“Fuzzy Rights and Heritage Sites: The Case of the Haci Bektaş Veli Complex”

In 2012, Turkey’s Ministry of Culture and Tourism began the process of nominating the Haci Bektaş-ı Veli Complex, the most sacred and significant site of worship for Alevis, to the UNESCO World Heritage List. Turkey has long tried to assimilate Alevis, a sizeable, historically rural Muslim minority, in an effort to shape a homogenous, ethnically Turkish and Sunni Muslim citizenry. The state casts Haci Bektaş, a medieval Sufi mystic and patron saint of the Alevis, as a Turkish humanist, who propounded a philosophy based on tolerance and human love in line with modern, universal human rights doctrine. At the same time, Turkey has come under criticism from the European Union and the wider international community for violating the human rights of Alevis, and other minority groups, within its borders. The Haci Bektaş-ı Veli heritage site, today run as a state museum, sits awkwardly at the intersection of human rights celebration and violation. This paper, in turn, takes up the case of the Haci Bektaş-ı Veli Complex to consider the ethics of World Heritage nomination in conflictual contexts and to trace the role of heritage in the interplay of social inclusion and exclusion in Turkey and beyond.

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