

Editorial

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Dear Readers,

During the past 20 years, religious practices and spirituality in mountain contexts have increasingly attracted the attention of both political actors and academics. Thus the Mountain Agenda at the UNCED Conference in Rio de Janeiro 1992 stressed the “sacredness of mountains” and the importance of taking this into account in development processes: “Mountains have entered the inner core of society since the dawn of human awareness. All the major and minor religions render mountains spiritually significant, and despite the spread of modern skepticism, these emotional, religious, or spiritual forces prevail throughout much of the world. For development agencies to ignore them is not only to court failure and exasperation, but also to risk the loss of a vital part of our world heritage.”

How should we interpret this statement today? Should we pay closer attention to the diversity of mountain religions and to the lack of sacredness in some places and periods? And which alternatives can we offer in evidence and reflection? These are some of the questions raised by the Research section in the present issue of MRD. Most of the articles in this section were discussed at the Round Table on “Mountain Peoples and Societies: Nature and Culture” at the 20th International Congress for the Historical Sciences in Sydney 2005. Of these contributions, 2 concern different parts of the Andes and the Himalaya. The other 3 relate to Europe, where, perhaps typically, research on mountain sacredness is still in its beginnings compared to the large body of existing studies in other fields.

Reading these articles, one gets the impression that we should, indeed, take religious diversity in mountains more seriously than we used to. It is a genuine expression of cultural difference. We also find important changes occurring over time in a single culture—there seems to be no timeless sacredness. Cultural processes revolve around relationships of assimilation and distinction between social groups. They are, for that reason, difficult to predict. It is important, nevertheless, to remember that they are man-made. It is men who speak more often to mountains, than mountains to men. This does not make mountains any the less important. In many, context-specific ways, we can use their human history and cultural significance for purposes of environmental education—as underlined by Edwin Bernbaum in the introductory article to this issue.

The other articles in the Development section provide interesting examples of how the role of spirituality and religion as social and political forces can be taken into account by development cooperation. Of course, these important components of socio-cultural reality do not always guarantee a positive form of development: religion and spirituality can also be risk factors when they are instrumentalized to serve autocratic political interests and undermine tolerance, thus leading to conflict. The articles in this issue, however, dwell on the positive impact of deep-rooted spirituality and religious organizations on development processes, with reference to community cohesion and forgiveness, endogenous development, and environmental education, citing examples from Colombia, Madagascar, Guatemala, and Pakistan. We welcome comments from our readers on this truly special issue of MRD, which deals with a challenging topic and introduces history as a field of research rarely covered by the journal to date.

Jon Mathieu, guest editor (University of Lucerne, Switzerland)

Chetan Singh, guest editor (Himachal Pradesh University, Shimla, India)

Hans Hurni, Editor-in-Chief