

# Shrine Politics and Non-Institutional Religiosity. The Mrtvalj Spring in the Choreography of the Pilgrimage Shrine of St. John the Baptist at Podmilačje (Bosnia and Herzegovina)

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## SHRINE POLITICS AND NON-INSTITUTIONAL RELIGIOSITY

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## The Mrtvalj Spring in the Choreography of the Pilgrimage Shrine of St. John the Baptist at Podmilačje (Bosnia and Herzegovina)

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The Mrtvalj spring is an integral part of a more complex sacred landscape, the center of which is the Shrine of St. John the Baptist located in Podmilačje near Jajce, Bosnia and Herzegovina. The shrine is a multi-confessional pilgrimage destination that is also very popular within the wider region. The Mrtvalj spring is one of the key stops in pilgrimage itineraries, but it is not only a sacred place within pilgrimage practices. In this paper the conceptualization of the Mrtvalj spring's sacredness is examined as a reflection of the relationship between the religious and the political. The author analyzes the relationship between the shrine's politics, which are based on the ideas of a "Bosnian Lourdes" and a shared shrine, and the spring as a focal point for the shared non-institutional practices of believers of various religious affiliations. She aims to show that a shared sacred site does not necessarily have to be controversial, and calls for a revalorization of non-institutional religiosity, which has proved to be a rich phenomenon for the study of interreligious relations.

**Keywords:** sacred spring, interreligious relations, shared shrine, shrine politics, Podmilačje, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Water, as a basic source of life and purity, has made springs focal points of religious practice and worship since the earliest periods in human history and in various religious traditions. According to theology and cultural anthropology, the veneration of springs among believers of the Christian tradition is categorized as part of non-institutional religiosity or folk piety (Grbić 2012: 47, 49–51; Ray 2020: 6–9, 12–15; Šimić 1987: 8; etc.), and the same is true in the Islamic tradition (Duranović 2014: 286, 295). These are religious conceptualizations and practices that have developed from both concrete mundane life and existential needs, and that are particularly heterogeneous, pragmatic, affective, and subjective, but are often also veiled by a theologically grounded symbolic system and narrative. At the same time, when orchestrating rituals at Christian shrines, it is not uncommon for a shrine's officials to accept, adapt, or reinvent the use and veneration of natural phenomena, such as sacred springs and wells, in an effort to strengthen the shrine's power and popularity

(Eade 2020: 1; Ray 2020: 6). This raises questions regarding the politics of shrine management and the ways in which they are affirmed and legitimized.

The focus of this paper is the Mrtvalj spring, an integral part of the sacred landscape of Podmilačje, located in central Bosnia near Jajce. Both the semantic and physical center of this landscape is the Shrine of St. John the Baptist, one of the most well-known pilgrimage sites in southeast Europe. Throughout its history, the Shrine of St. John at Podmilačje has served as a place of numerous healings, both spiritual and physical, and as such is often referred to as the “Bosnian Lourdes,” after the world-famous healing shrine of Lourdes.<sup>1</sup> The Podmilačje shrine has also been shown throughout history to be a crossroads for believers of various religious affiliations, including Roman Catholics, Orthodox Christians, Muslims, and Roma. Today the largest number of visitors to the shrine are Catholic, but there are also local Muslim and Roma visitors. The Mrtvalj spring is one of the most important stops on the itinerary for pilgrims to Podmilačje. However, it also exists as a sacred place outside pilgrimage practices and is a locus for non-institutional religiosity. In this paper, the Mrtvalj spring will be viewed as a focal point for diverse religious practices and also, inevitably, as a metonymic node for the entire sacred landscape of the Shrine of St. John at Podmilačje.

The paper explores how the Mrtvalj spring, as a non-institutional sacred site, corresponds with the broader sacred landscape of Podmilačje, at the center of which is a Catholic shrine shared by believers of different religious traditions. This article considers the agency, power, and impact of believers and the shrine’s officials by examining the relations between different ways in which the Mrtvalj spring’s cultic character is produced. It will also analyze how this place reflects the shrine’s fundamental meanings – the “Bosnian Lourdes” and a shared shrine that underlie its management policy. I approach these questions from the perspective of place-making studies and shared shrines research, so I will therefore focus on aspects of the religious and the political as heuristic devices (cf. Barkan and Barkey 2016b: 2–3). Although my research includes some archival data, the emphasis is on the contemporary imaginations and practices of actors who engage in creating and sustaining the Mrtvalj spring as a sacred place within the sacred landscape of Podmilačje. Such an approach stems from the fact that it is not known when the Mrtvalj spring was “discovered” in the local landscape, and in the reviewed sources, which are mostly recent, there is only sparse and scant information about the spring, and then exclusively as a place for religious practices. The research is therefore focused on contemporary cultural processes, rather than on their historical reconstruction.

Following the concept of “spatializing culture” (Low 2016), I view a sacred place as a product and construct of religious imaginings, symbols, and practices that are supported by a continual process of sacralization, i.e., the interactions of believers with and within the space, whether it is animate or not. Believers’ experiences

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<sup>1</sup> Lourdes (France) is the major international pilgrimage site where the Virgin Mary was said to have appeared in 1858 to the girl Bernadette Soubirous and to have directed her to uncover a curative spring. However, Lourdes’ origins as a shrine emerged from the apparitions experienced by Bernadette.

in terms of affect, embodiment, and discourse emerge from interactions with the space, and they ensure the existence and continuity of a sacred place. The process of sacralization is characterized by the continual negotiation of various and sometimes contested meanings and interests of the groups and individuals taking part in it. Nevertheless, for believers, the site's sacrality draws believers to connect with the place and with each other despite having different religious affiliations and interests (Barkey 2016: 33; Belaj and Martić 2014: 61, 71).

In recent years, sacred places shared by members of different religious affiliations and interreligious relations at shared shrines have attracted particular attention from researchers (e.g., Albera and Coroucli, eds. 2012; Barkan and Barkey, eds. 2016; Belaj and Martić 2014; Bigelow 2010; Bowman, ed. 2012a, 2012b; Cormack, ed. 2013; Darieva et al., eds. 2018; Katić 2014; Lubanska 2015; etc.). Many of these challenging and ethnographically rich studies into religious tolerance, co-existence, syncretism, religious nationalism, antagonisms, and conflicts at shared shrines have often taken one debate (see Bowman 2002 discussing Hayden 2002) as a point of discussion reference, which, as Barkey estimates, may have prevented their even more innovative work (cf. Barkey 2016: 44). This debate is based on “two ideal types” of interpretations of shared shrines (Barkan and Barkey 2016b: 1), and has, in fact, emerged from fundamentally different research perspectives, with different focuses, and different understandings of the notion of identity (Barkey 2016: 44; Belaj and Martić 2014: 60, 75–77; Bowman 2019: 110–119). The diversity of cultural interactions and contextual nuances ethnographically observed at shared shrines repeatedly point to openness and flexibility, and toward numerous and varied possibilities for interpretation. Antagonism or peaceful co-existence do not need to be viewed as axioms or mutually exclusive scenarios. Rather, these are two ends of a continuum of numerous and diverse interactions of believers of different religious affiliations within a place they consider to be sacred.<sup>2</sup> Thus, I understand the sharing of shrines among believers of different religious affiliations as a process that is being continually established and directed. In so doing, as I will try to show, shared shrines encompass not only encounters and interactions of various institutional religious conceptualizations, but also those that are non-institutional and which, moreover, offer meaningfully deeper and more nuanced data for the study of this topic.

This paper is based on ethnographic research from a wider research project that thematizes interfaith relations at the Podmilačje shrine. Research was conducted in 2017 and 2018 in Podmilačje, Jajce, and the surrounding villages. It included interviews and conversations with over thirty interlocutors (priests and employees of the shrine at Podmilačje, residents of Jajce County, and pilgrims to Podmilačje of various religious affiliations), as well as participation in the days-long preparations at the shrine at Podmilačje to celebrate the Feast of St. John the Baptist, the Roma pilgrimage to the Podmilačje shrine for the Feast, and ritual activities at the shrine that day. Empirical research was supplemented with archival research at the Francis-

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<sup>2</sup> Some of the characters of interactions in sites termed “shared shrines” were presented by Bowman (2019: 120–131).

can Monastery at Jajce, available documentation at the Podmilačje shrine, and data from media sources. This article's reflections on the conceptualizations of sacredness and cult practices connected to the Mrtvalj spring stem from more comprehensive research experiences and insights connected to a thematically broader exploration of the Podmilačje shrine. Therefore, in order to understand the position of the Mrtvalj spring in the shrine's politics and religious practices, it is necessary to first discuss the fundamental ideas on which the Podmilačje shrine is built.

## The Shrine of St. John: the "Bosnian Lourdes" and multiconfessionalism

The Shrine of St. John the Baptist at Podmilačje, or the Shrine of St. John as it is also known, is located near the Vrbas River and seven kilometers from Jajce on the highway to Banja Luka. The shrine, along with the Roman Catholic parish of the same name in Podmilačje, is part of the Archdiocese of Vrhbosna. Pastoral care and management of the shrine is entrusted to the Franciscans of the Franciscan Province of Bosna Srebrena. The shrine is regarded as one of the oldest in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It received the largest number of pilgrims in Bosnia and Herzegovina up until 1981, when Međugorje was inscribed in pilgrimage maps. As was the case with Međugorje, the Podmilačje shrine has no recognized institutional status as a shrine. Institutionally, it is considered a pilgrimage site, but tens of thousands of pilgrims who visit it annually, as well as numerous officials of the Catholic church, the media, and publications of various provenances call it, treat it and experience it as a shrine. Furthermore, what distinguishes it from a pilgrimage site is that it is active year-round, as the current parish priest at the shrine, Fr. Filip Karadža, points out: "The shrine is next to the highway, and a large number of people come here every day, night and day" (Stanić and Tolo, eds. 2017).

The beginnings of the shrine date to the middle of the fifteenth century when a small, Gothic-style church was built on the site (Kujundžić 1966: 374; Zirdum 2013: 170). This small church survived Ottoman conquest and rule in Bosnia. A Franciscan, Grgo Kotromanović (1787 – 1864), fashioned a wooden statue of St. John for the church, and to this day believers perceive it as miraculous. Later, the original church was incorporated as a side chapel within a new church during a construction project carried out between 1910 and 1920 (Draganović 1939: 145; Kujundžić 1966: 370), so the church would be able to accommodate a larger number of pilgrims gathering for the Feast of St. John the Baptist from various parts of Bosnia, Croatia, and Sylvania ("Vjesnik" 1910: 132). In 1993, the Serbian Army completely razed the church and the parish house, and the non-Serb population in the area was forced to flee. Although the shrine was completely destroyed, the cult of St. John (focused on the miraculous wooden statue of St. John) continued uninterrupted. The statue was saved during an extremely dangerous undertaking. During the

war it was kept in several places in Bosnia and Croatia. According to local inhabitants and my interlocutors, who at the time were displaced, the statue “in exile,” wherever it was kept for safety and veneration, attracted a large number of believers, especially those from Jajce and its surroundings who had been displaced by the war.

Starting in the fall of 1995, the displaced residents began to return, and the first celebration of the Feast of St. John was held in 1996 at the ruins of the church. As both the shrine’s officials and their predecessors point out (Ćuro, ed. 2016), the local Roma were among the first to become involved in the reconstruction of the shrine because they also saw it as theirs. In 2000, a new church was built on the foundations of the fifteenth-century church and in the same style (Zirdum 2001: 187–188). The miraculous wooden statue of St. John was placed there, and it continued to be a destination for numerous believers and the focal point for the cult. In 2003, the Church of St. John was named a national monument of Bosnia and Herzegovina (“Crkva sv. Ive...” 2003). Construction on a new large and imposing church about one hundred meters from the Church of St. John was begun in 2004.

Even though written traces of pilgrimages to the Shrine of St. John date from as early as the eighteenth century, it is believed that the pilgrimage tradition connected to this shrine is much older (Marić, ed. 2015: 286) due to the fact of the existence of a church from the fifteenth century. The largest number of pilgrims come to the shrine on St. John’s Eve (23 June) and on the day of the Feast of St. John the Baptist (24 June). Historical sources, various publications, current Church representatives, contemporary pilgrims, and local residents point to the shrine’s exceptional appeal, either by referring to the large number of pilgrims who visit it, or by referring to historical facts and events such as the shrine’s age or its resilience during Ottoman rule, or by emphasizing devotion to St. John the Baptist, the continuity of the cult during the last war, and so on. What all of them have in common, however, is that they refer to two core meanings of the shrine: the miraculous power of St. John the Baptist to heal the sick – especially those who are mentally ill – and the shrine’s multiconfessionalism.

The shrine has long been known as an especially popular destination for pilgrims suffering from illnesses, which, as previously mentioned, is why it has been given the epithet the “Bosnian Lourdes” (e.g., cf. H. J. B. 2020).<sup>3</sup> This epithet dates as far back as 1897, due to belief in the shrine’s miraculous power that “many since ancient times have pointed to as an established fact present in the consciousness and practice of Catholics, Orthodox Christians, and Muslims” (Stipić, ed. 2013: 22–24). Over the years, numerous cases of healing have been recorded at the shrine as well as countless gratitudes to St. John for healing. The shrine has also attracted the mentally ill and those “possessed by the devil” (ibid.: 25), for which there are also a number of records. Although the official narrative attributes such characterizations to “naïveté

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<sup>3</sup> In addition to the Podmilačje shrine, there are several other shrines in Bosnia called Bosnian Lourdes. Some of them do not have a spring (like Lourdes) or a well. According to pilgrims and my interlocutors, Međugorje is given this epithet because it is believed to have a strong healing potential due to the presence of the Virgin Mary who allegedly appears in this place or because of the sacredness of its ground as such.

and foolishness,” both priests and believers, at least until recently, nurtured “the belief that at St. John at Podmilačje the devils are being expelled from the possessed through a special prayer ritual (exorcism)” (ibid.: 25–26). Almost all of my interlocutors gave first- or second-hand accounts of scenes of “behavior of the possessed” during masses held at the shrine for the Feast of St. John the Baptist and also prayers for exorcism. The priests who were particularly successful at these rituals stood out as those who had a significant influence on the believers and on attendance at the shrine. Even today they enjoy great respect and are remembered as those who “motivate and inspire” (Fr. Pavao Filipović, sermon at the central pilgrimage mass held at Podmilačje on 24 June 2017). The ritual dedication of the shrine to the sick is also indicated by the program of events during the Feast of St. John the Baptist. The Feast begins with a series of events the evening before, during which the miraculous statue of St. John is carried outside of the church in procession. The central event is the open-air Mass for the Sick (*Bolesnička misa*). On the saint’s day, the central pilgrimage mass ends with a prayer for the sick.

In addition to its dedication to the sick, the shrine has long been described as a meeting place for believers of different religious backgrounds. In the descriptions of the “powerful” Podmilačje shrine, the two characteristics of the shrine – referring to it as the “Bosnian Lourdes” and its multiconfessionality – are often inseparable and interconnected. For example, ethnologist Radmila Fabijanić has identified in photographs of the Feast of St. John the Baptist from 1897 both Catholics and Muslims based on their clothing and head coverings, and also a Muslim undergoing the rite of exorcism in the company of other Muslims. She also identified an Orthodox Christian woman on a stretcher in a photograph from 1903. (cf. 2002: 169, Notes 1 and 2). In 1884, Fr. Antun Knežević wrote that the Podmilačje shrine was held in the highest regard among “the entire Bosnian population, regardless of faith,” and that especially on the Feast of St. John the Baptist, “Turkish men and women [Muslims], Christian men and women gather there in such multitudes, as nowhere else in Bosnia” (see Stipić, ed. 2013: 23). At the very beginning of the twentieth century, a reporter stated that a railway worker had spoken “with a Turk, who had just arrived there from Constantinople and was barefoot out of respect for St. John” (ibid.: 27–28). A report from 1910 stressed the shrine’s widespread popularity and multiconfessionality, and stated that, in those years, pilgrims poured in from all over Bosnia and from “Lika and Syrmia,<sup>4</sup> and from other Croatian lands,” and they were served by twelve Franciscan priests who held masses, heard confessions, and gave communion throughout the night of 23–24 June. (“Vjesnik” 1910: 132). The Catholic believers, “with Muslim men and women, with [Orthodox] Christian men and women, visited the Church of St. John” (ibid.). Similarly, in 1968 Fr. Jarak and Fr. Džaja, both priests at Podmilačje, wrote that approximately ninety priests from around thirty parishes and almost 70,000 pilgrims from all over Bosnia and oth-

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<sup>4</sup> In 1910, the areas of Lika and Syrmia were part of the Triune Kingdom of Croatia, Slavonia, and Dalmatia within the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. Today Lika is in central Croatia, and Syrmia stretches between eastern Croatia and the southwestern part of the Province of Vojvodina in northern Serbia.

er places, “not just Catholics, but also Orthodox Christians, Muslims, and others” came to “this Bosnian shrine” for the Feast of St. John the Baptist. They also added that “countless lines of people” among whom were “a large number of crippled and sick people, and in particular the mentally disturbed, possessed by demons,” and the seriously ill were treated with exorcism prayers (Jarak and Džaja 1969: 23–26). The attendance of believers of different confessions at the St. John’s Day in the same year was also witnessed by the ethnologist Radmila Fabijanić. However, she reported a significantly smaller number of pilgrims, around 15,000 at the shrine (Fabijanić 2002: 170, Note 3).

These are not just historical records of believers of different religious traditions at the Podmilačje shrine as was confirmed for me by the owner of the hotel where I had just set down my suitcase. Without knowing anything besides the fact that I intended to visit nearby Podmilačje, she told me, “We’re also going to Podmilačje tomorrow. Every year, my children come [from Australia], and we go together. St. John is ours,” while showing me how the very thought gave her the goosebumps. The owner of the hotel was Muslim.

When discussing the presence of believers from different religious affiliations at the shrine, Fr. Filip Karadža, the shrine’s priest, said, “Most of those who come here are Catholics, but we also have a lot of Orthodox Christians. We also have Muslims and Roma and atheists and people who are unaffiliated” (Stanić and Tolo, eds. 2017). He explained the shrine’s policy as based on the following, which he himself supports:

This is, then, a Catholic and Christian shrine, primarily. But we are not the sole recipients of God’s mercy, nor does God privilege us just because we are Catholics. God did not reveal himself to any one religion. God revealed himself to man, to humanity. (...) God loves everyone. (...) All people are welcome. We [the shrine’s officials] are merely the unworthy stewards of God’s mysteries. We are not owners. (...) People don’t come to us and say ‘I am...’ We don’t know. Here no one shows an ID card when they come. Nor do we keep a list according to religion. Here we accept all people. We don’t ask anyone who they are. (...) A lot of Orthodox Christians also come, which is natural. They are also brothers in Christ. They are our brothers. As are Muslims. (interview conducted in 2017)

A nun who comes to the shrine daily to help out also spoke similarly about non-Catholic believers. For example, she stated that when cleaning the church, she meets Orthodox believers who are not sure if they are permitted to enter the shrine. She encourages them to do so because “St John accepts everyone!”, and she tells them they should touch the statue and seek the help for which they had come. Many of my interlocutors also spoke of non-Catholic believers at the shrine, explaining their presence as having to do with needs that “don’t ask how many blood cells they have,” an ironic allusion to the political rhetoric state officials use to determine one’s belonging to a particular ethnic or ethnic-religious group. My interlocutors stated that



they encounter numerous believers, especially on the Feast of St. John the Baptist, who are not Catholic, and whom they know personally or at least recognize according to their external features, for example Muslims “by the way they dress” or Roma “by their skin color.” Nowadays Orthodox Christians are not seen so often, according to my interlocutors, “because there aren’t that many of them.” They make up less than two percent of the total population of the Jajce municipality.

However, contacts and encounters with believers of different religious traditions emerge not only in the idea of the power of this shrine but also in numerous and diverse forms. For example, research into Roma, Catholics, and Muslims has shown that they all share the folk tale of the relocation of the Podmilačje church from a Muslim village on the other side of the Vrbas River to the place where it is now,<sup>5</sup> or that they even know of and use a medicinal herb referred to locally as St. John’s Herb (*Teucrium montanum*). Furthermore, during my research, every time I visited the shrine, I would meet a Muslim woman who came there regularly – almost daily – to have coffee with a Catholic friend who worked at the shrine as a cook. Finally, when I participated in the pilgrimage of a group of Roma to the Shrine of St. John, I witnessed the Roma engaging in friendly meetings and socializing with their Catholic friends to whom they were also connected by what are known as *kumstvo* relationships, which refer to witnessing and participating in important life cycle events. There is a number of various examples that point to different forms and various interactions among believers of different religious traditions in and around the Podmilačje shrine.

## From the Mrtvalj spring to the Spring of St. John and back again

The Mrtvalj spring is not only a meeting place for believers, but is the venue where their perceptions, imaginings, beliefs and ritual practices are regularly renegotiated and kept it alive. The Mrtvalj spring will be considered in relationship to the Podmilačje shrine in terms of the physical or built environment, how the space is used, and the meanings it has for those who use it, as well as in terms of the believers’ experiences that emerge from their interactions with it (cf. Low 2016). In considering the process of the material and symbolic creation and re-creation of spring’s space, the politics included in these processes will be given special attention.

## Mrtvalj in the politics of the shrine

Mrtvalj is both a water source and a sacred place where faith is crystallized and revived. Its waters are drained through a canal to the Vrbas River. Apart from being

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<sup>5</sup> The folk tale is recorded in church sources in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (The Schematism of Bosnia Srebrena from 1864; Directory of clergy and parishes in Bosnia and Herzegovina from 1885; Latin writings of the church historian A. Theiner), and it is assumed that it is older (Stipić 2013: 21–22).

a stage for religious interactions, it is also an anchor for memories because it commemorates religious ideas that have taken root there (according to Assmann 2006: 56), perhaps since antiquity or even the Illyrian period (cf. Kajmaković 2002: 174). In any case, the sacredness of the spring perpetuates local religious truths, as will be seen later on in the paper.

The spring was named *Mrtvalj*, which in Croatian means “dead” and which contraindicates the meaning of water as a source of life. According to the local population and the shrine’s officials, the name derived from the fact that grave diggers from a nearby graveyard would “cleanse their hands of the dead” at the spring following their work (interviews conducted in 2017). Numerous archaeological and ethnographic studies of ritual burial practices, also in this region, point to an old and widespread perception of places of burial as spaces that are symbolically “unclean.” Because of this, washing and cleansing the hands of those who have been in any kind of contact with the dead and upon returning from a burial ground is a mandatory practice of ritual burial cleansing (Grbić 1998: 298; Vitez 1998: 189). Within these types of practice, the *Mrtvalj* spring is not simply a natural source of water for grave-diggers’ hygienic needs; it is also a ritual place within local burial rituals.

However, along with *Mrtvalj*, the spring is also referred to as the Spring of St. John in accordance with St. John the Baptist, for whom the Podmilačje shrine is named. Field research has shown that this is the usual name for the spring among the shrine’s officials, the priesthood, and the faithful who are not local, while local believers primarily use the name *Mrtvalj*, even though they are familiar with both. Just as the name *Mrtvalj* was not arbitrary, neither was its renaming as the Spring of St. John. From the perspective of the shrine’s officials and other clergy, this renaming is based on multiple and logical assumptions. From a Christian perspective, St. John’s connection to water and the use of water as a means of purifying (the soul of sins) and renewal is based on Biblical accounts of John’s baptisms in the Jordan River of anyone who approached him (Matthew 3: 5–6), and especially in the image of the baptism of Jesus Christ (Matthew 3: 13–17).

According to Christian interpretation, the act of baptizing Jesus Christ in the waters of the Jordan by John the Baptist made the water sacred and gave it the power to purify sins, to enact conversion, and to reinvigorate Christian life (Rajar, ed. 1996: 210). This meaning of water in Christian interpretation renders it one of the fundamental symbolic elements of the liturgy and ubiquitous within the sacraments and blessings. The perspective of Christian piety strongly relies on such a perspective of Christian doctrine, and holds that St. John the Baptist is, along with many other protective roles attributed to him, a great patron of water sources: in terms of *dulia*, he is the one most often connected with miraculous and healing springs, and he in particular is venerated in this region and elsewhere as a patron of the sick whose waters have miraculous powers for healing and also for safeguarding health (Belaj 2006: 36–38; Fučić 1985: 282). Purifying, healing, renewal, water, and thaumaturgy are some of the key motifs within the entire symbolic inventory of St. John the Baptist that make him more prone to being invoked when renaming springs whose sacred-

ness, from ages past, rests on similar motifs. Furthermore, although these motifs are part of St. John the Baptist's symbolic inventory, they also represent universal human needs, regardless of religious affiliation. The shrine's current parish priest, Fr. Filip Karadža, says of this:

St John is simply a prophet who is in some way a balm for the wounds of those in need. (...) He judged the sin, not the sinner. And he encouraged everyone to be true to themselves in their identity. This is why everyone here at Podmilačje just recognizes John as their own. (H. J. B. 2020)

... his voice as a prophet, shouting out in the desert for us to convert and prepare the way for the Lord – this is everyone's fundamental task (...) All people have a need for this, to change their life for the better, to find meaning (...) St. John is a paradigm for every believer. (Stanić and Tolo, eds. 2017)

Another priest in service to the shrine spoke of St. John the Baptist in a similar way: "Here we have assistance for people. St. John. For believers and non-believers" (interview conducted in 2017).

Additionally, it is important to mention that, as a part of the Christian heritage of St. John the Baptist, Orthodox Christians also venerate him as St. John the Forerunner (the forerunner of Jesus Christ), and he is particularly revered by Muslims as Nabi Yahya (Prophet John). One of my interlocutors related a tragic episode in the life of a Muslim woman who, when her son was killed by a grenade, called on St. John the Baptist for strength and assistance to carry him away from the place where he died. She "swore by Allah [to my interlocutor] that without his help" she would not have been able to carry him away. The presence of St. John the Baptist in different religious traditions and forms of piety validates him as a convenient and accessible saint whose name can gather believers of different religious affiliations to the Podmilačje spring.

The naming of a place, in this case the spring, is of great importance not only for shaping the meaning of a place. It also has power to establish a connection between ideology and landscape. Purifying, healing, and openness to believers of different religious affiliations are motifs that anchor the Spring of St. John to the ideas the shrine's officials present to the Podmilačje pilgrims of it being the "Bosnian Lourdes" and a shared shrine. Renaming the spring in Christian terms is a politically powerful act of its appropriation (cf. Azaryahu in Horsman 2006: 279; Radding and Western 2010: 402) that is "usually imposed on a society by a political, often colonial, authority" (Radding and Western 2010: 402). With this, the importance of toponyms in communities and society are used to confirm legitimacy, political control, and the promotion of ideological goals (Horsman 2006: 279; Radding and Western 2010: 400–402). Renaming the spring in a Christian register does not just appropriate it and tailor it to Christian discourse. It also establishes and legitimizes it as a part of the Podmilačje Shrine of St. John – or, as the shrine's officials often say, "the Valley of St. John" on the Vrbas River, or even "the Bosnian Jordan."

The location of the Mrtvalj spring and its position in relation to the shrine is by no means unimportant. The spring is not even visible from the area of the shrine, and the position of the spring does not even suggest that it is part of the shrine. Furthermore, the shrine and the spring are separated by an old highway running along the Vrbas River. The shrine and the old church, the new church currently under construction, the external altar, the Way of the Cross, and the parish house are all located on the eastern side of the road. On the other side and lower down, a large meadow extends out to the west, and the spring is located at its extreme northwest edge of this field.

The highway appears to be an even more prominent border between the two spaces during the Feast of St. John the Baptist, because the entire official program of the celebration – masses, confession, the Way of the Cross, the veneration of the statue – takes place in the eastern area. On the other hand, the western part, where the spring is located, is covered in tents containing refreshments and is meant to be a place for the believers to relax and socialize – in other words, it is an informal part of the celebration. Moreover, more than ten years earlier, the road was shifted further west into the “informal” area, because it “disrupted the ceremony” (Zrile 2012). This “significantly improved the shrine’s position” (Karamatić 2008/2009: 21), i.e. the shrine was expanded at the expense of the “informal” area.

About a year later, a huge underpass was built between the two areas, and there are plans for it to include a hall for lectures and performances, sanitary facilities, and other facilities meant to serve the needs of the pilgrims. As an enthusiastic, local amateur historian pointed out, the underpass “leads to the spring” (Zrile 2012). Building this underpass thus established direct communication between the “informal” area and the formerly isolated spring. During this time, the shrine’s officials also considered arrangements for the spring itself. A deck was built for access to the spring, the wall was built on three sides and above the source and behind the spring, on the back wall, a mural was painted with a scene from the life of St. John the Baptist – the Bible scene in which he baptizes Jesus Christ in the Jordan River. This highly common artistic depiction of St. John the Baptist (Rebić, ed. 2002: 386) is presented in the local landscape of Podmilačje in the Vrbas River valley, surrounded by mountains. Just as renaming the Mrtvalj spring as the Spring of St. John, both the building around the spring and constructing the underpass “leading to the spring” reflect the efforts of the shrine’s officials to affirm their authority over it and, in a broader sense, their manipulation and control over the Podmilačje landscape.

The actions of the shrine’s officials turn the Mrtvalj spring into a politically and strategically important place. By painting a mural of a Biblical scene and thereby symbolically adapting it to fit into a Christian context, and by creating a physical connection with the spring and renaming it, the spring is then firmly situated in a conception of the sacred landscape of the Podmilačje shrine that is invoked by the shrine’s officials. However, their conceptualization is not without its limitations. The highway remains as a visible border between the “ceremonial” and “informal” spaces. Rerouting the highway so that it will not “disrupt the ceremony,” or in other

words so that the “ceremonial” space will benefit at the expense of the “informal” one where the Mrtvalj spring is, establishes a clear hierarchy of the topoi within this sacred landscape.

### Mrtvalj in religious practices

[S]ome writers have given the shrine the epithet the “Bosnian Lourdes.” And many people like to take water from this place. In fact, the Spring of St. John is located near the shrine and has healing and miraculous water. We have this miraculous water source where there is now a beautiful fresco, and people take water from this spring. Through the intercession of St. John, many experience physical and spiritual health after drinking the water and washing with it. Of course, we Franciscans always purify the spiritual conception of these events and make sure people avoid any sort of magical element. (...) [N]o folk tradition can be excluded, for example, (...) washing on the morning of St. John’s. There is a lot of the traditional and the mythical here that, of course, gained a completely new flavor, a spiritualized and Christianized tradition, through Christianity and an act of evangelizing. (H. J. B. 2020)

This statement by Fr. Karadža, the current parish priest of the Podmilačje shrine, directly connects the Mrtvalj spring and its “healing and miraculous water” – or, in his discourse, the Spring of St. John – with the idea of the “Bosnian Lourdes,” while also emphasizing the efforts of the shrine’s officials to re-semanticize what, for them, are the problematic “traditional and mythical” practices this “miraculous” spring elicits from believers. A spring at the center of hydrolatry can indeed pose a problem from the perspective of Christian doctrine because, as Cusack and Wilson vividly explain, springs cannot be cut down like a sacred grove or destroyed like a sacred pillar monument (2016: 69). It appears that, over time, efforts by the Podmilačje shrine’s officials to manage ritual practices at the Mrtvalj spring have borne at least some fruit because, as ethnologist Radmila Kajmaković puts it, washing at this spring is a reduction of a former bathing ritual once performed there (2002: 173). Unfortunately, the author does not offer any further information about this change in ritual.

Despite the stated intentions of the shrine’s officials, the ritual practices that developed from interactions with the Mrtvalj spring are unconventional, informal, and particularly heterogeneous. Movement to and around the spring is accompanied by informal and varied ritual practices: immersing hands in the waters of the spring, washing one’s face with it, washing feet after a barefoot pilgrimage, touching parts of the body with hands that have been dipped in the spring, or sometimes uttering an accompanying free-form prayer of gratitude out loud that may or may not include St. John the Baptist. These flexible popular devotions may also include various praying gestures such as putting palms together, covering the face with one’s hands, making the sign of the cross, crossing one’s arms over one’s chest, partially extending one’s hands out with palms facing upward, leaving gifts, or simply standing in contemplation.

Additionally, many believers fill bottles or canisters with water. Some drink the water immediately, and others take it with them when they leave. It is however not uncommon for the same believers, after approaching Mrtvalj with religious motivations, to later return to the spring several times during the celebration of the Feast of St. John the Baptist and refill their bottles to quench their thirst during a hot June day, as was the case in 2018. It is also not unusual to see crates of beer or other drinks left to cool in the canal leading from the spring to the Vrbas River just a few meters away. Additionally, water from the spring is used when pickling cabbage because, “in terms of its composition, there is no better water for pickled cabbage!” (interview conducted with one of the shrine’s officials, 2017).

For some of the believers, the sacredness of the spring extends to all water at the Podmilačje shrine. In 2018, I accompanied a group of Roma on a pilgrimage to the Podmilačje shrine from their settlement (Skela–Kuprešani), located a few kilometers away. In their faith, as they point out, they are anchored in the Roma folk tradition. However, they regularly make pilgrimages to the Catholic shrine at Podmilačje, and their children attend Islamic religious classes. For example, a young Roma woman, twenty-four years old, arrived at the shrine and conducted rituals in the same way as a number of other believers. This involved walking around the church three times, entering the church, dipping her fingers in the holy water font and making the sign of the cross on her forehead, leaving an offering at the altar, and then walking around it. Afterward, she went to the faucets near the church to wash her feet after her barefoot pilgrimage. As she walked to the faucet, she worried that someone would object to her wanting to wash her feet, and because she had not brought a bottle with her to bring water home to help with ailments. She asked a Catholic woman there, who had filled her own bottle with water from the tap, if she would mind if she washed her feet. The woman moved out of the way of the faucet, smiling and saying that there was no reason why she would. She had not gone to the Mrtvalj spring to wash her feet because there “it is all sacred water, everything around the shrine is sacred,” but sometime later she gave a more pragmatic reason: her feet were aching horribly from the barefoot pilgrimage and she wanted to put some shoes on as soon as possible.

During this time, her mother-in-law, also a Roma, went to Mrtvalj to fill a bottle with water from the spring to take home because she believed the water was healing: “When something hurts... my body, my hands... I wash them with this water, and I drink of it.” Along with help for all illnesses and general well-being, some believers point to the Mrtvalj water’s particular power to heal sicknesses of the eyes. This kind of cure was pointed out by the Muslim woman mentioned earlier who regularly came to the shrine to have coffee with her Catholic friend who was a cook at the shrine:

It’s best for rinsing your eyes in the morning. And my daughter-in-law [also Muslim], she doesn’t see well. (...) And my son [a Muslim] came here [to the spring] and brought back five liters of water. And she rinsed with it. And she said she’s better. (...) This is good water, and there’s no one who doesn’t go to the water. There’s no place from which people don’t come to go to the water. Everyone carries this water away. A car will stop here [to take some water] ... (interview conducted in 2017)

Finally, another interlocutor spoke about Mrtvalj's importance in Muslim piety. She was a saleswoman at a market in Jajce and a Catholic, and as a resident of Podmilačje, she was often asked by her Muslim customers to bring them water from the spring.

Ritual practices and beliefs connected to the spring seem to grow from it organically (cf. Ray 2020: 6). From a religious perspective, in the interactions between believers and the Mrtvalj spring, these beliefs and practices are grounded in immanent (sacred) meanings of the spring associated with regeneration, purity, and healing. If believers even mention John the Baptist in their prayers, it is to call on him to assist them in accessing the miraculous powers of the spring. Otherwise, they would not go to the spring when there is a church nearby with a powerful and miraculous sacred statue.

The changes to the built landscape (building an imposing underpass leading to the spring and decorating the spring with a visual display of St. John the Baptist) indicate the authority of the shrine's officials and their attempts to re-semanticize the spring and consolidate the religious ideas inscribed in it. Believers, however, demonstrate power and resistance with what are, for them, effective ritual practices that commemorate the ancient religious ideas and experiences anchored in this sacred place. Their religious experiences are their power, and these experiences confirm and legitimize rights to and ownership of the spring. The existence of the spring as a sacred place, at least for now, remains within the authority of believers. But the spring's existence does not occur only within the religious sphere. Some of the data presented here shows the openness of the spring for various non-religious needs that include it. These non-religious practices, which exist alongside religious ones, point to a very permeable and, indeed, blurred boundary between the sacred and the profane – a boundary that is often uncritically constructed in academic studies. This has been pointed out repeatedly in empirical research (e.g., Belaj 2012: 38–40; Dubisch 1995: 95; Reader and Swanson 1997: 228).

Like many springs, the Mrtvalj spring is the focal point of non-institutionalized worship not only for Catholics but also for believers of other religious affiliations. Just as it is in non-institutional Catholic piety, at least in this part of Bosnia it is, as Bringa and Henig point out, “the veneration of multiple sacred sites, including (...) water springs (...) is closely associated with Muslims' personal notions of well-being,” (2017: 84). According to Duranović, a historian of Islam in Bosnia, water sources and other locations in nature are places of prayer for Bosnian Muslims that have been embedded into their own piety as part of a pre-Islamic tradition. In the process of Islamization, they are grounded on narratives about God's prophets in the Qur'an (Duranović 2014: 286, 293). Like my interlocutors, Duranović emphasizes that, for Bosnian Muslims, the Mrtvalj spring is a beloved healing and miraculous place with a particular curative attribute – the treatment of diseases of the eyes (ibid.: 295).

The research presented here also demonstrates that, in the worship of Mrtvalj spring, even the local Roma population is not an exception. Marushiakova and Popov write that, just like others, Roma everywhere (despite stereotypes present even within the academic community) are influenced by the surrounding culture and are

“an integral part of the societies in which they live and with whom they share their common general cultural characteristics, e.g., religion(s), holidays, customs, rituals...” (Marushiakova and Popov 2016: 46). As is the case with Roma communities elsewhere (ibid.: 41, 46, 58), research conducted at Podmilačje shows that the Roma’s religious practices at the Mrtvalj spring cannot be perceived as something specific or exclusive to their culture.

Whether they are Roman Catholics, Muslims, or Roma, believers share a faith in the spring’s immanent miraculous and healing properties. Moreover, as already noted, they all have in common the non-institutional quality of a religiosity that is shaped by their interactions with the spring. This shared, informal, and unconventional religiosity, shaped by a bio-cultural setting (Ray 2020: 23) and its content, clearly indicate shared values and engagement with it, which are difficult to fit into “current academia, media and popular obsession with ‘difference’” (ibid.: 19), and are even more difficult when considering division and violence. The informal and unconventional nature of non-institutional religiosity makes it a democratic, creative, and dynamic space for religious practices, and which is open to diversity and difference. After all, this is about a religious interpretive system not necessarily shaped by religious experts and theologians, but rather anchored primarily in the shared existential and mundane life needs of the broader community (see more in Badone, ed. 1990; Belaj 2006; Christian 1989; Orsi 2007; Schielke and Debevec, eds. 2012; etc.). The Mrtvalj spring as a space for non-institutional piety does not require the abandonment of one’s religious identity, nor does it establish a hierarchy among these identities. It does not facilitate religious conflicts and antagonisms and is thus another example that eludes such (academic and popular) discourses – they are not at all part of the narrative associated with this sacred place. Thus, at least when it comes to this sacred place, the non-institutional religiosity of the believers who visit it cannot be strictly linked to any one religious tradition. Rather, this piety should be viewed as a shared part of the overall cultural inventory of the region’s multi-confessional population.

Re-semantizing the spring only externally, it seems, is sufficient for the shrine’s officials to fit the Mrtvalj spring into the landscape of the Podmilačje Shrine of St. John the Baptist. This superficial adaptation aims to legitimize the power of the sanctuary’s officials, and of the Church in general, over this sacred place, while also not censuring non-institutional religious practices, is a tactic that supports the development, expansion, and popularity of the shrine. Ultimately, such tactics were clearly articulated in 2018 when the Archbishop of Vrhbosna, Cardinal Vinko Puljić, concluded the central mass celebrating the Feast of St. John the Baptist by inviting the crowd of pilgrims to refresh themselves at the “miraculous Spring of St. John.” Belief in the miraculous and curative powers of the spring, and the shared religious practices of the multi-confessional multitude at this sacred place, proved to be favorable qualities that enable the shrine’s officials to embed this place into the ideas of the “Bosnian Lourdes” and the “shared shrine” of St. John the Baptist at Podmilačje, and consequentially enable the shrine’s expansion, both spatially and religiously.



## Conclusion

It is apparent that the Mrtvalj spring is a politically and strategically important place within the entire religious landscape of Podmilačje, which is centered around the Shrine of St. John the Baptist. Rather than letting Mrtvalj, a focal point for non-institutional religiosity, become a burdensome and discarded place for the shrine's officials, they have instead embraced it as one of the generators of the shrine's development. By embedding Christian symbols within a space for non-institutional cult practices, the shrine's officials have demonstrated their efforts to inscribe their authority over it by pursuing a policy to increase the shrine's popularity and strengthen its power. Despite external re-semanticization, the authority and ownership of the spring remains with believers who have continued non-institutional practices unhindered. For them, these practices are grounded in the spring's immanent miraculous and curative powers, which are deeply rooted in the memories associated with this place. As a place of purifying and healing within the non-institutional religious practices shared by believers of different religious affiliations, the spring has easily been integrated into the politics of the Shrine of St. John at Podmilačje based on the concepts of the "Bosnian Lourdes" and a shared shrine.

Religious practices, as an analytical basis for this study, point to the need to revalorize the phenomenon of non-institutional piety. It offers much more than the usual research focus on issues concerning the origin of its particular segments or determining believers' orthodoxy or heresy according to the dogmas of the institutionalized religions to which the believers belong. Non-institutional religiosity is a living and lively cultural realm that reflects not only religious or religio-historical dynamics, but also social, political, and broader cultural dynamics. The example of the Podmilačje shrine demonstrates that non-institutional religiosity is a fruitful area of study for considering power relations, authority, how a sacred place is negotiated, and interreligious relations.

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## Politike svetišta i izvaninstitucionalna religioznost. Izvor Mrtvalj u koreografiji hodočasničkog svetišta sv. Ivana Krstitelja u Podmilačju (Bosna i Hercegovina)

Izvor Mrtvalj je konstitutivni dio kompleksnijeg svetog krajolika u čijem je središtu svetište sv. Ivana Krstitelja u Podmilačju kraj Jajca (Bosna i Hercegovina), multikonfesionalna i u široj regiji izrazito popularna hodočasnička destinacija. Izvor Mrtvalj je jedna od ključnih točaka u hodočasničkim itinererima, no on također egzistira kao sveto mjesto izvan hodočasničkih praksi. Rad propituje konceptualizacije svetosti izvora Mrtvalj kao refleksiju odnosa između religijskog i političkog. Promatra se odnos politika svetišta, naslonjenih na

ideje o "bosanskom Lourdesu" i dijeljenom svetištu, i izvora kao žarišta dijeljenih izvaninstitucionalnih praksi vjernika različitih religijskih pripadnosti. Osim što rad pokazuje kako dijeljeno sveto mjesto ne mora nužno biti kontroverzno, on poziva na revalorizaciju pojma izvaninstitucionalna pobožnost koja se pokazuje kao izrazito podatan fenomen za istraživanje interreligijskih odnosa.

**Ključne riječi:** sveti izvor, interreligijski odnosi, dijeljeno svetište, politike svetišta, Podmilačje, Bosna i Hercegovina