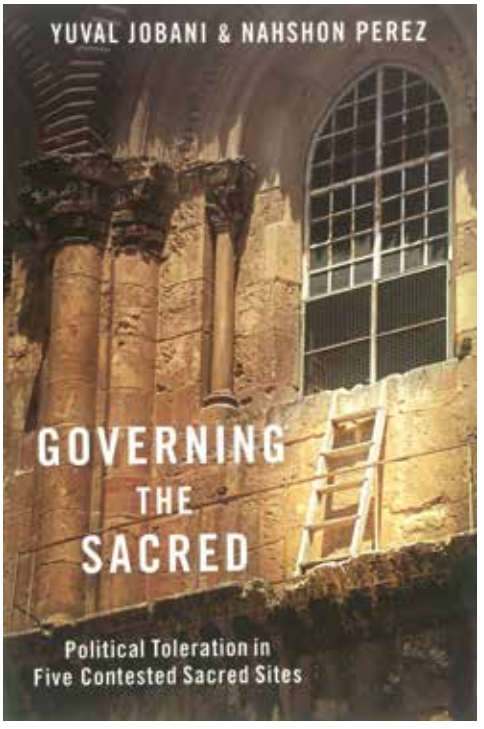
BOOK REVIEW

Managing Contested Holy Sites

Reviewed by Michael Dumper

Governing the Sacred: Political Toleration in Five Contested Sacred Sites, Yuval Jobani and Nahshon Perez (Oxford University Press, 2020), 210 pages; $120 hardcover and ebook.



Abstract

Holy sites in cities present particular difficulties for negotiators seeking compromise and consent. All cities are sites of contestation and occupied cities, where the legitimacy of the occupation is repudiated by a significant part of the population, have special dynamics. Nowhere is this more clearly manifested than in the city of Jerusalem. In occupied Jerusalem, negotiations over the governance of the holy sites of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity involve many more parties than just the Palestinians and Israelis. In this review, Michael Dumper examines the authors' aim of establishing both a typology and a policy toolbox for managing conflict over these holy sites.

Keywords

Holy sites; Jerusalem; Arab-Israeli conflict; negotiations; governance; ethno-nationalism; religion.

In the 2000s, I carried out a series of interviews with senior religious figures in Jerusalem and was knocked sideways by a particular remark. Referring to confidential negotiations taking place over how the holy sites of Jerusalem could be managed following a peace agreement between the PLO and the Israeli government, I was urgently instructed to "keep the clerics out of it …." What surprised me was that my interlocutor was not a hard-bitten security advisor but a very high-ranking cleric in one of the religious hierarchies responsible for some of the holy sites in the Old City.

His despair at reaching accommodation with his opposite numbers and his conclusion – that in the management of holy sites in a contested city like Jerusalem, clerical input was an obstacle – pointed clearly to the critical issue at the heart of this topic. Holy sites are not the same as other assets in a conflict. They are not like areas of mineral deposits, or productive agricultural land, or industrial infrastructure that can be exchanged, divided, or compensated. They are, in the words of political scientist Ron Hassner, "non-fungible," that is, a mosque, synagogue, church, or cemetery, for example, cannot be traded in the same way as those tangible assets.[1] Holy sites have a non-tangible superstructure that support liturgy, theology, tradition, and other cultural associations, which make them almost impossible to be negotiated over without huge loss to one party or the other. Such difficulties also spill over into the hinterland of the sites so that the land and property around such sites are also impacted by attempts to change their status and governance.

Holy sites in cities present particular difficulties for negotiators where compromise and consent for such changes are sought. Nowhere is this more clearly manifested than in the city of Jerusalem. In fact, it is probably more difficult in Jerusalem than in many other cities with holy sites due to the ethno-nationalist ideology of the controlling authorities, the Israeli government, which seeks to privilege one community over others.

All cities, it should be remembered, are sites of contestation. Nevertheless, they thrive and prosper as a result of a mixed or heterogeneous population, through economic and cultural exchange and the opportunity to specialize due to their size and their wider links. Most cities contain extreme conflicts and inter-communal breakdown through some kind of formal or informal representation where the priorities and concerns of communities are mediated by community leaders in various ways. In occupied cities, where the legitimacy of the occupation is repudiated by a significant part of the population, these avenues are not appropriate or not used. The subordinate communities, in this case the Palestinian East Jerusalemites, seek support from parties outside of the controlling Israel state structures with the result that a paradox is created: the ethno-nationalist ideology of control triggers the mobilization of resistance that threatens to frustrate the very purpose of the ideology. That is, it sets out to achieve one thing – community dominance – but creates also conditions which undermine those objectives. In Jerusalem, the holy sites of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity have become more than just places of worship but mobilizers of the wider diaspora of these respective communities. Negotiations over their governance, therefore, include many more parties than just the Palestinians and Israelis.

The study of the management of holy or sacred sites has emerged in recent years as a subgenre in peace and conflict studies. The book under review – *Governing the Sacred: Political Toleration in Five Contested Sacred Sites* – is a welcome and stimulating addition to this subgenre, although it contains some puzzling flaws. I read it with great interest as it covers much of the same ground as my own study on sacred sites, *Power, Piety, and People: Holy Cities in the Twenty-first Century*. In some ways, it is a better book than mine as it engages with the academic literature and debates more rigorously and is ambitious in its attempt to construct a framework of analysis

which is then systematically applied to the cases it covers. In addition to a U.S. case known as Devil's Tower/ Bear Lodge in Wyoming, and the Babri Masjid controversy in Ayodhya in India, the case studies include three in Jerusalem – the Israeli Jewish controversy concerning women praying at the Western (Wailing) Wall, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, and the Haram al-Sharif/ al-Aqsa Mosque compound, referred to as the Temple Mount by Jews.

The main aim of the authors is to establish both a typology and a policy toolbox for managing conflict over these holy sites. The discussion and the sifting through the advantages and disadvantages of different approaches is very robust and useful. They narrow down their typology to five main models: Non-interference (Wyoming), Separation and Division (Ayodhya), Preference (Women at the Wall, Jerusalem), Status Quo (Holy Sepulchre, Jerusalem), and Closure (Haram al-Sharif/ Temple Mount, Jerusalem). What is helpful, but ultimately frustrating, about this work is the authors' notion of toleration, which is central to this task. They are clear that while a narrow definition is not feasible, as it will not lead to compromise and accommodation, too wide a definition may lead to syncretism, which would not be an acceptable outcome of a negotiation process.

Their own definition locates toleration in the political sphere, which makes sense given the cases examined. However, with the exception of the Women of the Wall case in which the authors have a special interest, the political analysis in the case studies turns out to be the weakest part of the study. In particular, the understanding of how the Status Quo in the Holy Sepulchre and tripartite governance of the Haram al-Sharif/ Temple Mount (Jordan, Israel, and the PLO/Palestinian Authority) works is quite superficial. It is noteworthy that not a single Palestinian author is cited in these chapters.

In this context, it is also surprising that no reference is made to international law around religious and cultural buildings and artifacts. The omission, for example, of any consideration of the work of UNESCO in Jerusalem is striking. It is true that UNESCO's position on Jerusalem in relation to Israeli encroachments upon Palestinian land and property has been, ultimately, disappointing. Nevertheless, its role in monitoring and challenging Israeli policies is based on a wealth of experience drawn from its engagement with many other international cases of political conflict concerning culturally significant sites. It is hard to understand why such experience has been overlooked. As a result of these weaknesses, the book merely offers a series of models that are thought-provoking but which, in the end, remain unconvincing.

Michael Dumper, professor emeritus at Exeter University, is author of several works on Jerusalem including Jerusalem Unbound: Geography, History and the Future of the Holy City *(Columbia University Press, 2014). His latest book is* Power, Piety, and People: Holy Cities in the Twenty-first Century *(Columbia University Press, 2020).*

Endnotes

1 Ron Hassner, "To Halve and to Hold: Conflicts over Sacred Space and the Problem of Indivisibility," *Security Studies* 12, no. 4 (Summer 2003): 1–33.