusive heterotopia and the secular model of 'cultural heritage'. Among the obvious targets of this gesture was the Georgian Orthodox Church and its attempts 'to capture both the past and the territory' (p. 207). Thus, we can see a triple stand-off in progress: the state, in its desire to be progressive and modern, attempts to face down the 'great tradition' of Orthodox Christianity, which, for its part, treads on the toes of the 'little tradition' that is so eloquently described in some of the other chapters of the book under review.

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