

Holy Places in the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict

Confrontation and co-existence

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8 The pessimist's guide to religious coexistence

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Introduction

The Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem is revered as the site of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ by several Christian sects who vie zealously for control over different parts of the structure. These sects attempt to encroach on their rivals' space while continuing to defend their exclusive rights to sections that have traditionally been under their control. In May 1997, a sewer cover in the church interior broke. Concerned that the exposed sewer hole might endanger worshipers, Metropolitan Daniel, the senior Greek Orthodox priest in the church, tried to replace the cover.¹ A group of Armenian monks happened to see his activities, attacked the eighty year-old metropolitan and beat him within an inch of his life. The sewer hole, they later explained, was located in the Armenian, and not the Greek Orthodox, part of the church. A special committee convened by the Greek Orthodox, Armenian, and Latin Patriarchates in response to this incident could not resolve the question of jurisdiction over the sewer cover. For several years after this incident, it remained broken, covered with a rickety board.²

Despite agreements on a wide range of issues, violent incidents such as these are common at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, where Coptic, Syrian, Ethiopian, Latin, Armenian, and Greek Orthodox worshipers struggle over the right to access, maintain or decorate every square inch of space. Tussles, fist fights, and an atmosphere of tense suspicion between the religious groups that must share this space have led to deadlock on crucial matters relating to the integrity of the church and the safety of worshipers, such as disagreement on repairing parts of the structure and an impasse on constructing an additional entrance to accommodate the surge of pilgrims for the year 2000.³

The tense conditions at this site are all the more astounding because several key conditions for peaceful religious coexistence have already been put in place. The "Status Quo," legal system with regard to the Christian Holy Places, established in 1757 and confirmed in 1852, is rigorously enforced by the State of Israel. The government has tried to bridge differences between the rival sects and, more often than not, has undertaken to cover the expense of critical maintenance projects itself. As a neutral party enjoying power

predominance, the Israeli Government should be expected to be able to compel the parties to coexist peacefully. Additional efforts to reduce friction between the parties have included mapping out spheres of jurisdiction to the minutest of details, and the handing over the keys of the entire shrine to Muslim custodians. Yet the conflict continues unabated.

The pervasive discord at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher is particularly remarkable because it is not a typical case of inter-religious conflict over sacred space, like Jewish-Muslim disputes in Israel or Hindu-Muslim disputes in India, where contradictory religious narratives lead different groups to compete over one and the same site. Atypically, this conflict is intra-religious, occurring among various Christian sects that are driven by the same sacred texts to worship at a communal site. Any common ground that might have united these groups has been overshadowed by the competitive desire to control a space, restrict access to that space and enforce rules within it. Far more costly outcomes characterize competition over sacred places by distinct religions, as occurs frequently in South Asia, the Middle East, the Balkans, and elsewhere. The costs of these conflicts can be measured in tens of thousands of lives, particularly when sectarian violence spills over into local and regional conflicts and hampers the resolution of intractable military disputes.

Given this empirical record, the optimistic attitude that characterizes current research on inter-religious strife, including contributions in this volume, is nothing short of baffling. Scholars studying sacred sites in Israel and the West Bank have enthusiastically pointed to inter-faith harmony at the Cave of Elijah in Haifa, the Tomb of Samuel north of Jerusalem and, in the nineteenth century, the Cave of Simon the Just in Jerusalem.⁴ An expert on the sharing of Sufi shrines by Hindus and Muslims in the Punjab, India, has noted "the reality of peaceful interaction that counters the stereotype of perennial Hindu-Muslim antagonism."⁵ Another author, writing about shared sacred sites in the Middle East, argued that although religion is antagonistic to pluralism, "it would be misleading to conclude that for this reason there cannot be sharing among distinct religions."⁶

Hopeful outlooks such as these are part of a larger backlash against the pessimistic stance that has dominated the study of religion and politics since the publication of Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* and the disproportionate focus on fundamentalism and extremism in the wake of September 11.⁷ Authors who counter the tragic implications of Huntington's deterministic view have taken pains to point to the benevolent message at the core of all religious traditions, citing it as evidence for religious coexistence. Others have gone so far as to laud the peacemaking capabilities of religious actors and have suggested that a greater dose of religion in politics would provide the means for resolving many interstate rivalries.⁸ Religious conflicts, these scholars argue, are not inevitable but rather the result of misunderstandings, mismanagement and failure to implement widely available conflict resolution measures.

If applied to religious coexistence at sacred sites, I believe this optimism is dangerously misguided. In the following pages, I will argue that the very same

motivations that lead religious groups to attribute importance to sacred sites also lead these groups into conflict with religious rivals at these sites. This is why attempts to divide sacred space between religious groups, arrangements in which groups alternate in their use of the space or exclusion of all groups from a space have consistently failed to lead to harmony at sacred sites. The only exceptions to this rule occur at less pivotal "folk" sites that occupy a marginal role in the religious landscape. To illustrate the weakness of these measures, I present a brief case study of the Muslim-Hindu dispute in Ayodhya, India, in which a variety of conflict-resolution techniques failed to prevent a disastrous outcome.

I conclude by arguing that the key to resolving religious conflict at sacred sites lies not in managing tensions between rival groups but in separating those groups from one another. The difficulty lies in the fact that such separation cannot be imposed on religious groups from without. The decision to abandon a sacred site for another must arise from within the leadership of a group, a scenario that is only feasible at unique junctures in the development of a religious movement.

The root of the problem

Religious movements value sacred sites for four primary reasons: Sacred sites provide access, legitimacy, meaning, and a sense of community. Inevitably, those same reasons lead religious groups into conflict with competitors who wish to implement conflicting rules regarding access, compete for rightful title, provoke their rivals, and target its population.⁹

First and foremost, sacred sites provide access to the divine by permitting worshipers to come in contact with the sacred. Sacred sites represent earthly locations at which the divine has manifested itself through vision or miracle, where humans have communicated with the gods and to which they come in expectation of blessing, healing or forgiveness. Because these sites constitute ruptures in the ordinary realm, worshipers must abide by specific rules regarding access and behavior. These rules are designed to protect the divine presence from desecration and protect humans from overstepping dangerous limits as they approach the divine, as well as to distinguish the sacred space from the surrounding secular space. Transgressing these rules is tantamount to sacrilege.

One of a religious group's most important tasks, therefore, is to enforce these rules on access and conduct. Although driven by religious principles, this is essentially a political enforcement. It involves monitoring the boundaries of the sacred space and policing behavior within it. In the secular realm, this degree of control over space is associated with sovereignty, i.e., with the exclusive domination by a social group over a defined space. In the religious realm, protection of a sacred space from sacrilege requires similar exclusivity. It is when the sacred spaces of two or more religious groups overlap that difficulties arise, due to contradictions between what is permitted by one

group and prohibited by the other. One group bans the consumption of alcohol, another employs wine in the performance of crucial rites. One religious movement requires covering the head, another demands its exposure. One sect practices a solemn ritual while the other wishes to celebrate an exuberant feast. One religion espouses inclusive services while the other bars women from its sanctuaries. Jewish-Muslim friction at the Tomb of the Patriarchs/Ibrahimi Mosque in Hebron exemplifies this type of conflict.

A second cause for the centrality of sacred sites in religious belief lies in their ability to confer an aura of legitimacy on the movements that control them. This is particularly important when several competing sects claim the right of true succession from a common religion of origin, as do the multiple Christian sects struggling over the Holy Sepulcher. Exclusive access to the divine is one important way for a religious tradition to demonstrate that it is the most authentic inheritor to the "one true faith." The group exerting exclusive control over a sacred space can bar others from access at whim, extract concessions or exert control over pilgrims entering into its domain. Saudi control over the sacred mosques in Mecca and Medina and its implications for its rivalry with Shi'ite Iran offers a prominent example for this type of conflict.

Third, sacred sites are valued because they embody the very essence of a particular religious movement, both to its members and to members of other faiths. The shrines erected at these sites often represent the religious movement at its most splendid, displaying a religious community's power and wealth even to those barred from access. Their design and ornamentation capture key elements of the religious tradition in a symbolic form that is immediately recognizable to worshipers and outsiders alike. Many of the world's great religious shrines, such as the Grand Mosque in Mecca, the Western Wall in Jerusalem, the Church of Saint Peter in Rome or the Shinto Shrine in Ise, have become synonymous in popular perception with the religions they represent.

Given this parallelism between the religious group and its sacred space, the space itself becomes vulnerable to attack from those seeking to harm the group. Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh shrines in India are routinely targeted during riots against these communities. Similarly, mosques and synagogues throughout Israel and the West Bank suffered the brunt of sectarian violence in the early days of the Al-Aqsa Intifada, as did churches and mosques over the course of the armed conflicts in the former Yugoslavia.¹⁰ By targeting or damaging the shrine most sacred to a group, its rivals hope to strike at the heart of the group's values, heritage, and pride. This type of attack bears unmistakable meaning. It is not merely an act of violence but a challenge to the core of the religious group and all it represent. Assaults on sacred sites are thus attempts by one group to undermine the foundations upon which their opponent's identity and faith rest.

Sacred places make tempting targets for another reason: they tend to teem with religious adherents. Believers are drawn to sacred places not only because

of the religious functions these sites perform but also because these places perform specific social roles. In their function as legal, political or financial centers, sacred places draw powerful actors from all walks of life into their orbit. Temples and shrines have doubled as royal residences, courts of law, financial exchanges, and markets. Often the largest public structure at the center of a village or town, they become the primary locus of societal interaction. Rivals striking at these structures can therefore expect to exact substantial casualties from the target community. This notorious tactic is evident in the Sunni-Shi'ite conflict developing in Iraq today, in which attacks on crowded mosques have cost thousands of believers their lives.¹¹

To summarize, insofar as sacred places provide believers with access to the divine, legitimacy, meaning, and community, they invite conflict with rival groups who strive to compete for access or legitimacy or who simply wish to inflict harm on their opponents. The more important a sacred site the more likely it will provide crucial functions, the more likely the friction with other groups and the greater the odds of large-scale violence.

This explains, in part, why students of religion and politics have observed peaceful coexistence at minor shrines that are not fully institutionalized into the formal framework of a religious movement. Muslim-Jewish coexistence is possible at a site like the Cave of Elijah because it is neither an official mosque nor an official synagogue. Restrictive rules that delimit access and behavior have not been implemented, and possession of such sites confers little or no legitimacy on one religious community or the other. Because they are marginal to the religious landscape of both Judaism and Islam, they make for poor symbols of the religious movement to outsiders and for poor targets of mass attack by adversaries. Should sites like these grow in importance, due to a sudden rise in their popularity or increased sectarian tension in the region, their vulnerability to conflict is certain to increase as well. At important sacred sites, conflict is inevitable. Peaceful coexistence is only possible where it matters least.

Recipes for disaster

In facing these seemingly intractable challenges, peacemakers have suggested a variety of approaches for managing coexistence at sacred sites. Their tools tend to fall into three broad categories: partition, scheduling, and exclusion. In the Jewish-Muslim and Hindu-Muslim disputes that I examine below, these strategies provide temporary solutions, at best. Instead of resolving disputes, they provide provisional accommodation in the hope that gradual understanding between the rival groups will displace tensions. Instead, such provisions merely serve to frustrate religious movements which find their access to a sacred site restricted by the presence of rivals. This frustration is made all the more acute by each group's perception that divine decree has granted it, and only it, exclusive rights to the site. As the rivals face off in a zero-sum conflict, their resentment tends to manifest itself, sooner or later, in a violent outburst.¹²

In the first conflict resolution approach, the sacred space is divided so as to permit two or more religious groups to worship at a sacred site at the same time. This can take the form of establishing restrictions on access to specific parts of a shrine or indicating spheres of jurisdiction without restricting access. The former is the approach adopted in several Indian mosques that have been constructed on top of, and with materials recycled from, destroyed Hindu temples. At the Krishna Janmasthan in Mathura, the Kashi Vishwanath Temple/Gyanvapi Mosque in Varanasi and the Quwwat-ul-Islam Mosque in Delhi, Hindu and Muslim worshipers pray in distinct areas, separated by barriers and guarded by Indian military troops.¹³ The latter approach, jurisdictional division, was implemented in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem and the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, where members of the different Christian sects are free to move about the shrine but are limited in their right to clean, maintain or decorate sectors other than their own.

In the second scenario, a detailed agreement establishes the times at which different groups have access to a site. Such an agreement might permit only one group to access the site at one time or establish periods of common versus separate worship. In most cases, division and scheduling are combined. In the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, for example, parts that are in the public domain most of the year are reserved for the exclusive use of one sect or another at dates of particular significance to that sect. Scheduling need not provide equal access to all parties involved. Only Muslims are permitted to access the Temple Mount platform in Jerusalem on Fridays and Muslim holy days; non-Muslims are permitted there at other times but may not pray there.

Finally, the strategy of exclusion seeks to resolve conflict over a sacred site by barring all religious groups from worshipping there. This can be achieved by secularizing the sacred place, conferring historical or archeological status on the site or simply locking its gates to worshipers. For example, the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, a church converted into a mosque, could have formed the backdrop for significant Christian-Muslim tension had the Turkish government not declared the shrine a national museum in which neither Muslim nor Christian worship is permitted.

Although strategies of partition, scheduling and exclusion are routinely practiced at controversial sacred sites worldwide, their record of success is disappointing, at best, and disastrous, at worst. Before 1967, for example, Muslim authorities ruling over Hebron had barred Jews from praying at the Tomb of the Patriarchs. Upon conquering Hebron in the Six-Day War of 1967, Israel forced a division of the large prayer hall and instituted an elaborate prayer schedule designed to enable Muslim as well as Jewish prayer while keeping the parties apart.¹⁴ Nevertheless, conflicting practices at the site soon led to violence between Jews and Muslims. Overwhelming Israeli military presence converted the shrine into an army stronghold.¹⁵ Congregations pray under 24-hour camera surveillance, separated by head-high aluminum barricades, and keep their sacred texts in fire-proof safes for fear of

desecration. These measures have all proven futile, as demonstrated by a series of attacks involving stabbings, shootings and Molotov cocktails, culminating in the brutal attack of February 1994. Thirty-nine Palestinians were gunned down by a Jewish extremist during prayer in the Tomb and an additional sixteen died in subsequent violence.¹⁶

The reason why accepted conflict resolution methods prove unsuccessful lies in their failure to address the root causes of violence at sacred sites, as discussed above. Neither partition nor scheduling obviate the desire by multiple parties to control access and behavior over an entire sacred space. Indeed, they deprive each party to the dispute of the ability to prevent what it considers sacrilege in half of the sacred place all the time, or in the entire sacred space half of the time. Moreover, partition and scheduling fail to resolve or even address the looming question of legitimacy. The outcome, in fact, is that sharing space and time among rival groups establishes the basis for increased competition, as each group attempts to control more space and more time to establish its authority and authenticity. The division of sacred space by fiat merely represses the conflict, creating tensions that seethe under the surface, threatening to erupt as soon as one party perceives changes in the balance of power.

The third approach, exclusion, does address the problems posed by a sacred place's vulnerability as social symbol and community center, by barring worshipers from the site altogether. However, this is a harsh measure and is likely to antagonize all religious groups involved. Only the strongest of states can afford to adopt a unilateral strategy of this sort. Moreover, only a government neutral to the interests of all religious rivals involved would be likely to desire exclusion as an outcome. The secular Turkish regime's handling of the Hagia Sophia constitutes a rare exception to this pattern.

The Indian government's failure to manage the Ayodhya crisis, on the other hand, demonstrates the dangers of attempting conflict resolution at sacred sites in the absence of strict neutrality and overwhelming power dominance. This case is worth examining because in the course of the dispute there, all of the strategies discussed above were implemented at some point or another, yet all failed to prevent conflict. The Ayodhya dispute should also be of particular interest to students of religious coexistence in the Middle East, given its similarities with the conflict over Jerusalem.¹⁷

The dispute over the Babri Masjid (Mosque of Babur) in Ayodhya is rooted in the belief that the Muslim Emperor Babur constructed this mosque on the site of the Ramjanmabhumi, an earlier Hindu temple marking the birthplace of the god Rama. Although this religious-historical claim is highly unlikely, it is not unreasonable given the frequency of mosque constructions on the sites of Hindu shrines by Mughal rulers, who often incorporated building materials from destroyed shrines to construct the mosques.¹⁸

The mosque was constructed by the Mughal emperor in the early sixteenth century. Until the mid-nineteenth century, the site was a popular folk shrine, revered for its miraculous drinking water. Muslims and Hindus shared access

to the well in the central courtyard whereas the rest of the shrine was divided into Muslim and Hindu sectors.¹⁹ This state of harmonious coexistence was interrupted in the mid-nineteenth century. The onset of direct British rule over India in 1857 was accompanied by a rise in sectarian tensions that in turn increased discord between Hindus and Muslims in Ayodhya as well.

Consequently, a low barrier was installed to keep Hindu worshipers out of the inner courtyard of the mosque. Hindu believers constructed a *chabootra*, a prayer platform, in the outer courtyard and made their offerings there. This separation, while convenient for Muslim worshipers, was unacceptable to Hindus, who appealed to the courts on several occasions. The tenuous nature of the arrangement was further underscored in Hindu attacks on the mosque during communal riots in the 1930s.²⁰

In 1949, Hindu worshipers escalated the situation further when they demanded the right to worship idols of the gods Rama, Sita, and Hanuman that had “mysteriously” appeared inside the mosque. When a violent crowd attempted to storm the mosque, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru instructed that the idols be removed, an order disobeyed by local police who feared mob retaliation. Instead, the mosque was placed under lock and key, barring worshipers of all faiths.²¹ This second attempt to resolve the situation in Ayodhya led to further court appeals by Hindu worshipers and the founding of the Ramjanmabhumi Mukti Yajna Samiti, the Organization for Sacrifice to Liberate the Birthplace of the God Rama. Its efforts were ultimately successful. In 1986 the locks were removed and exclusive Hindu worship began in the mosque courtyard. Muslims responded by founding the All India Babri Masjid Action Committee, a movement that led their protests in the ensuing decades.

As far as extremist Hindu worshipers were concerned, Hindu prayer in the courtyard was merely the first step towards construction of a Hindu temple on the mosque ruins. In 1989 the foundations for this temple were laid, prompting widescale anti-Hindu riots and the destruction of over 400 temples in Pakistan and Bangladesh. Nevertheless, the World Hindu Council (VHP), and the Indian People's Party (BJP) continued in their campaign to construct a temple for Rama in Ayodhya. In 1990, dozens of Hindu devotees died in clashes with the police in Ayodhya. Two years later, tens of thousands of activists, using their bare hands, pick hammers, and sticks, attacked and demolished the Babri Masjid in under fourteen hours and constructed a shrine for Rama among the ruins.²² This incident, instigated by the VHP and BJP, provoked riots across India in which an estimated 20,000 Hindus and Muslims met their deaths. The backlash was felt as far as England, where Hindus and Muslims attacked one another's sacred shrines.²³ Hundreds more died the next year in a series of bombings in Mumbai, said to have occurred in retaliation for the destruction of the Babri Masjid.

Since 1992, the ruins of the mosque have once again been placed under lock and key. Visitors wishing to approach the site must pass a steel barricade located half a kilometer from the shrine, then go through a metal detector,

discard all personal items, and pass through a second metal detector.²⁴ The area is protected by closed-circuit cameras and a force of 3,000 policemen bearing automatic weapons. Not surprisingly, none of these measures has reduced violence at the site. Hindu extremists continue planning in earnest towards construction of a temple, with blueprints and materials already assembled and consecrated. Muslim radicals, in turn, attacked Hindu worshipers returning from Ayodhya in 2002, and staged an assault on the mosque site itself in 2005.

Good fences for bad neighbors

The consequences of the Ayodhya affair should serve as a warning to peace-makers who consider partition, scheduling or exclusion to be workable options for the resolution of conflicts over sacred places. Even when all available conflict-resolution strategies are adopted in turn, violence at sacred sites is likely to prevail and ultimately escalate. Rather than seek examples for successful conflict management where none exist, students of religious coexistence should focus their efforts on analyzing cases in which groups have avoided conflict altogether by worshiping at separate sites. This, as Arthur Conan Doyle would have put it, shifts the attention to “the dog that did not bark.” For example, researchers should ask why, despite mutual Muslim and Jewish reverence toward Moses and Abraham, is there Muslim–Jewish conflict over the Tomb of Abraham in Hebron but not over the Tomb of Moses in the Judean Desert? Why, despite common Muslim and Christian veneration towards John the Baptist or Christian and Jewish reverence towards Adam and Eve, is there no Muslim–Christian or Jewish–Christian conflict over the tombs of these biblical figures? The answer, in all these cases, is related to the conscious decision by one party to a potential dispute to identify its sacred site elsewhere. Jews and Muslims identify the same site as the Tomb of Abraham, leading to major violent conflict at the tomb. There is disagreement, however, as to the location of the Tomb of Moses. Muslims worship at Nebi Mousa in the Judean desert whereas Jews believe that the location of Moses' tomb, somewhere near Mount Nebo east of the Jordan, is unknown. Muslims pray at the Tomb of John the Baptist in Damascus, but Christians worship his tomb in Ephesus, Turkey. Christians revere the Church of the Holy Sepulcher as the location of the bones of Adam while Jews place his tomb in Hebron.

The decision to place a space or event common to multiple religions at different sites can have profound implications for religious coexistence. The Jewish–Muslim clash over the Temple Mount/Haram es Sharif, for example, has been pivotal in aggravating Israeli–Palestinian relations, contributing to the failure of the Camp David negotiations in July 2000 and provoking the Al-Aqsa Intifada two months later.²⁵ Christians, on the other hand, have expressed their opinions regarding the resolution of the Jerusalem question in general but have not made claims to the Temple Mount.

The Christian disinterest in the site so central to Jews and Muslims stems from an early Christian understanding of the Gospels as marginalizing the

Temple. Christian interpreters believed that the New Testament site of Jesus Christ's sacrifice and resurrection, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, supplanted the Old Testament site of Jewish animal sacrifice, the Temple Mount. It was with this interpretation in mind that the Emperor Constantine decided in the fourth century to disregard the Temple Mount and build Christianity's most sacred shrine on the opposite side of the city of Jerusalem. His biographer and then bishop of Caesarea, Eusebius, described the new church, underscoring its opposition to the sacred Jewish site:

On the monument of salvation itself was the new Jerusalem built, over against the one so famous of old which, after the pollution caused by the murder of the Lord, experienced the last extremity of desolation and paid the penalty for the crime of its inhabitants. Opposite this the emperor raised, at great and lavish expense, the trophy of the Savior's victory over death ...²⁶

This decision of Constantine's explains why the conflict over the Temple Mount today involves two and not three religious groups. It was a remarkable shift, given the place occupied by the Jewish Temple in seminal events in the lives of Jesus Christ, John the Baptist, and other Christian figures. But it was not a decision without parallel.

Similar reasoning serves to explain why Islam is not a party to the dispute over the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, despite the importance of the crucifixion in Muslim accounts of the life of Jesus Christ. According to one tradition, when the Caliph Umar ibn al-Khattab conquered Jerusalem for Islam in the seventh century, he was taken on a tour of Jerusalem that included a visit to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Halfway through the visit, the call for prayer resounded through the city so Sophornius, the patriarch of Jerusalem and guide to Umar, invited the Caliph to conduct his prayers inside the church. Karen Armstrong, citing the ninth-century *Annals* of Eutychius, recounts what happened next:

Umar courteously refused; neither would he pray in Constantine's Martyrium. Instead he went outside and prayed on the steps beside the busy thoroughfare of the *Cardo Maximus*. He explained to the patriarch that had he prayed inside the Christian shrines, the Muslims would have confiscated them and converted them into an Islamic place of worship to commemorate the caliph's prayer ...²⁷

If this account is to be believed, the lack of Muslim-Christian conflict over the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, like the absence of Muslim-Christian and Jewish-Christian conflict over the Temple Mount, has its roots in a conscious decision made by a charismatic leader at a critical time in the history of a religious-political movement. Constantine, first Roman-Christian emperor, chose to position Christianity's sacred center in Jerusalem away from the

city's sacred site for Jews. Umar ibn al-Khattab, successor to the Prophet Muhammad, placed the Muslim sacred site in Jerusalem apart from the Christian site but on top of the Jewish site, thus dooming Islam to conflict with Judaism but not with Christianity in the city.

Along similar lines, a more pertinent question to ask about the Church of the Holy Sepulcher is not how conflict between the Greek Orthodox, Latin, Armenian, Coptic, Syrian, and Ethiopian parties could be prevented but rather why it is that Protestant Christian movements are not party to this dispute. The answer has to do with Protestant dissatisfaction with the Church of the Holy Sepulcher as the location of the crucifixion and resurrection. In the nineteenth century Protestant biblical scholars – most famous among them General Charles Gordon – raised doubts regarding the authenticity of the Holy Sepulcher as the actual crucifixion site. Instead, they chose to focus their attention on an alternative location, a garden just outside the walls of Jerusalem that contained a tomb as well as a rock resembling a skull, identified as Golgotha.²⁸ The Garden Tomb, as it has come to be called, is one of the most popular Protestant sites in the Holy Land today, with some 50,000 pilgrims visiting every year. For these pilgrims, this is the true location of the crucifixion and resurrection. The struggles between their co-religionists taking place inside the Church of the Holy Sepulcher is of no interest to them.

There is, then, an alternative to conflicts at sacred places. At critical historical junctures, religious and political leaders have proven capable of focusing the attention of their constituents on sites not already "taken" by competing religious movements. However, this alternative provides no reasons for optimism regarding coexistence at sacred places for four reasons.

First, the key to peace in this account is *separation*, not coexistence. As long as rival movements continue to worship at one and the same site, accord will always remain elusive. Second, separation cannot be forced on a religious movement from without. The initiative for relocation must come from within the group itself. Tragically or not, in most cases rival religious groups have chosen competition at sacred sites over separation. Conflict is thus the norm and separation is the exception. Third, even if religious leaders would prefer separation over conflict, the constraints of tradition hamper their ability to divert worship to a new site. Change of this nature is only possible when dramatic shifts in political circumstances open up possibilities for initiative. Finally, even if separation succeeds, it may prove insufficient in preventing strife in the long run. For ultimately, Umar's refusal to pray at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher did little to prevent Jewish-Muslim conflict on the Temple Mount or intra-Christian antagonism at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. In the end, the wisest stance for students of religious coexistence to adopt is one of sober pessimism.

Notes

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