Agnieszka Halemba


The subject of Marian apparitions has long preoccupied scholars of religion, providing fertile ground for discussions of individual and collective aspects of Christian—both Catholic and Orthodox—religiosity. Agnieszka Halemba’s monograph is a perfect example of what ethnographic study of the development of a Marian cult can bring, yet it also goes well beyond it, demonstrating that the issue of apparitions is a great point of departure, or a provocation, for exploration of much broader themes. If her book is going to be included in university syllabi—and I certainly hope it is—it will achieve that thanks to Halemba’s astute engagement with a series of themes that lie at the heart of current debates on religion: those regarding the value of cognitive approaches, new forms of spirituality, transnational religious networks, and, most of all, the question of religious organization(s). Halemba tackles a range of other problems through her exploration of the religious field, such as the dynamics of ethno-national identities and the question of postsocialist legacies.

Negotiating Marian Apparitions is based on long-term fieldwork in Transcarpathian Ukraine, which consisted of several research stages between 2006 and 2011. Halemba carried out her study in several villages located in the vicinity of Dzhublyk, a site of the Virgin Mary’s apparitions in 2002, in an area cut across by different regimes of belonging. First, it is a region inhabited by both Greek Catholics and Orthodox, and although it is the first community that constitutes the main focus of her analysis, it is by engaging with the latter that Halemba is able fully to explore the functioning and the transformation of the former. Second, due to a series of historical developments, there exist two organizational structures of the Greek Catholic Church: one is part of the Ruthenian Byzantine Catholic Church directly supervised by the Vatican and
the other functions as a constituent of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church with the seat in Lviv. Thirdly, the presence of different Church structures is partly related to the competition between different understandings of ethno-national belonging: ideas of Ukrainianness and Rusynness, which are seen by some of Halemba’s research participants as mutually exclusive and by others as compatible. Consequently, the content of the Dzhublyk apparitions—a call for unity of the people and of the Church—is open to interpretations and embraced for the purpose of justifying different decisions, made by the Church representatives and laity alike.

However, it is a different kind of belonging that preoccupies Halemba most. What constitutes the most valuable aspect of the study is her insistence on perceiving local Greek Catholic structures as belonging to a global, centralized, and hierarchical Catholic Church. The global Catholic Church, albeit not present ‘directly’ in the monograph, is nonetheless its main protagonist, in that Halemba clearly shows to what extent it shapes local patterns of religiosity—no matter if we take into account people’s search for spirituality, choice of the parish in which people attend religious services, or their relations with the clergymen. In doing so, she offers a challenge to two established ways of thinking about Greek Catholics and the Greek Catholic Church and their ‘in-between’ position: Vlad Naumescu’s idea of “Orthodox imaginary,” which highlights the importance of ritual and liturgical aspects (i.e., being a part of the Eastern Christian tradition) vis-à-vis institutional ones (i.e., being a part of the global Catholic Church), as well as the idea of the Greek Catholic Church as a part of an assembly of deeply localized Eastern Churches. This is not to say Halemba questions that ‘switching’ between Orthodox and Greek Catholic churches occurs or is perceived to be relatively easy due to the common Eastern Christian ‘imaginary,’ a fact widely documented in academic literature; rather, she emphasizes—in reference to collective ‘switching’ during and after socialism (resulting from the ban and underground activities of the Greek Catholic Church in the Soviet era)—that when it happened, it was often determined by what was perceived as beneficial for the life of organized religious community and that ‘organizational belonging’ continued to matter.

These arguments invite us to rethink not only widespread interpretations of the Greek Catholic Church, but also the many ethnographic studies devoted to ‘local’ parishes and ‘local’ religious traditions in an array of faiths. Halemba provokes such reflection by calling for more attention to organizational aspects of religion (which she clearly distinguishes from institutional aspects in her plea for conceptual carefulness) and to how the organizational Church is present in the lives of the faithful. She observes that despite numerous changes, “[o]rganizational religion is still a crucial point of reference for