

The Holy Light as a signifier of purity

The Greeks have another kind of church, of which I shall only remark that if a Latin priest had celebrated mass therein they would think that all the water of the ocean were not enough to purify the church, to such an extent do they wash the altar, and even the whole building, in their belief that the Latin mass contaminates and profanes it. Their usage of consecrating with leavened bread, and their other rites are sufficiently known. They hate the Latins worse than they do the Turks.¹

This short quote from 1596 written by Niccolò Dandini exemplifies the negative attitude toward sharing sacred space on the part of some Orthodox under Latin rule. The ritual purification of an altar that had been ‘profaned’ by Latin worship is documented in the *Errors of the Greeks* (1563-1570) recently edited by Kyriacou:

The eighteenth [error] is that they do not allow the Latins to celebrate the liturgy in their churches and on their altars. In case a Latin priest, without any violation or adverse intention, celebrates the liturgy in their churches, they consider it a sacrilege and immediately correct the accident with holy water, which they make with odoriferous ingredients. Thus, they sprinkle the holy water throughout the church and purify the altar in a way of reconsecration or reconciliation [with God].²

Friar Angelo Calepio, an eyewitness of the Ottoman siege of Cyprus in 1570, described what he considered to be a deep ‘hatred’ among the Cypriots for the ‘dogmas of the Latin Church ... They would not allow any Latin to celebrate upon their altars, but held their priests to be profane persons, and when the chiefs of State desired to hear mass in their churches, they made portable altars.’³

And yet, numerous examples of shared sacred space exist throughout the Latin East, even at the very heart of Christian sacred space.

In the sepulchre [of the Virgin Mary], masses are said, as they are in the Edicule [of the Holy Sepulchre]. And I celebrated there many times, as it is a place where all Christians can celebrate, no matter their rite, since it does not belong to anyone in particular. (Felix Fabri’s Evagatorium 1483-84)

Considering the hostility with which the Orthodox regarded the Latin/Roman Catholic Church the ecumenical character of the annual miracle of the Holy Light is highly unusual. In the case of the Holy Sepulchre the interreligious interactions and the shared nature of the space led to the development of a rite that made explicit the superiority of one denomination over all others. I argue that the credulous heterodox witness of the miracle affirms the Greek Orthodox claims of ownership of the space of the Holy Sepulchre. As the space is not directly

¹ Cobham, *The Excerpta Cypriana*, pp. 121-122.

² Kyriacou, *Christian Diversity in Late Venetian Cyprus*, pp. 45-55.

³ Cobham, *The Excerpta Cypriana*, p. 143.

controlled by the Orthodox and cannot be purified by physical means the rite serves as a kind of affirmation of purity over defilement.

The annual miracle of the Holy Light was probably known throughout the Mediterranean much earlier but the first account of the ritual in its current form is from the pilgrimage account of Bernard the monk in 870. The ritual that precedes the miracle is still controlled by the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem though the Holy Sepulcher has been a fluctuating multi-denominational space since the Crusades. Since then, the status quo of the Holy Sepulcher has regulated liturgical space for the use of the Orthodox, Copts, Armenians, Latins and Georgians. Though the space is shared, boundaries of space and timing divide the sepulcher up for confessional use, transgressions of these boundaries whether real or imagined has serious repercussions up to the present.¹ The annual ritual of the Holy Light takes place on Holy Saturday at the tomb of Christ which is marked out in the Holy Sepulcher complex under a *ciborium/horos* known as the aedicule. The ritual is the culmination of Holy Week at the end of Lent, the appearance of the Holy Light often known as the Holy Fire because of its appearance and transmission through oil lamps and candles is believed to be the same light that shone through Jesus at Mount Tabor during the transfiguration (Metamorphosis).² The light is said to appear at the tomb just as it did at the moment of Jesus' resurrection.

The aedicule itself can traditionally be used by any of the Christian denominations but the ritual of the holy light is reserved zealously by the Greek/Melkite community. There are times notably during the crusading period when the ritual was led by Latin/Roman Catholic and Armenian (Non-Chalcedonian) hierarchs, the way that these occasions are recorded by Orthodox sources stress the unauthenticity of the heterodox. In other words, the miracle publicly affirms the authenticity of the liturgist and his congregation at the height of the drama of Holy Week and the Christian liturgical year. The re-telling of the failures of the

¹ When they came to Golgotha, the Latins first chanted and read at their own place; then they went over to our place, where the Cross of Christ had stood. Our monks took down all the lamps which could possibly interfere with them and carried away the candlestands, and thus cleared the area. There remained only a covering on the Holy Table. The Latins set up their cross behind our Holy Table and said that we should take the covering off the Holy Table. The Greeks refused, saying, "We cannot do this, for the covering is never taken off, and the firman does not allow it; but you spread your own cloth on top"; when the Latins tried to take the covering off by force, the Greeks did not let them. Then the Latin archbishop came and scandalously grabbed the covering off the Holy Table... Mount Golgotha was all covered with blood; and during the whole of Matins two men were washing it with water. Three people were killed. I have not seen such terror since the day I was born. Holy Week and Pascha in Jerusalem. Monk Parthenius Ageev, *Report of the Wanderings and Journeys across Russia, Moldavia, Turkey, and the Holy Land*. Vol. 5.

² Tabor light is according to the hesychastic tradition the uncreated light of God.

heterodox to accomplish the ritual have become an important part of the lore of Palestinian Orthodoxy. In this paper I will bring together accounts that record mixed attendance at the ritual and try to understand how purity was maintained.

Baldric of Dol's version of Urban II's speech at Clairmont for the exploration the importance of the miracle in the Western mind at the time of the first crusade: 'How precious would be the longed-for, incomparable place of the Lord's burial, even if God failed there to perform the yearly miracle! 'For in the days of His Passion all the lights in the Sepulcher and round about in the church, which have been extinguished, are relighted by divine command. Whose heart is so stony, brethren, that it is not touched by so great a miracle? ... And yet the Gentiles see this in common with the Christians and are not turned from their ways! They are, indeed, afraid, but they are not converted to the faith; nor is it to be wondered at, for a blindness of mind rules over them.' Baldric of Dol's version of Urban II's speech is the only version to contain a reference to the miracle. It is highly likely that it was mentioned in this way because Baldric was aware of the initial failure of Daimbert, Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem to provoke the miracle in 1101. This failure by the newly established Latin hierarchy of Jerusalem is recorded in the *Gesta Francorum* as well as the *Chronicle of Matthew of Edessa*. The *Gesta* account describes the despair among the Western Christians in the Holy Sepulcher after the long-anticipated miracle failed to arrive, they then processed to the Dome of the Rock which the crusaders understood to be the Temple of the Lord only to find that the Orthodox clergy had succeeded in provoking the miracle in their absence.

King Baldwin made sure to include the Orthodox clergy in the subsequent Holy Saturday rites. The Russian pilgrim Daniel witnessed the rite in 1107 and described in detail the specific roles of both Latin and Greek clergy who performed their rituals simultaneously. He related that the Holy Light was taken from the tomb by a Latin bishop and given immediately to King Baldwin. He also states that the lamps that were lit initially were those left by the Orthodox on the tomb of Christ and that of the Frankish lamps which were hung higher up 'not one was lit' ... later, on the third day after easter he retrieved his lamp which was still burning with the particular flame of the holy light and remarked that the Frankish lamps were lit but burned with a less wonderful light.¹ The particular brilliance of the lamps laid out by the orthodox among the other lamps is a nice spatial metaphor for the shared ritual and space of the sepulcher itself.

¹ Daniel, *Jerusalem pilgrimage*, P.170

The historical nature of the miracle is also a source of interest for Muslims whose presence is noted in almost every pilgrimage account that describes the miracle. Multiple sources in Greek and Arabic relate the attendance of the Emir, Imam and or Muzzein of the Dome of the Rock who then carry the Holy Light back to the Mosque (al-Aqsa) and shrine (Dome of the Rock).¹ The tenth century saw Muslim control of the ritual and usually involved the removal of all persons and sealing of the Holy Sepulchre by the Emir until the Holy Light had descended. Ibn al-Qass' (10th C) account describes the most overt non-orthodox control over the ritual before the Crusades: 'On the Easter of the Christians, on Holy Saturday, the faithful exit from the place of the tomb to gather around the rock that is surrounded by railing. From there they look upon the tomb and all together they pray and kneel before the Almighty God, from the morning prayer until the setting of the sun. The emir and the imam of the mosque are also present. The sultan locks the door to the tomb. They all remain still until they see a light similar to a white flame which comes from the interior of the tomb. The sultan then opens the door and enters holding a candle, which he lights with this flame and then emerges. The flame of this lit candle does not burn. He gives it to the imam who transfers it and lights the lamps of the mosque. Once this candle has passed to three hands, then it burns and is transformed into a (regular) flame.' The authenticity of the Holy Light was challenged several times in the same century by the Islamic authorities.

In conclusion, the miracle may have been accepted by non-orthodox and even controlled by them but ultimately became a way to retain purity when management of space and even the ritual itself could not be saved from the pollution of heterodox.

¹ *'The Christians and whoever else comes on this day to the site of the grave, implore and call upon God, the exalted, from noon to evening. Also the muezzin of the mosque, the leader in prayer and the emir of the city come and sit near the grave. They bring lamps, that they leave there while it is still closed. The Christians have extinguished their lamps and torches already prior to this and wait, until they see a pure white fire, which causes a lamp to ignite. From this fire, the lamps in the mosques and in the churches are lit. Then a report is written to the Caliph about the time, at which the fire descended. If it occurred soon after the noon hour, a fertile year is expected, but if it is delayed until the evening or later, then an infertile one is expected.'* Al-Biruni