

# SACRED PLACES AND RELIGIOUS PRACTICES AMONG CROATIAN SPIRITUAL SEEKERS: A MEDJUGORJE CASE STUDY

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*The political, economic, and sociocultural transitions and transformations that Croatia has experienced since the 1990s have also affected the position of the Church in society. In the last decade, institutional religion in Croatia has lost its legitimizing function in society, and religiousness is greatly influenced by the individualization and subjectivization of, or distance from, institutional religious principles and doxa. Internal conflicts within the Church regarding the most known pilgrimage place in Hercegovina, in Medjugorje notwithstanding, the pilgrimage to Medjugorje continues to flourish, upholding the thesis about the "spiritual turn" in contemporary society.*

Keywords: *sacred space, ritual, identity, Medjugorje, Croatia, pilgrimage*

*Politične, gospodarske in družbenokulturne preobrazbe, ki jih je doživela Hrvaška od devetdesetih let prejšnjega stoletja, so vplivale tudi na položaj Cerkve v družbi. V zadnjem desetletju je institucionalna vera na Hrvaškem izgubila legitimno funkcijo v družbi, doživljanje religioznosti pa zaznamujeta individualizacija in subjektivizacija institucionalnih religioznih načel. Kljub različnim stališčem znotraj Cerkve o najpomembnejšem romarskem kraju v Hercegovini, v Medjugorju, število romarjev narašča, kar omogoča domnevo o "duhovnem obratu" v sodobni družbi. Ključne besede: *sveti prostor, ritual, identiteta, Medjugorje, Hrvaška, romanje**

## INTRODUCTION

Because this article is part of a thematic whole dedicated to religions and practices connected to sacred places in southeast Europe, as part of which it presents the state and phenomena in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the authors decided to divide the article into two main parts. The first part presents the state of religiousness, with special attention given to the Roman Catholic Church, the church with the largest following in Croatia today, thus providing a context and a frame of importance for research on religious practices connected to sacred places. These practices are further discussed in the second part, a representative anthropological case study that examines the practices connected to the currently most visited sacred place in southeast Europe, Medjugorje in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Specifically, it is located in western Herzegovina, in an area mostly inhabited by Croats. Medjugorje was chosen for the case study because it is the most popular pilgrimage destination among the Croats, and Croats are the most numerous pilgrims in Medjugorje.

## THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF RELIGIOUSNESS IN CONTEMPORARY CROATIA

Croatia achieved independence by seceding from Yugoslavia in 1991 and, following the war for independence and territorial unity that marked the first decade after independence, Croatia and its people have been significantly marked by the transition and transformation from a communist system into a western-style democracy (see Črpić & Zrinščak 2010: 4). The transformation from a one-party system to a multiparty political system, from communal to private ownership, necessarily followed by the democratization, liberalization, and modernization of society, has had numerous and complex consequences, both positive (regarding human rights, freedom of thought, and public action) and negative (e.g., liberal economic principles do not facilitate social development because they damage social solidarity and social justice; see Zrinščak 2001: 301–4). Transition also affects the position of the Church in society, which was formerly marginalized and stigmatized but has now become an influential social actor. Particularly worthy of mention is the high degree of identifying the national and the religious (Cifrić 1995). “The transformed position of the Church is noticeable first and foremost in its public cultural and social activity, public performance of rituals, establishment of educational institutions, access to the media of social communication, the social teachings of the Church, chaplaincy in the army, the police, and prisons. Thus, the social influence of religion and the Church on the individual has become greater” (Mihaljević 2005: 12). This transitional period is extremely complex and is followed by complex social, economic, cultural, and even religious processes. Sociologists believe that these “processes are primarily marked by individualization, subjectivization of general religious and moral principles of traditional behavior, distance from institutionalized religion, and personal choice within a varied range of religions” (Mihaljević 2006: 1088).

Social research on religious practices in Croatia also testify to this fact. A comparison between Siniša Zrinščak’s and Gordan Črpić’s representative studies from 1999 and 2008 shows that religion has remained a stable and substantially represented phenomenon, and that in the European context Croatia can be placed among the more religious countries, with 84% of the population declaring themselves members of some religious community. Research has shown Croatia to be a country of great religiousness, with lower secularization than in predominantly protestant and other former communist countries. Under the influence of post-communism and transition, and the moral norms and actions of those religious practitioners that do not consistently abide by the teachings of the Church, religion is a strong symbol of identity for most inhabitants and there is a broader historical tendency to tie religion to the national. Research clearly points to the following changes: “a mild fall in religiousness, especially considering confessional identification, participation in religious rituals, and the public role of the Church” (Črpić & Zrinščak 2010: 3–8).

The main information, briefly presented, is the following: from 1999 to 2008 the share of the population identifying with a religious confession has decreased, particularly Catholic

(by 6%; Črpić & Zrinščak 2010: 8). Women display a higher degree of religiousness than men, but the gap between them is decreasing (the percentage of religious women is falling, whereas with men it is rising; Črpić & Zrinščak 2010: 10). The older and less educated people are, the more religious they are (Črpić & Zrinščak 2010: 12). With 52% of the population in 1999 and 42% in 2008 attending mass at least once a month, Croatia is also a country of very high church attendance, although a significant fall in the number of participants is noticeable (Črpić & Zrinščak 2010: 13–4). Falling confidence in the Church has also been noted, although it still remains prominent in the European context: 63% of the population declared confidence in the Roman Catholic Church in 1999 and 53% in 2008 (Črpić & Zrinščak 2010: 17).

A general survey of religiousness in Croatia shows that approximately 90% of citizens have a confessional identification, of which 85% are Catholics. Approximately 25% of the population attends mass once a week, 33% pray daily, and approximately 80% believe in God (Črpić & Zrinščak 2010: 20). Another study conducted in 2009 states that 78.3% are members of religious communities, of which 76.2% are Roman Catholics, 0.1% Greek Catholics, 0.5% Orthodox Christians, and 0.1% Lutherans. Moreover, 23% of the population participates in a church ceremony at least once a week, and a discrepancy between teaching and practice is reflected in the fact that following the Ten Commandments is important for only 15.2% of Christians (Cifrak 2011: 926–7). Religious trends are reflected in all research. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, the number of Roman Catholics decreased by 6% (from 87% to 81%), and the number of other denominations increased by 2% (from 2% to 4%); the number of those that believe in God has fallen by 4% (from 91% to 87%), whereas the number of nonbelievers has risen by 5% (to 16%) (Baloban 2010: 527).

The changes in the status of the Church and its social role since the fall of the communist regime have been great. Since the 1990s, the Church has become much more prominent in public life, and so “religious education has been reintroduced to schools, a military vicarage has been founded, religious pastors have entered hospitals and prisons, the Catholic Faculty of Theology in Zagreb has been reintegrated into the University of Zagreb, at the same time two other faculties of theology have been established, the Faculty of Theology at the University of Split and the Faculty of Theology in Đakovo at Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek, and four international treaties have been signed between the Republic of Croatia and the Holy See” (Baloban 2009: 741).

Research shows that in the European context the Roman Catholic Church in Croatia shares the destiny of churches in central and eastern Europe, which is also confirmed by the *Aufbruch II* study, conducted in 2007 in Bulgaria, eastern Germany, Croatia, Lithuania, Moldova, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Ukraine, Hungary, and Belarus (Baloban 2009: 747). The results point to a certain secularization of people, society, and institutions, particularly political ones, which try to emancipate themselves from the influence of religion and the Church. These phenomena are followed by a growing individualization, subjectivism, and more liberal perception of human beings, society, the state, and law (Baloban 2009: 749).

Among the countries in which the Church was seen with more confidence and competence in 1997 than in 2007 are Croatia, Slovenia, Hungary, and the Czech Republic. In that sense, in measuring public confidence in Church, Croatia has fallen from 63% of public confidence in 1997 to 52% in 2007 (Baloban 2009: 750). The Church in Croatia thus belongs to a circle of countries in which confidence in the Church is falling. The crisis the Church is going through is also reflected in its structure, leading all the way to the crisis of the parish as an organizational structure (i.e., the elementary church unit) and the problem of performing its and the Church's duty in contemporary society and the world (Šagi 2010: 898–901).

It is generally considered that the Church in the east is moving towards the situation of the Church in the west, where the social role of religion has changed in the last decade. "Individualization and pluralization . . . have greatly influenced the fact that religion has lost a legitimizing function to the other social subsystems as well as the fact that the personal relationship to religion has become almost exclusively conditioned by personal preferences, and not social constraints. At the level of empirical data, the trend of decreased religiousness and/or separation from the Church is unambiguously confirmed in numerous studies" (Zrinščak 2005: 72). As an answer to atheization after a period of religious revival, suppression of religion, and (sometimes deviant) modernization under communism, post-communist countries are moving in the direction of what the west has already experienced (see Zrinščak 2005: 77–80).

On the basis of an anthropological case study, this article considers how the noted process of decline of institutionalized religion in Croatia is related to the emergence of various non-institutionalized religious practices. We believe that Medjugorje is a good example of the individualization and subjectivization of contemporary religious practice in Croatia, which also demonstrates that the noted process of decline of institutionalized religion in Croatia does not mean that the Croats are becoming less religious, but, quite the contrary, that they have found new ways for practicing and expressing their religiosity.

## MEDJUGORJE: A PLACE OF PERSONAL AND SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCES

Pilgrimages, Marian devotion, and religion in general offer possibilities of positioning believers in a time of social tensions and transformations (Hermkens et al. 2009: 2). At the same time, as sociologists point out, "the times when one could be a believer out of cultural and social reasons of belonging to a religious institution are long gone" and it is improbable that one could be religious without a personal religious experience (Tadić 1998: 370). These tendencies are a challenge for the strongly organized, structured, traditional, and conservative Church. Below we discuss Medjugorje, a very popular destination among pilgrims from Croatia that is developing and growing primarily as a space of personal and subjective experiences and also outside "objective" definitions of a pilgrimage shrine, but

for which the Church also recognizes numerous beneficial outcomes. Tomislav Pervan, a theologian and Herzegovinian Franciscan, has recognized Medjugorje as a “gift of Heaven to the Church” and “the strongest and ripest fruit of the Church renewal” (2011b: 70, 73).

This article is based on a study conducted in Medjugorje from 2006 to 2012. The focus was on the construction of Medjugorje as a pilgrimage place: fixed in space, but not in its meanings (Coleman & Elsner 1995: 202). The research started from the premise that the sacredness of a pilgrimage destination, or sacredness in general, in order to become real, has to be continually recreated and that a sacred place becomes real only through the conscious effort of pilgrims to “use it” (McKevitt 1991: 79). Medjugorje was seen as a place that attracts pilgrims by means of attributed meanings, as a *raison d’être* of pilgrimage (Eade & Sallnow 1991: 6), and as a guideline in the construction of pilgrimage. At the same time, it was seen as a *locale*; that is, a setting of particular sociocultural activities (see Rodman 2007: 207) and identification processes of all those that use it. In other words, the important questions were how people inscribed their presence and experience in the space of Medjugorje; that is, how they gave it meaning and, at the same time, how they negotiated their identities in their interaction with individual locations in Medjugorje (Low & Lawrence-Zúñiga 2007: 13–14; Fernandez 2007: 189–190; Sheldrake 2001: 1) while building a “realm of competing discourses” (Eade & Sallnow 1991: 5).

The course of the study<sup>1</sup> was defined by four coordinates: place, text, person, and movement (see Eade & Sallnow 1991: 9; Coleman & Elsner 1995: 202–205; Coleman & Eade 2004: 3, 16–17) seen in interaction. As noted previously, “place” is seen as a place of meanings and social interaction, situated not only in a physical location, but also in words, text, or an important person that became part of the pilgrimage itinerary or an event. “Text” refers to interpretations and definitions of Medjugorje as a center of pilgrimage, contained in oral testimonies, narratives, and comments, in published material and articles, and so on. The coordinate “person” refers to pilgrims’ experiences, as well as to experiences of those using the space of Medjugorje (e.g., church officials, guides, and the local population), and the individuals incorporated in the perceptions of place and experiences. “Movement” was, on the one hand, observed as “the kinetic mapping of the space” (Coleman & Eade 2004: 2, 16); that is, physical movement towards and inside of Medjugorje. On the other hand, through documenting experiences, pilgrimage was tackled as metaphorical movement; that is, the focus was on transformations in physical, psychological, or spiritual aspects of people’s lives that are the result of (often) years of (physical) pilgrimages to Medjugorje and spending time there. Namely, the contact with diverse influences at a pilgrimage shrine can strengthen or change pilgrims’ values and behaviors, and contribute to their health and wellbeing (Morinis 1992: 21). As is commonly believed, each end of a pilgrimage is a

<sup>1</sup> This research approach was based on a critical analysis of concepts and approaches in the anthropology of pilgrimage that, together with a more detailed insight into the researcher’s own approach to Medjugorje, was extensively elaborated and discussed in a study by one of the article’s authors (see Belaj 2012: 18–69).

spiritual step forward (Turner & Turner 1978:15). The research was based on individual and subjective experiences of the Medjugorje space and pilgrimage, and it is directed at the variety and multiple meanings—and frequently also the contradictions—of the reality of Medjugorje and the pilgrimage there.

Medjugorje is one of the most often visited—and at the same time one of the most controversial—pilgrimage destinations in the world. Since 1981, when pilgrimages started, tens of millions of pilgrims have visited it; according to very broad estimates, the number amounts to forty million. The exact number of pilgrims can only be speculated on, but from 1985, when the parish first began to compile statistics, to mid-2014, over thirty million holy communions have been distributed.

In spite of these imposing numbers, the fact remains that the official Church has not acknowledged Medjugorje as a pilgrimage shrine. Medjugorje is just one of the 366 registered cases of apparitions of the Blessed Virgin Mary during the twentieth century around the world. The results of a statistical analysis of the Marian apparitions directory of the International Marian Research Institute at the University of Dayton show that the Church has made “no decision” about the supernatural character of the apparition in 299 of these registered cases; it has made a “negative decision” in seventy-nine of them, and a “positive decision” in only eight cases. Medjugorje features among the 299 cases that have not been decided on. These cases are (or have been) investigated by bishops, but a decision cannot be made until additional analysis has been carried out, or the Church has started an examination of the alleged apparition. As opposed to this option and according to this analysis, the “negative decision” in the seventy-nine cases contains either *non constat de supernaturalitate* ‘it is not evident to be of supernatural origin’ or *constat de non supernaturalitate* ‘it is evident to be of non-supernatural origin’. Whereas the first formulation could indicate a temporary character of the decision and demand new results of research or a reopening of cases, the other formulation has a final character (“Marian Apparitions of the Twentieth Century” 2012).

This examination also indicates a domain of controversy with regard to Medjugorje that is especially present in public discourse. Two facts lie in its foundation. One relates to the testimonies of six visionaries from Medjugorje that state that since June 24th, 1984 to this day Our Lady has been appearing to them on a daily basis, wherever they may be. The second fact is a consequence of the first one and it relates to the ambiguous position the Church holds on the supernatural character of the Marian apparitions at Medjugorje. The Church stated its official position on Medjugorje in the *Declaration of the Bishops’ Conference of Yugoslavia*, adopted in Zadar on April 10th, 1991. Among other things, it states:

On the grounds of examination so far it cannot be affirmed that one is dealing with supernatural apparitions and revelations. However, the numerous gatherings of the faithful from different parts of the world, who come to Medjugorje, prompted both by motives of belief and various other motives, require the attention

and pastoral care in the first place of the diocesan bishop and with him of the other bishops also, so that in Medjugorje and in everything connected with it a healthy devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary may be promoted in accordance with the teaching of the Church.

The position on the supernatural character of the apparition in Medjugorje has remained to this day a bone of contention within the Church, and it is most evident in the relation between Ratko Perić, the Bishop of the Diocese of Mostar-Duvno, to which Medjugorje belongs, and the Franciscans of the Franciscan Province of Herzegovina, who provide pastoral care in Medjugorje. On the grounds of the *Declaration* from Zadar, the supernatural apparitions are characterized by the Church as a *non constat de supernaturalitate* ‘it is not evident to be of supernatural origin’ but with an opposite interpretation. Bishop Perić points out that the Church “clearly and consistently says: *Non constat de supernaturalitate*: no pilgrimages that allege the supernatural character of the apparitions, no Our Lady’s shrine, no authentic messages or revelations, no truthful sightings!” (Perić 2007). The Herzegovinian Franciscans interpret the formula *non constat de supernaturalitate* in a different way than Bishop Perić. In their opinion, according to the *Declaration* “the final decision on the supernatural character of the apparitions and revelations remains open”; the bishops have “accepted Medjugorje as a place of pilgrimage,” private pilgrimages are allowed if they do not imply the authenticity of the apparitions, and “the Church does not forbid priests to follow the pilgrimages” (“Deset godina Zadarske izjave,” Ten Years of the Declaration of Zadar, no year<sup>2</sup>). The disagreement between the local bishop and the Herzegovinian Franciscans is a “constant shadow that follows the events in Medjugorje” (Ivančić 2011: 75).

The Medjugorje issue became current again at an official level in the Church in March 2010 with the establishment of a new international commission to investigate the Medjugorje phenomenon at the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. The provincial superior of the Franciscan Province of Herzegovina, Ivan Sesar, declared already several years ago that Medjugorje satisfies all necessary conditions to be declared an international shrine because it already exists as one. It “has a future of its own because it is not a novelty within the Church, but an encouragement to convert and live the Gospel” (“Svećenik dr. Ivan Sesar o Medjugorju,” The Priest Dr. Ivan Sesar on Medjugorje, 2006). Tomislav Pervan, a Herzegovinian Franciscan, while comparing Medjugorje to Lourdes, Fátima, or Guadalupe, states that Medjugorje considerably exceeds them “in its dynamics and spread” in the whole world, in its intensity of sacramental and religious life, especially confession, in the number of praying communities all around the world, resulting as “a fruit” of a particular pilgrimage site. “Medjugorje is the name of a place, but also a name of a movement that is spreading

<sup>2</sup> The website [www.medjugorje.hr](http://www.medjugorje.hr), where there is a link to this title, works within the Medjugorje Peace Information Center, established by the Franciscans in 1993. This website is also considered the official website for the events in Medjugorje; it is supported by Herzegovinian Franciscans and is thus one of the sources of their opinions on the events in Medjugorje.

around the whole world,” says Pervan, at the same time emphasizing that it is the strongest evangelical movement after the Second Vatican Council, whose main message was the renewal of the Church (Pervan 2011a: 7–8). Moreover, in a “time of searching and abyss” (Pervan 2011b: 73) many Herzegovinian Franciscans have recognized Medjugorje as a lighthouse, a form of a new evangelization of the world (see Dugandžić 2011: 172; Pervan 2011b: 72).

Although among hierarchical representatives Medjugorje “keeps unsettling spirits” (Pervan 2011b: 64), the millions of pilgrims that gather here unambiguously show that a place does not become a pilgrimage shrine by a decree and institutionalization, but by the pilgrimage itself and the engagement of the pilgrims. Their experience of Medjugorje is thereby of crucial importance: “I do not care what the Holy Pope thinks, nobody can take away my experience,” a pilgrim from Ireland explains. The spiritual magnetism (see Preston 1992: 33) of Medjugorje has been triggered by the alleged apparitions of the Virgin Mary. The Medjugorje visionaries describe Our Lady as embodied in human form and, as they point out, in Medjugorje she speaks Croatian. Thus, Mary is integrated into the “ordinary” world; she is close to man, but still not entirely. Her indescribable beauty and a power alien to human is what separates her from this world, which makes her divinely authentic. However, the fact that her power is not inaccessible to the pilgrims is exemplified by the visionaries testifying about their meetings with Mary. For the pilgrims, the visionaries are a living trace of Mary’s presence on Earth and her messengers, and their testimonies are an inspiration and a guideline in shaping notions about Mary and devotion to her. The visionary Vicka mentions Mary especially as a mother, full of understanding and love, ready to help when asked to (Bubalo 1998 [1985]: 270). A tour guide, who has been organizing group pilgrimages from Zagreb to Medjugorje for almost thirty years, in a similar manner calls pilgrims to meet a mother that is expecting them:

If the Mother didn’t love you or didn’t want you to come, she simply would not have invited you; you would not have received the call. . . . I can only confirm that Our Lady appeared in Medjugorje, that she is present there.

For her devotees, Mary herself undoubtedly has significant power. A pilgrim from Zagreb, who was guided by this guide, adds: “Obviously the Mother called me when I needed it, when I had cried my whole life out.” She has a very clear idea about the role of Mary, who appears in Medjugorje, in the life of her family and especially her son:

The Lady has performed a miracle in my family. The children have also started attending mass regularly, my husband started going to confession in Medjugorje and to Holy Mass; their lives are completely changed . . . . The Lady educates him [her son] in Medjugorje, I am only the earthly mother. The Heavenly Mother is the one who took him under her care, who teaches him, gives him strength, the will to live, peace.



This interview contains the components that correspond to the fundamental components of Our Lady's messages in Medjugorje. According to the testimonies of the visionaries, in her messages she invites and encourages peace, conversion and faith, prayer, and fasting. As the practices and experiences of the worshipers show, the pilgrims respond to her call—they arrive in search of her proximity, favor, or a visible sign, out of gratitude for the mercy they have received or in order to honor the place of her apparition.

However, in addition to the issue of the presence of the Virgin Mary and her power that many pilgrims testify to, Medjugorje can be perceived from another perspective: as a place the sacredness of which stems from the place itself. Mary communicated the following to the witnesses of the apparition:

Dear children! I have chosen this parish in a special way and I wish to lead it. I am guarding it in love and I want everyone to be mine. (March 1st, 1984)

. . . because I and my Son have a special plan for this parish (April 12th, 1984)

Dear children, I love you and in a special way I have chosen this parish, one more dear to me than the others in which I have gladly remained when the Almighty sent me. (March 21st, 1985)

Through the numerous messages that the visionaries pass on, Mary has chosen Medjugorje to channel her power, and thus she made it a consecrated space, or “sacred ground,” as interpreted by one of the regular pilgrims.

The idea of it being “chosen” is also supported by many of those included in its shaping. One resident of Medjugorje tells the story of her stay in Mexico, where a Mexican woman kissed her and touched her only because she was from Medjugorje. Some Herzegovinian Franciscans connect Medjugorje being “chosen” to the Jewish people being “chosen” (see Dugandžić 2011: 153, 158; Jolić 2011: 116, 117; Pervan 2011c: 136).<sup>3</sup> Provincial Sesar says about Medjugorje: “People say: you can pray here or there, that’s a fact. But the *vox populi* holds that it is precisely here where people find what they need.” The spiritual magnetism of Medjugorje is so powerful for many pilgrims that they often return, like this pilgrim from Zagreb:

<sup>3</sup> The sociologist Zlatko Skrbiš, considering the relationship between the Medjugorje apparitions and Croatian nationalist discourse, as a connection between the two sees precisely the idea of “being chosen”; that is, “being special.” In this case, it is “being chosen” that Croatian nationalists understand as their own quality, bestowed from God, because Our Lady appeared in a Croatian parish. The author, however, notes that the relationship of the apparitions and nationalism does not draw much attention from Croatian nationalists, nor has it been in any way part of the recent war events in this region (see Skrbiš 2005).

There were many obstacles every time I said I was going to Medjugorje. However, I didn't give up; nothing could stop me from coming. I was always persistent, there were always situations—I was ill or there were problems with my husband. He is here, he can tell you. He said “You're not going again, are you, you just came back the other day.” And I answered I had to go even if he packed all my things and put the suitcase at the door.

In Medjugorje, in the words of a pilgrim guide, “this pool of God's love, many found comfort, freed themselves from the evil of sins, pressures”; all those that are “dispirited, sick, nervous, drugged, with marriage crises, and the like. They look for comfort, peace, the touch of the earth, these bushes, to take it home as a memento” (a resident of Medjugorje). A priest from Medjugorje says: “Everybody who steps on this land, feels some, to put it in a modern fashion, positive energies, vibrations.” Another priest says: “No one has ever returned from Medjugorje the same. Ever. That is impossible.”

In the narratives, often carrying the aura of the miraculous, Medjugorje is being presented as the place of witnessing, truth, prayer, conversion, renewal, healing of any kind, and peace. It is also often emphasized that Medjugorje is the “confessional of the world.” “That is what makes Medjugorje a wonder in the world,” points out a Franciscan from Medjugorje. According to the priests and pilgrims in Medjugorje, many confess here for the first time in their lives or after many years, or they confess only in Medjugorje. “When one confesses pilgrims here, it is a completely different story. People are freer, encouraged to say the truth, more open and honest, more humble; they experience these things more profoundly, with more faith. Medjugorje has this power,” explains a priest from Medjugorje. The confession is, for instance, an important segment of all events at the International Prayer Youth Meeting (Youth Festival), one of the most frequently visited annual events in Medjugorje, which draws tens of thousands of pilgrims from all over the world. During the festival, confession is encouraged by the organizers of events, lecturers, and those that present testimonies (members of the Cenacolo Community, visionaries, Christian-oriented famous people from cultural and social life, and married couples) because it is “what you cannot leave the festival without” and because it has shown itself to be a “merciful moment for many and a turning point that changed their lives to the point of unrecognizability” (Ćurić 2011). Hundreds of priests are hired for confession at the festival. Testifying, confession, conversion, prayer, and peace are the fundamental values and motives of the spirituality of Medjugorje, which greatly depend on the fundamental motives of Our Lady's messages.

However, although Medjugorje mostly draws Catholics, pilgrims from other Christian faiths and other religious traditions come to visit it. There are many followers of non-Christian religious traditions as well as non-devotees of Mary that speak of the magnetism of Medjugorje itself, beyond the apparitions or Mary herself. The spiritual values supported in Medjugorje are an integral part of Mary's messages, but at the same time they are universal across religions and for humanity in general (e.g., the call to peace and openness to all

people, conversion as a turning away from sin, renewal, etc.). Internationality, ecumenism, and interreligious dialogue are all parts of Mary's messages:

Dear children! During these days people from all nations will be coming into the parish. And now I am calling you to love: love first of all your own household members, and then you will be able to accept and love all who are coming. (June 6th, 1985);

Here I began with this parish and invited the entire world. (August 25th, 2011).

In Medjugorje many "emphasize the sense of the closeness of God and the spiritual values inscribed here, to which Medjugorje motivates them. . . . People of other religions come to Medjugorje as well; they deepen their respective religiousness and feel that something divine and supernatural is present in Medjugorje" (Ćorić 2011: 284). For example, a Malaysian Hindu collected stones for his children and friends at Cross Mountain, one of the points on the itinerary for many Medjugorje pilgrims, because "millions of pilgrims stepped on them."

The attractiveness of Mary herself and the magnetism of Medjugorje as a consecrated space are the initial concepts out of the cooperation of which the pilgrims' Medjugorje emerges. In the material and symbolic sense, the space of Medjugorje is composed of a number of locations transformed into meaningful places. In that process, the material and symbolic world that the pilgrims inhabit is not created only by the pilgrims; Medjugorje reflects a varied range of understandings and meanings that many actors bring into it: alongside pilgrims of various categories, also the shrine officials, pilgrimage guides, local population, travel agencies, accidental visitors, salesmen, and restaurant and bar keepers. Moving through pilgrims' Medjugorje, it is difficult to anticipate all of the locations and arrange them according to the importance attributed to them. In other words, in Medjugorje there is no established pilgrimage itinerary, and the shaping of Medjugorje through pilgrimage itineraries is an open-ended and dynamic process. There are three locations that make up the so-called Medjugorje triangle, as Provincial Sesar named it, and which are under the control of the Medjugorje clergy: Saint James's Church as the center of sacramental life and prayer, Cross Mountain (*Križevac*) with the Way of the Cross devotion, and Apparition Hill (*Brdo ukazanja*) with the Rosary devotion. These three locations are also typically parts of all pilgrimage itineraries. However, there is a series of other locations included on the pilgrims' map at the discretion of pilgrims or itinerary managers (e.g., B&B owners, tourist agencies, and pilgrimage guides). These locations focus on persons (e.g., the visionaries, the figure of Father Slavko Barbarić, the Cenacolo Community in Medjugorje for treatment of addiction, and Nancy and Patrick Latta) or events (e.g., the International Youth Prayer Festival). Judging by the number of pilgrims that visit them, Cross Mountain and Apparition Hill are inevitable stops, together with Saint James's Church, where masses and

prayer programs are held daily in various languages. Apart from these sights, one of the boarding house owners, for example, offers his guests a meeting with one of the visionaries, deeming it an indispensable part of the Medjugorje itinerary, as well as a visit to the men's group of the Cenacolo Community. Another one thinks that Nancy Latta and her edifice resembling a castle, where Nancy receives pilgrims and other guests, is obligatory. Unlike them, a guide that has finished a seminar for Medjugorje guides and has years of experience working there does not include the visionaries or Nancy Latta in his itinerary, but sticks to the so-called Medjugorje triangle (the church, Cross Mountain, and Apparition Hill). He also does not guide the group to the grave of Father Slavko Barbarić, although the pilgrims from his group visit the grave themselves.

The following paragraphs briefly discuss some of these locations, selected in order of greatest popularity (for more on all of these locations, see Belaj 2012: 118–212).

Cross Mountain is a 520-meter hill (Figure 1), one kilometer from the parish church. At the top of it there is a 8.5-meter-high concrete cross containing relics from the cross of Jesus at Rome. The cross was erected in 1934. There are contrasting stories about the reason the cross was set up. The official account is that the cross was erected to honor the 1,900th anniversary of Christ's Passion, whereas the unofficial one mentions that the cross was erected by the locals as protection against bad weather. Whatever the reason, the erection of the cross was given a supernatural undertone because, according to the seers, Mary mentioned it in her message of August 30th, 1984: "The cross was part of God's plan when you built it." Hence the cross, even though it is half a century older than the apparition itself, became part of the concept of Our Lady of Medjugorje. The Stations of the Cross lead from the bottom of the hill to the cross at the top and were erected at the beginning of Mary's apparitions, when the religiosity of The Way was first observed here. Officially, Cross Mountain is presented as a call to pilgrims for sacrifice (climbing uphill on a steep stone path to the cross) and a possibility "to meet with Jesus in His Passion and discover His love." Unofficial perceptions, however, turn Cross Mountain into an arena of personal prayers and thanks, struggles and changes, contemplations, and peace-finding modes, or even hill-climbing challenges. This is all inscribed into it through narratives ("The majority of people mostly make some changes to their lives here on Cross Mountain," said the owner of a bar at the bottom of the hill), bodily practices, graffiti written on the base of the cross, hand-written messages left around, small personal items, or anything that could serve as a reminder of a certain person throughout the Stations of the Cross and on and around the cross on the top of the hill; this is visible on the bronze parts of the Stations of the Cross, polished to high shine by numerous touches, in the footwear left and temporary abandoned at the bottom of the hill, and so on.

The content of Cross Mountain has been supplemented by a stone with a bronze cast of Father Slavko Barbarić (Figure 2) between the thirteenth and the fourteenth Station of the Cross. The stone, allegedly weighing 1,000 kilograms, was brought to the bottom of the hill in 2001, on the first anniversary of Father Slavko's death, by the members of



Figure 1: The Cross Mountain. 2010. Photo by Marijana Belaj.



Figure 2: The Stone with a bronze cast of Father Slavko Barbalić. 2010. Photo by Marijana Belaj.

the Cenacolo Community. They placed it on the spot where Father Slavko had allegedly died after finishing his round of the Stations of the Cross. The members of the Cenacolo Community honor him as their great friend and spiritual father. However, the range of the perceptions of his character and actions in the local community and among numerous pilgrims, the trace he has left in the space of Medjugorje and, according to the accounts, in individual lives, raise him to the level of charismatic authority. Hence, even though the stone and his grave in the local cemetery are presented in the official discourse only as a “remembrance and monument to a man that spoke what he thought and did what he spoke, following the Gospels and the messages of the Queen of Peace,” judging from everything that is going on around them, both places are more than merely monuments. Written messages and personal pictures are being left on the stone, and the cast has been polished to high shine by numerous hands. Individuals or small groups of people visit his grave until late at night not only to light a candle, but also to touch the grave and say a personal prayer. One of the pilgrims said: “Every time I go to Medjugorje, I visit his grave. In contemplation and silence I thank him and ask him to uphold my family and myself before Almighty God.”

This is what the pilgrims say about Father Slavko’s influence on their lives:

He told me many miracles had happened here. This is why I come. (A female pilgrim from England)

I used to buy Father Slavko’s books, tapes about Medjugorje, CDs. I didn’t know that someday it would do some good for my R.<sup>4</sup> That Father Slavko would write to him, inspire him, be a role model for him. . . . After Father Slavko’s death, I went to his grave and I said: “Father Slavko, you left your life in Medjugorje, you gave it to the Lord and our Heavenly Mother. You wrote so many books for the young, you have saved so many drug addicts from the hell of addiction, received so many children in the Mother’s Village, worked selflessly. Please, you are in Heaven, pray for my sons.” They were typical adolescents then. They used to go out, hang out, interested in alcohol and everything else that keeps young people out till midnight or one in the morning. I prayed for help to Father Slavko, asking him to pray for my children. (A female pilgrim from Zagreb)

Remembrance of Father Slavko evokes the creation of Medjugorje in the official historical context (he founded Mother’s Village, organized and aided the community for treating drug users, formed the Fund for Talented and Economically Challenged Students, started

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<sup>4</sup> R. is her son, who, after encountering some problems in life, converted and directed his life to the pilgrimage to Medjugorje. He is currently studying to become a guide for groups of pilgrims. “He started to trust God, left the world and its charms, and accepted the leadership of God and his Mother Mary. . . . But when I saw him for the first time, I ran away from him,” said a guide about R.



seminars for fasting and prayers, the Youth Festival, an annual international seminar for priests, etc.), but also brings back memories of emotional and spiritual experiences, and even complete personal transformations. In fact, through the social, ideological, and especially emotional aspect, he was himself turned into a site of symbolic and identificational significance.



Figure 3: The Apparition Hill. 2011. Photo by Marijana Belaj.

Apparition Hill (Figure 3) became a “site” when Mary’s alleged apparitions began. The steep stone paths from the bottom to the apparition site and back are marked by bronze molds of the sacrament of the Rosary, and there is also a cross that marks the spot of the apparition on the third day, when Mary allegedly called for peace. At the top of the hill there is a statue of the Queen of Peace, modeled on the statue by the parish church and erected here on the twentieth anniversary of the initial apparition, in 2001. In comparison to Cross Mountain, where behavior is almost exclusively ritual, dictated by the uphill Stations of the Cross and dominated by contemplation and prayer, climbing up Apparition Hill seems to be expressed in much more diverse, spontaneous, emotional, individualized ways. The differences in the perception of the two hills can also be seen in the behavior of the guides that lead the groups of pilgrims to the respective hills. The pilgrim groups are much more scattered here and their practices are mostly dictated by their own individual perceptions of the place. In the official discourse, Apparition Hill is a place of “meeting with Our Lady

through personal prayer and the sacrament of the Rosary.” However, according to the visitors’ accounts, this place even allows individuals that are ascribed certain special powers, together with their clients, to inscribe in it their alternative healing concepts, sensing the special energy of the place and using it for their own séances.

At Apparition Hill, Cross Mountain, and almost all other locations, pilgrims leave written notes, bundles of letters, votive tablets, photos, jewelry, clothes, shoes, and other personal objects. The objects become part of the shrine’s inventory, as reminders and witnesses of contact with the sacred. Offered for insight to future pilgrims, those objects become a landmark for shaping the perceptions of these places, and a framework for narratives emphasizing and propagating the shrine’s special power.



Figure 4: The Statue of Resurrected Savior. 2011. Photo by Marijana Belaj.



An especially sacred location for Medjugorje pilgrims is the bronze statue of the Resurrected Savior (Figure 4), six meters high and weighing two and a half tons, standing near the parish church. The statue was erected in 1998. In the official discourse, the statue is presented in the context of the area immediately around it and which is intended for “personal and group prayer of the Stations of the Cross for those who cannot climb Cross Mountain.” The important fact is, however, that drops of water appear on the statue’s right shin. The official rhetoric attributes this to the condensation of water, but the pilgrims interpret this as a supernatural phenomenon. The statue of the Resurrected Christ lures the pilgrims to collect water drops for their personal use, and while doing so they have the opportunity to touch or kiss the statue. Among those that visit the statue, this is the dominant perception and use of this site.

The pilgrimage locations in themselves, as much as Medjugorje as a whole, reflect the many needs, expectations, and perceptions brought by all of those included in shaping it. The locations arise at the crossroads of the formal and the informal, which especially comes to prominence in the dimension of pilgrimage practices. As Morinis summarizes it, on the formal pole the social ritual, the repetition of formula and rituals, rigidity, and unchangeableness are prominent, and on the informal pole the emphasis is on the individual and direct experience, personal expressions, and flexibility (1992: 14). The continuum from formal to informal behavior is evident within the locations themselves (e.g., it is most evident on Apparition Hill or at the Resurrected Savior statue, where official and unofficial interpretations of the location are intensely negotiated), as well as between locations (whereas Cross Mountain is closer to the pole of the social, ritual, and rigid, Apparition Hill is closer to the pole of the individual, personal, and flexible).

The subjective interpretations of space, in accordance with personal motives and needs that came about from the personal, inner experience of the place and the meeting with the sacred, together create a dynamics of the pilgrims’ Medjugorje. However, these interpretations of the space take place within the framework of guidelines provided by the symbolically marked space and the fundamental motives of Medjugorje spirituality.

As we stated earlier, the qualities of Medjugorje are expressed in terms of testimony, confession, conversion, and peace, but especially through the ability of that space to allow and accommodate diverse cultural modes of religiousness and spiritual experience in general.

Provincial Ivan Sesar says:

These are these spiritual seekers, people who seek something they can’t find and, for reasons unknown and unfathomable, they find it in Medjugorje. That is what we can’t grasp with mind, that is faith. That is the faith that will be found precisely here, in Medjugorje, what they cannot find anywhere else. . . . One difference from other pilgrimage places is that here there is a homey atmosphere. . . . But, I must say, because of an increasing number of pilgrims, certain frames simply need to be imposed. But people do not like frames. They want to be able to do what they want when they feel it.

Spiritual seekers that “do not like frames” and who follow their own feeling on the one hand, and a “homey atmosphere”—an atmosphere of immediacy and spontaneity—within a frame of fundamental (but also universal) terms of Medjugorje spirituality on the other, are an amalgam that the pilgrims’ Medjugorje grows from. The plurality of voices of all those included in shaping the pilgrims’ Medjugorje confirms the universalistic character of that pilgrimage site, and its ability to absorb and reflect different discourses (Eade and Sallnow 1991: 15). However, without the common ideas and practices there would not be a pilgrims’ Medjugorje.

Finally, what does the pilgrims’ Medjugorje do for pilgrims?

What is enchanting in Medjugorje is to see all these people praying. If you went from our house down through the fields . . . everything is somehow brisk, colorful, but all somehow peaceful. All aflutter, but somehow also at peace. And that is what really captivates people . . . People have really experienced a conversion in Medjugorje, concrete things. Today I was like this, tomorrow I am living in a different way, with another worldview, according to other principles. (A member of the Cenacolo Community)

Many people from all over the world come [to Medjugorje] . . . They look for solace, peace, the touch of the soil, these bushes . . . [Other pilgrimage places] are far ahead. Not in terms of system, but in terms of reception, guides, accommodation, transportation. Hmm . . . maybe that is an advantage of Medjugorje, that everything, so to say, stayed the same, as they say, Calvary, the staircase, walking on foot, hardships, day and night. (A resident of Medjugorje)

As accounts show, it is precisely the possibility of customizing, personal creation of a pilgrimage space, that makes Medjugorje distinct from other “organized” and “regulated” pilgrimage destinations. This very impulse to creation is presumably what makes Medjugorje a “world movement,” the power of which “keeps unsettling spirits.”

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The political, economic, and sociocultural transitions and transformations that Croatia has experienced since the 1990s also affected the position of the Church in society. Its position changed from being marginalized and stigmatized, to the position of an influential social actor (with a high degree of identification of the national with the religious), to an actor undergoing a crisis and a decrease in confidence on the part of believers. In the last decade, institutional religion in Croatia has lost its legitimizing function in society, and

religiousness is much influenced by an individualization and subjectivization of, or distance from, institutional religious principles and doxa.

Internal conflicts within the Church regarding Medjugorje notwithstanding, the pilgrimage to Medjugorje continues to flourish, upholding the thesis about the “spiritual turn” in contemporary society (Heelas et al. 2005). Pilgrims to Medjugorje are “spiritual seekers” that find precisely there what they cannot find anywhere else (Provincial Sesar), what the institution of the Church cannot give them (Margry 2009: 246). Pilgrimage to Medjugorje is motivated by conversion, confession, sacrifice, worship, and other exclusively religious motives, but also by secular needs, physical recovery, the wellbeing of families, work, society, and finding support in the midst of existential uncertainties. In Medjugorje conflicts come to the fore every day. There, pilgrims of different affiliations find answers, refuge, encouragement, intimacy, and security in a world marked by diverse sociocultural processes that generate inequality at various levels (see Hermkens et al. 2009: 2). For some it is a place where God has touched the land, and for others a place where a solidary, just, warm and caring, encouraging, protective, healing Mary appears.

Medjugorje is an intersection of various pilgrimage practices, ranging from those inspired by an established order and tradition to those that a pilgrim models according to his or her individual needs, wishes, and beliefs, guided by his or her inner experience. In Medjugorje the sacred ceases to be distant and unreachable, separate from everyday reality. All hopes and appeals related to everyday problems that the pilgrims bring with them and inscribe in Medjugorje bear witness to this; the messages that they inscribe in the objects they bring with them and leave behind, in the worn bronze sculptures they touch, and in worn stones they walk on. The sacred and the secular cease to be exclusive categories through a range of different practices of Medjugorje pilgrims.

The Croatian theologian Tomislav Janko Šagi-Bunić believed that Christianity in this region has a provincial character (Šagi-Bunić 1983: 147). However, the millions of pilgrims in Medjugorje indicate something else: a high degree of creativity and openness that this shrine absorbs and reflects, intercultural encounters and dialogue in practice, the need for personal religious experience, spirituality focusing on individuality, and inner experience. These characteristics put Medjugorje at the focus of contemporary European developments in religiousness—religiousness as an autonomous phenomenon, free from demands and prescriptions of institutional religion.

Medjugorje is also a good example of how a mere physical space has been transformed into a sacralized place that has an important role in the lives of many Croats, and has influence on their self-understanding and understanding of religion and its (institutionalized and noninstitutionalized) practices. Therefore, Medjugorje is not only a place in which many Croats seek comfort or divine help, but it is also a place that is significant for their identification processes because, among other things, it very successfully localizes their sense of individual and collective (religious) identity.

Currently, Medjugorje as a place of pilgrimage is in a transition phase, the direction of which will be determined by the Vatican's decision on the status of the seers' visions. This will define its place among other Catholic holy places inspired by apparitions of the Virgin Mary that draw millions of pilgrims. Currently, one can say that the recent changes introduced by the Vatican to Medjugorje have affected pilgrims' numbers and their practice. The changes implemented by the ruling of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith included more restricted space for seers' activities. For example, seers stopped meeting pilgrims outside of Medjugorje, and in Medjugorje they started meeting them in a very limited manner; in fact, seers almost quit engaging in public statements and activities, together with the priests serving as their spiritual leaders (cf. <https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/vidioci-vise-ne-izlaze-u-javnost-1094392>). One obvious result of this is a reduction in the number of pilgrims. Namely, in comparison with the number of communion receivers at its peak in 2011, it can be concluded that there has been an approximately 20% decrease in the number of pilgrims (cf. <http://www.medjugorje.hr/hr/medjugorski-fenomen/statistike/>). It should be stated that this conclusion cannot be fully proved; however, because there are official data on the number of people that received communion (and no official data on the number of pilgrims), if one presupposes a high correlation between the numbers of communion receivers and pilgrims (which can be assumed because of the pilgrims' profile and their high religious motivation), the conclusion above appears to have a good basis. The future character of Medjugorje as a pilgrimage place depends on the final Vatican ruling; however, if that decision remains somehow in line with the Bishops' Conference of Yugoslavia ruling in 1991 (cf. <http://www.medjugorje.hr/hr/medjugorski-fenomen/vodic/zadarska-izjava/>), which is still the only official decision by the Catholic Church regarding Medjugorje, matters will not change much. Namely, the 1991 ruling says that there is no proof of supernatural apparitions and revelations in Medjugorje, but that pilgrims deserve all necessary pastoral care. Both Archbishop Hoser (cf. <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/svijet/ispovijest-papinog-posebnog-izaslanka-za-medjugorje-cuo-sam-da-se-po-hercegovini-prica-da-sam-tamo-dosao-i-cudom-ozdravio-od-malarije/5732779/>), the pope's special envoy for Medjugorje, and Cardinal Müller (<https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/svijet/kardinal-zaduzen-za-pitanje-gospe-u-medjugorju-kada-cemo-donijeti-konacnu-odluku-imamo-na-raspolaganju-sve-vrijeme-do-drugog-dolaska-isusa-krista/5718927/>), the prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, have publicly expressed similar views on Medjugorje as bishops did in 1991, and so it seems that everything will remain the same for Medjugorje as it has since 1981.

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## SVETI PROSTORI IN RELIGIOZNE PRAKSE HRVAŠKIH DUHOVNIH ISKALCEV. PRIMER MEDJUGORJE

*Politične, gospodarske in družbenokulturne preobrazbe, ki jih je doživela Hrvaška od devetdesetih let prejšnjega stoletja, so vplivale tudi na položaj Cerkve v družbi. V zadnjem desetletju je institucionalna vera na Hrvaškem izgubila legitimno funkcijo v družbi, doživljanje religioznosti pa zaznamujeta individualizacija in subjektivizacija institucionalnih religiozних načel. Kljub različnim stališčem znotraj Cerkve o najpomembnejšem romarskem kraju v Hercegovini, v Medjugorju, število romarjev narašča, kar omogoča domnevo o "duhovnem obratu" v sodobni družbi.*

*Romanja v Medjugorje tako motivira spremenjenje, priznanje, žrtev, bogoslužje in drugi izključno verski motivi; pomembne pa so tudi posvetne potrebe, npr. fizično okrevanje, dobro počutje v družini, delo in družba. Medjugorje je presečišče različnih romarskih praks, tako tistih, ki jih navdihuje ustaljeni red in tradicija, kot tistih, za katere je romanje konkretizacija njihovih individualnih potreb, želja in prepričanj, pri čemer jih vodi njegova notranja izkušnja. Milijoni romarjev v Medjugorju kažejo: visoko stopnjo ustvarjalnosti in odprtosti, ki jo ta cerkveni hram vpija in odraža; nenehna medkulturna srečanja in dialog v praksi; potrebo po osebni verski izkušnji in duhovnosti, ki ji je vir individualnost in notranje izkušnje. Te značilnosti Medjugorja postavljajo v središče sodobnih evropskih razvojnih dogodkov v religioznosti: religioznost kot avtonomni pojav, tj. mimo zahtev in predpisov institucionalne vere. Medjugorje je primer, kako se je fizični prostor preoblikoval v sakralizirano mesto, ki ima pomembno vlogo pri identifikacijskih procesih številnih Hrvatov.*

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