

Marshall J. Breger, Yitzhak Reiter, Leonard Hammer, eds. *Sacred Space in Israel and Palestine: Religion and Politics*. Routledge Studies in Middle Eastern Politics Series. London: Routledge, 2012. xi + 340 pp. \$155.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-78315-6.

Reviewed by Harold Brodsky (University of Maryland)

Published on H-Judaic (November, 2012)

Commissioned by Jason Kalman



Religion Meets Politics: Disputes over Sacred Space in the Holy Land

The Temple Mount in Jerusalem is holy to Judaism, and holy to Islam, but Israel and the Palestinian Authority each lay exclusive claim to sovereignty over this site, which makes it one of the most contentious in the world. The site's potentiality for conflict became manifest on September 28, 2000, when Ariel Sharon (at that time a candidate for prime minister) entered the Temple Mount accompanied by over one thousand security guards. Sharon's presence was seen as an effort to reinforce Israel's claim to sovereignty over all of Jerusalem. Whether his act was a cause of the Second Intifada, or only a contributing factor in what was already an incendiary situation, will continue to be debated. What is clear is that almost seven thousand lives were lost during uprisings that followed.

Muslim cemeteries are another source of conflict. During the summer of 2012, Tel-Aviv University began construction on what appeared to be vacant land. In the process they unearthed two graves. When this became known, a group dedicated to preserving Islamic holy sites called on the university to refrain from building on what was likely a Muslim cemetery. This matter was taken to Israel's High Court of Justice but its ruling allowed construction to continue. The judge acknowledged a right to protect the dignity of the dead but found that in this instance it "clashed with the right to protection of property and other important public interests."^[1] Perhaps even more controversial is the use of an ancient Muslim cemetery (Mamilla) in Jerusalem.

These issues are discussed in chapters 7 and 8 in the second part of *Sacred Space in Israel and Palestine*. The first part of the volume deals with the process of designating holy places and determining how important they are to various Jewish, Islamic, or Christian communities. The last four chapters, which make up part 3 of the volume, discuss the responsibilities that religious leaders have in determining policy and controlling events at sacred sites. The editors and authors contributing to this collection are scholars of diverse nationalities, representing Jewish, Islamic, and Christian viewpoints, and offering a variety of perspectives.

Issues about Muslim holy sites generally receive more attention in the news because of their volatile nature. But matters concerning Christian sacred space in Israel and Palestinian lands are also vital to the stability of this region. This book contains three chapters concerned with Israeli governance over Christian sites. The chapter by Kurt Martens notes that for the Catholic Church, most holy places are those that are "linked with the birth, life, death and resurrection of Christ," and that the Holy See and the State of Israel have, over the years, reached agreements to respect "the status quo" (pp. 58, 59).

But the status quo largely goes back to the Ottoman Empire and represents conditions that may no longer be entirely suitable. In a chapter titled "Christian Palestinian Communities in Israel," Merav Mack discusses some of these problems. Consider the case of the couple

married under the aegis of the Maronite Church. When the marriage ended with divorce, payment of alimony had to be determined. The local Latin Patriarchate in Jerusalem awarded the woman three hundred NIS in alimony but this was appealed at the Maronite High Court in Lebanon where the alimony was raised to two thousand NIS. The man appealed to the Israeli High Court of Justice: “The petitioner claims that the fact that the court of appeal that rules in matters concerning the citizens of Israel is located in Lebanon, an enemy state, severely breaches his procedural rights. He claims that the Lebanese court is not familiar with Israeli customs and this is made apparent in its rulings.” However, the Israeli court in a decision written at the beginning of 2009 indicated that with regard to Christian communities “the task [of deciding on matters related to marriage] seems to remain almost entirely to the internal consideration of the authorities within the religious community” (p. 300).

Essentially then local Christian communities are bound by status quo relationships worked out by the government of Israel usually in coordination with the hierarchy of a church, which may be based in a different country. Not only matters related to marriage but also church property and church administrative affairs are often in the hands of people of other nationalities. The Greek Orthodox Church in Israel may be administered by a hierarchy that is Greek even though the local community in Israel regards itself as Israeli or Palestinian. “Tension often arises when property deals are concluded between the patriarchate and the State of Israel and the [local] community is neither consulted nor reaps any benefits” (p. 303). But for various reasons, usually to maintain good foreign relations, the State of Israel may continue relationships that counter the wishes of its own citizens.

What can be done to mitigate conflict over religious sites? Sharon Rosen in her chapter on interfaith coop-

eration suggests that a greater involvement of leaders of different faiths could promote mutual respect and a solution to episodes that otherwise “can be exploited as a tool by extremists to fan conflict” (p. 273). She cites the Mughrabi Gate issue as one in need of interfaith dialogue. This gate provides the only entranceway for non-Muslim visitors to the Temple Mount. During the winter of 2004, an embankment that allowed access to this gate collapsed during a rainstorm. A temporary bridge was erected, but there was concern that this bridge might give way, injuring tourists and women at prayer at the Western Wall, which is near the bridge. The Jerusalem District Court upheld the legality of a plan to replace this unstable temporary bridge with a permanent bridge. But any change in appearance or access to the Temple Mount can easily spiral out of control into a political issue, and a court decision may not be the most effective way to defuse tensions. According to Rosen, the addition of religious leaders in the final decision making might lead to more satisfactory outcomes.

This book will be especially welcome to advanced students and scholars in need of a deeper understanding of conflicts based on religious sites in the Holy Land. The resources offered by this book are considerable, including a twenty-three-page bibliography. All of the chapters have extensive footnotes—many have over a hundred. However, beyond academic interest, anyone with concerns and responsibilities in this region will want to be familiar with this informative volume.

Note

[1]. Tomer Zarchin, “Israel’s High Court Okays Construction on Site of Muslim Graves in Tel Aviv,” *Haaretz*, August 13, 2012, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/national/israel-s-high-court-okays-construction-on-site-of-muslim-graves-in-tel-aviv-1.458003> (accessed November 1, 2012).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-judaic>

Citation: Harold Brodsky. Review of Breger, Marshall J.; Reiter, Yitzhak; Hammer, Leonard, eds., *Sacred Space in Israel and Palestine: Religion and Politics*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. November, 2012.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=36671>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.