Making it Real: The Narrative (Re)Construction of a Pilgrimage Centre in Bosnia-Herzegovina

Sébastien Després, Memorial University of Newfoundland

Abstract

In the Balkans, language, culture, ethnicity, nationalism, and religion are inextricably interconnected, and religious factionalism plays a central role in the continuing tensions between Croats and Serbs. So intense is this fusion of the secular and the sacred in the former Yugoslavia that little more than a decade ago, it contributed to the construction of ideologies of "ethnic cleansing" which led to a civil war. An arena of competition and struggle between different groups attempting to win control of a crucial cultural resource, Franciscan-influenced Medjugorje is unquestionably the region's most potent and important symbol of Croatian identity. Presently the most visited Roman Catholic pilgrimage site in the world because of the daily Marian apparitions that have been reported since 1981, the landscape of this small parish is not a neutral geography; it has been recontextualized by the individuals who present the territory and its peoples to outsiders. A key method for claiming possession of territory and for buttressing collective identity, this sharing of "identity-stories" takes on an almost unlimited number of forms: grand narratives, histories, memoirs, songs, the visual arts, language, architecture, and geographies. These cultural texts help to create political subjects and political commitments and are appropriated and more fully narrativized by various groups in order to support specific, differing political agendas. This paper is an exploration of the narratives presently told to Canadian pilgrims in the context of this pilgrimage and their intended impact, with a special focus on the narratives surrounding the first days of the apparitions.

Pilgrimage sites serve as loci where pilgrims feel better able to body forth the subjects of their meditations in their imaginations.[1] Significantly, it is from the meaning of these sites, not the places themselves, that one draws inspiration. Medjugorje is a Roman Catholic pilgrimage site in Herzegovina made immensely popular by the daily Marian apparitions that are said to have occurred there since 1981. The meaning of Medjugorje is carefully constructed through story, history, icon, and symbol, which together form overarching narratives. These narratives are delivered to the pilgrims through a host of sources, and they are appropriated by the various groups involved. These are fully narrativized in order to enhance specific agendas[2] and finally become "cults enacted"—demonstrative processes whereby pilgrims learn to act out cultural texts.[3] Pilgrimage organizers, shrine administrators, and pilgrimage participants themselves often feel responsible for encouraging "correct" interpretations of the site. This is done by choreographing pilgrims' steps in a variety of ways and by "channeling" their experiences. These parties' attempts are never entirely successful, since the site's symbolic resonance appeals on multiple, even contradictory, levels,[4] and since its meaning is indeed in what Bakhtin referred to as a perpetual carnivalesque state of unfinalized transition.[5] Though much scholarship has inappropriately attributed the success of the pilgrimage to the social strength and political clout of the religious elites connected to the devotion,[6] they

1 Glenn Bowman, "Christian Ideology and the Image of a Holy Land: The Place of Jerusalem Pilgrimage in the Various Christianities," in *Contesting the Sacred: the Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage*, ed. John Eade and Michael J. Sallnow (New York: Routledge, 1991), 114.

2 cf. James J. Preston, "Spiritual Magnetism: An Organizing Principle for the Study of Pilgrimage," in *Sacred Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage*, ed. Alan Morinis (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1995), 43.

3 Jack Ellis, *The Documentary Idea: A Critical History of English-Language Documentary Film and Video* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1989), 43.

4 Simon Coleman and John Elsner, "Epilogue: Landscapes Reviewed," in *Pilgrimage: Past and Present in the World Religions*, ed. Simon Coleman and John Elsner (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995), 207.

5 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 164.

6 Mart Bax, "Patronage in a Holy Place: Preliminary Research Notes on a 'Parallel Structure' in a Yugoslav Pilgrimage Centre," *Ethnos* 21 (1990): 41-56.

do have an important impact on how pilgrimages are lived[7] and subsequently understood and narrated.

Although the narratives which detail the "first days" of the apparitions ostensibly exist to help contextualize the socio-historical period that spurred their occurrence, their interest for the tellers and the listeners lies not in dates or timeframes, but in the *meanings* that have been attributed to the events of those first days. These narratives "find, capture, and hold" the pilgrim, and form the reality of the pilgrimage[8] by constructing, contesting, and transforming its identity,[9] thus becoming a way that pilgrims may construe the land and events of Medjugorje and, as Keith Basso writes, "render them intelligible."[10] An important point is that these cycles of narratives are not what in the academy are referred to as "belief legends." The narratives shared in the context of Medjugorje pilgrimages are told in a matter-of-fact manner, as *histories*. My contention here is that the collection of narrative cycles which give context to the pilgrimage centre is the site's "sacred trace"[11]; the story here *is* the belief.[12]

The narratives which are used to give meaning to the Marian apparition site of Medjugorje, its space, its practice, and its history are, to a far greater extent than most might expect, concerned with struggle, pain, and suffering. These narratives recount a number of what are framed as "key moments" in the early history of Croats and of Medjugorje, including the Orthodox Christian repression of

7 Paul Younger, "Velankanni Calling: Hindu Patterns of Pilgrimage at a Christian Shrine," in *Sacred Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage*, ed. Alan Morinis (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1992), 97.

8 cf. Carolyn Merchant, *Reinventing Eden: The Fate of Nature in Western Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 3.

9 Timothy Lloyd and Patrick Mullen, *Lake Erie Fisherman: Work, Tradition, and Identity* (Chicago: University of Illinois, 1990).

10 Keith Basso, "'Stalking with Stories': Names, Places, and Moral Narratives among the Western Apache," in *Text, Play and Story: The Construction and Reconstruction of Self and Society*, ed. Stuart Plattner (Washington: American Ethnological Society, 1984), 22.

11 James J. Preston, "The Rediscovery of America: Pilgrimage in the Promised Land," in *Geographica Religionum 5: Pilgrimage in the United States*, ed. Gisbert Rinschede and Surinder Bhardwaj (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 1990), 22.

12 Lauri Honko, "Memorates and the Study of Folk Belief," in *Nordic Folklore*, ed. Reimund Kvideland and Henning K. Sehmsdorf (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 100-9.

Roman Catholicism, the Turkish [Muslim] oppression of Christian minorities [then Orthodox], the Austro-Hungarian callous disregard for the Croats in the present-day region of Medjugorje, the deceitful annexation of Serbia, Croatia, and Slovenia to form the state of Yugoslavia, the Allies' failure to protect Croats from civil communists following the Second World War, and Communists' massacre of religious persons. The narratives that relate events which occurred after the first apparitions, likewise concerned with suffering, are much more specific in detail. These include the Communists' abuse of the visionaries and Medjugorje's parish priest, the emotional anguish occasioned by the oppression of the authorities in the first years of the pilgrimage, Croatia's attack on Slovenia on the day of the tenth anniversary of the first Apparitions, God's role in the sparing of Medjugorje from bombardment by the Serbs, the presentation of the Shrine of Memory erected for the thirty Franciscan priests martyred by the Communists, and details of the war crimes committed by the Serbs, along with their psychological and social repercussions.

Because of the necessarily limited scope of this paper, the following is an exploration of a single series of narratives that are presented to international pilgrims during their stay in the village, those describing the context and "first days" of the Medjugorje apparitions. These are by far the most important narratives in terms of the frequency of their application, their narrative efficacy, and their impact on how the pilgrimage is subsequently framed by pilgrims. In order to better showcase how seamlessly and comprehensively this narrative cycle is presented to the pilgrim during her or his pilgrimage, this paper excludes the materials I collected during my first three pilgrimages to Medjugorje, only admitting those elements collected during my most recent time in the field as a participating observer.[13] Significantly, my research at the time, as my fellow pilgrims were very well aware, was focused on the corporeal practices of the pilgrims while in the village; the material they were presenting me with was incidental to my research and primarily intended for my own edification. Throughout

13 These include the pilgrimage journals pilgrims photocopied for me, audio recordings, photographs, and videos they took during the pilgrimage and gave me, the books, prayer cards, postcards, pamphlets, and websites they shared, sent, purchased and/or recommended to me and to each other, and the mass e-mails they sent to the group in the month immediately following our pilgrimage together.

this paper, only pilgrims are identified with pseudonyms, which they selected themselves.

In June 1981, six teenagers from the group of hamlets now referred to as Medjugorje in Bosnia-Herzegovina, began reportedly witnessing apparitions of the Virgin Mary. To this day, the visionaries are said to have daily visits from the Gospa, whom they describe as a beautiful young woman resplendent with holiness. From the very first days of the apparitions, thousands flocked from the surrounding towns and villages to be in the presence of the children, to perhaps witness the apparition themselves, and to hear "first-hand" the message which the apparition had for the children. The alluring power of the Medjugorje apparitions is difficult to overemphasize. The combination of new employment opportunities in the pilgrimage industry along with a not-unrelated significant increase in birthrates has had an important impact on the number of inhabitants, all of whom are of Croatian nationality, are Roman Catholic, and speak Croat. The percentage of residents who take part in the religious life of the parish is very high; around 90 percent of the population takes part in the Mass at least weekly. One can hardly fail to notice that this generally spurs on the pilgrims, encouraging them in their faith and pilgrimage. The pilgrims who travel to Medjugorje hail from all over the world, and expect to find there a very different life than that which they live at home. There, pilgrims are faced not only with the orthodoxy of their particular faith, but also with the Other as well—Croat Bosnia's landscapes, worldviews, and languages are typically very foreign to them. These travellers, finding themselves in an interstitial space between cultures where they have the potential to reformulate meanings and negotiate identities,[14] become destructured by the extreme experiences they undergo,[15] and they appreciate the pilgrimage site as a Foucauldian

14 Ellen Badone, "Crossing Boundaries: Exploring the Borderlands of Ethnography, Tourism and Pilgrimage," in *Intersecting Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage and Tourism,* ed. Ellen Badone and Sharon R. Roseman (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004).

15 N. Ross Crumrine and Alan Morinis, "La Peregrinacion: The Latin American Pilgrimage," in *Pilgrimage in Latin America*, ed. N. Ross Crumrine and Alan Morinis (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991), 16.

"heterotopia," a place of Otherness[16] in a "time out of time."[17] The purpose of this site is understood to convert the consenting visitors and enhance their lives through faith.

Upon their arrival in the Balkans, groups of North American pilgrims are typically met by their local guide. The first words of one guide after meeting a group at an airport in Croatia serve to position the country in terms of its faith and the politics of religion: "Croatia was baptized in the sixth and seventh centuries, and has fourteen centuries of Christendom." Most "Medjugorje" websites tell a variant of the same story, which highlights the first century of Christendom in Herzegovina as the first "Golden Age" of Roman Catholicism in the area (the second Golden Age being the present, since 1995). The narratives told in the context of Medjugorje pilgrimages represent the country as rightly Roman Catholic, whose history of injustice enabled foreign minorities to slowly coerce the faithful into becoming something other than nature (or God) intended them to be (Islamic, Bosnian, Serb, Communist). One pilgrim guide states that the current population of the country consists of a majority of Muslims, one-fifth Orthodox Christians, and a scant 17 percent Roman Catholic. "It's not easy for Catholics to live in this country," she states. She explains that from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century, the area was invaded by the Ottoman Empire**.** The version offered by Medjugorje's "official Website" is even more hyperbolic. Most contextualizing stories, however, contend not with Muslim oppression, but rather with the difficulty of life under the Communist government. One of the Franciscan priests presently posted in Medjugorje judges that "it is the blood of the martyrs of the Church and their years of imprisonment that brought [the Virgin] to Medjugorje."[18] The pilgrims also often conclude that the Virgin chose Medjugorje because of its history and its Communist government: "maybe because it's Communist? Maybe it's because she wanted to bring faith here?" shares one pilgrim (Diane).

When the apparitions first began, the parish priest, Father Jozo

16 Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics* 16:1 (Spring 1986), 22-7.

17 Alessandro Falassi, ed., *Time out of Time: Essays on the Festival* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987).

18 Elleta Nolte, "Our Medjugorje," www.ourmedjugorje.com.

Zovko, was in Zagreb. Narrative accounts have it that upon his return, when he witnessed the effervescence in the parish, he assumed that it was a coup from the Communists to destroy the Church. All the while, the story goes, the Communists were saying, "that's a coup from the Church to destroy Communism" (Sister Bénédicte). Skeptical about the authenticity of the apparitions, the parish priest and his colleagues are said to have summoned another Franciscan priest as this point—a psychologist—and to have asked him to listen to the seers, set them right, and thus avoid scandal in the parish. When Father Slavko arrived with his orders and interviewed the youths, however, he is said to have been "completely renewed," and to have immediately become a defender of the messages, and their propagator.

The fourth day of the apparitions, the local government authorities in Citluk became interested in what was occurring in Medjugorje. They are said to have interrogated the six children and had them examined by a doctor,[19] who found nothing the matter with the youths. On the fifth day, a crowd of thousands had gathered on the hill. The Communist authorities brought the children to a series of psychologists, thinking that they would attest to the children being psychologically unstable, and thus would appease the curiosity of the multitudes. "But no doctor wanted to sign such a paper," a guide told the pilgrims. Finally, in order to put a stop to the gatherings, the authorities blocked access to the hill.

On June 29, the children were taken to Mostar for further medical examination. Legend has it that the head neuro-psychiatrist said "the children aren't crazy, but the persons who brought them here must be." It is said that the authorities were frustrated and ordered Father Jozo Zovko to stop the gatherings, promising that they would hold him accountable for the repercussions. The authorities sent for a state psychiatrist, who observed the children during an apparition. According to a number of stories, the psychologist descended the hill visibly shaken and refused to file a report.[20]

On the seventh day, two government social workers asked the children to go for a ride with the intention of getting them away from the place of apparitions. The narratives of pilgrimage workers state that the children became agitated, so the vehicle was stopped.

19 Mate Tunin Vasilj, "The First Days," www.medjugorje.net.

20 Elleta Nolte, "Our Medjugorje." www.ourmedjugorje.com.

The children knelt to pray, and everyone present, *including the two workers*, saw a ball of light coming towards them. It is alleged that the social workers resigned their positions the very next day and moved away. From this day onwards, the seers and their retinue hid from the authorities in order to have the apparitions. One of the sites where the visionaries are said to have hidden is at the foot of the hill where they had first witnessed the Virgin, recounts one guide. Because of the poor cover offered by the site (the few trees and bushes present would not suffice to conceal a group of children), a folk legend said the Virgin protected the children by preventing the soldiers from seeing them (Diane). Guards are said to have been placed "in front of the house of each seer to watch their comings and goings" (pilgrim guide), and that the Virgin organized midnight meetings with them "because the Communists were sleeping at that hour of the night" (Sister Bénédicte).

After one month of apparitions, the authorities reacted to the increasingly popular movement and dispatched a special police force from Sarajevo, which surrounded the village. Hoping to avoid the spectacle offered by the six visionaries, the police searched the village for the children. Men were posted at the foot of Apparition Hill and the Cross Mountains, with orders to prevent anyone from acceding to the mountains. Sermons of the priests were recorded and scrutinized for anti-Communist content, and the parish priest, Father Jozo, was ordered to close the church. Shortly thereafter, Father Jozo was arrested and put in prison to await trial by Communist soldiers for having proselytized against the government in his homilies. A multitude of folk legends concerned with the pastor's stay in prison developed. On top of these are the stories told regarding the village while the priest was in prison. On a bright day with a clear sky, the guard who was placed at the summit of the Krizevac is said to have been struck by lightning. The officer was found in a coma and remained in that state for three months, after which he awoke, asked for a priest, and "became a devout Christian."[21] The youngest of the seers, Jacov, who was only ten years old at the time of the first apparitions, is said to have been very proud when the Virgin asked him for a favour: to offer one prayer with all his heart to the Lord. "So proud, in fact," explains a nun, "that in front of the Communist militia, he defiantly said, lifting

21 Elleta Nolte, "Our Medjugorje." www.ourmedjugorje.com.

his head, 'you don't scare me. The Gospa is counting on me.'" The nun comments that the authorities "were completely abashed, since if they cannot scare a child, what is their power?"

These narratives together establish that the many miracles and incredible feats occurring in Medjugorje showed the authorities that they were powerless to prevent these events from occurring. Many of the Virgin's messages are said to have been (very thinly) veiled in anti-Communist terminology, their symbolism having the potential to be read in divisive sectarian terms, the stories and narratives surrounding the apparitions completely transparent in their opposition and defiance. The victory of six little children of humble backgrounds over the Communist government (and, by extension, Communism itself) is framed in the narratives of organizers, accompanying priests, and pilgrims as the victory of David over Goliath.

The narratives presented to the pilgrims are not neutral texts; they are recontextualized by the individuals who present the culture to outsiders, and their content, intent, and effect are often politically motivated and intensely partisan. Indeed, this use of "religious" or "spiritual" narratives surrounding the first days of events to comprehend the more than quarter-century of daily apparitions demonstrates why Medjugorje offers a rich opportunity "for the investigation of emergent state-centred and ethnic nationalisms."[22] Preachers', locals', and tourism-industry workers' narratives are characteristically couched in binary antagonisms aimed at accounting for and vindicating the Franciscans' forestalling of diocesan control, the Croat reclaiming of the Serb landscape, and the Roman Catholic repossession of a Muslim, then Communist, then Serb territory. If a pilgrimage's foundation "is typically marked by visions, miracles, or martyrdoms,"[23] a pilgrimage's attractiveness and popularity is dependent on the manner in which religious concepts of the sacred are employed to draw attention to the alluring power of the sites.[24]

22 John Eade and Michael J. Sallnow, eds., *Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 26.

23 Victor and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 26.

24 cf. Sharon R. Roseman, "Santiago de Compostella in the Year 2000: From Religious Center to European City of Culture," in *Intersecting Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage and Tourism*, ed. Ellen Badone and Sharon R. Roseman (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 69.

The narratives surrounding the Medjugorje apparitions, "ideal [forms] into which particular bits of content are poured,"[25] not only supply a "grammar of experience,"[26] but also the frameworks that both tie narrated events to narrative ones and facilitate untyings.[27] I posit, following Lauri Honko, that the story here *is* the belief[28]; the "sacred trace"[29] of the Medjugorje pilgrimage is the collection of narrative cycles which surround the apparitions.

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25 Carolyn Merchant, *Reinventing Eden: The Fate of Nature in Western Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 37.

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29 James J. Preston, "The Rediscovery of America: Pilgrimage in the Promised Land," in *Geographica Religionum 5: Pilgrimage in the United States*, ed. Gisbert Rinschede and Surinder Bhardwaj (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 1990), 22.

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