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Crossing Religious Boundaries in Istanbul at  
the Turn of the Twenty-First Century

MÉROPI ANASTASSIADOU-DUMONT

*INALCO/CERMOM, Paris, France*

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# Sacred Spaces in a Holy City. Crossing Religious Boundaries in Istanbul at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century

MÉROPI ANASTASSIADOU-DUMONT

*INALCO/CERMOM*

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**ABSTRACT** The article examines Muslim pilgrimages to Christian places of worship in Istanbul after the 1950s. It aims to answer whether and how the Ottoman heritage of cultural diversity fits or does not fit with the pattern of the nation-state. After a brief bibliographic overview of the issue of shared sacred spaces, the presentation assembles, as a first step, some of the key elements of Istanbul's multi-secular links with religious practices: the sanctity of the city both for Christianity and Islam; the long tradition of pilgrimages and their importance for the local economy; meanings and etymologies of the word pilgrimage in the most common languages of the Ottoman space; and the silence of the nineteenth century's Greek sources concerning the sharing of worship. The second part focuses more specifically on some Orthodox Greek sacred spaces in Istanbul increasingly frequented by Muslims during the last decades.

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**KEY WORDS** Istanbul; Turkey; Greek-Orthodox; Christians; Muslims; pilgrimages; sacred places; sharing; holy city; relics; Hiderellez; St. George; calendars; *ayazma*; sacred springs

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## Introduction

Throughout time, and especially during the Ottoman era, contacts and exchanges, interactions, hybrid identities, but also different kinds of syncretism were, together with cleavages, permanent features of urban and rural societies in the Eastern Mediterranean region. In contrast to the nation states formed from the nineteenth century onwards, the imperial pattern demonstrates immaterial boundaries more than physical ones. For a large part of the empire's population, the latter remained invisible and distant.

Mental frontiers represented the backbone of rural and urban Ottoman societies. They offered shapes and forms for the diversity of people and cultures hosted for centuries throughout the Mediterranean East. Their role was not only to trace limits but also to generate transgressions and potential interbreeding and hybridity.

Sharing sacred spaces, using others' places of worship, was recurring, usual, and natural in Ottoman times. It did not necessarily mean that one's original religious identity was denied or abandoned. A Christian could pray before a Muslim tomb without converting to Islam.

## State of the Art and Work Hypothesis

This phenomenon of “sharing” religious practices and rituals has already been widely studied, particularly regarding the space (Mediterranean) and the periods (fifteenth to twenty-first centuries) that interest us here. The British archaeologist Frederick William Hasluck (1878–1920) is one of the first to have considered the question in these terms. After his death in 1929, his wife, Margaret Hardie-Hasluck, published his manuscript in two volumes (877 pages).<sup>1</sup> Since then, this monumental work represented a kind of “Bible” for all those who later sought to explore the same theme. *Christianity and Islam under the Sultans* is the work of a lifetime, the result of numerous study tours through Anatolia and the Balkans, carried out between 1904 (Hasluck was then 26 years old) and 1916, a period during which the author was appointed at the British School at Athens. However, it should be noted that Hasluck was not specifically interested in the theme of sharing sacred places! His book focuses on the same question that most of the specialists of the Ottoman Mediterranean, in all disciplines, have studied, namely interactions between Christianity and Islam, exchanges (or the lack thereof) between Christians and Muslims, living together (or not) in this part of the world.

Several decades after the publication of Hasluck's book, the theme of “shared sacred places” would be treated mostly by social anthropologists, but also sociologists and historians—French, British and American. It is undoubtedly significant that in the Eastern Mediterranean countries which formed after the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the production on this subject remained limited and generally adopted a descriptive tone without suggesting any analysis whatsoever.<sup>2</sup>

Over the last twenty years, the works of social anthropologist Dionigi Albera have certainly marked this field of research. Albera has written several articles on the notion of religious sharing before co-directing, with Maria Couroucli, a collective volume of synthesis entitled *Sharing Sacred Spaces in the Mediterranean. Christians, Muslims and Jews at Shrines and Sanctuaries* (Albera and Couroucli 2012). Including a dozen

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1 Hasluck 1929.

2 In this respect, we could mention the book of Efstratios Zengin (1988), which provides valuable information about spaces of worship in Greek Thrace. The readers will have to make the relevant conclusions.

articles, this book covers a geographical area that expands from Morocco to Syria via Egypt, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, and Albania, without forgetting Istanbul. From a strictly spatial point of view, it follows in the footsteps of Hasluck. With the anthropologist Manoël Pénicaut, Dionigi Albera co-edited one more book on the same theme to accompany the exhibition “Shared Places”, organized in the Museum of the History of Immigration in Paris from October 2017 to January 2018 (Albera and Pénicaut 2017).

Another significant contribution to the subject is the collective work directed by anthropologist Glenn Bowman, entitled *Sharing the Sacra: The Politics and Pragmatics of Intercommunal Relations around Holy Places* (Bowman 2012). Here too, as with Hasluck, the central question is how culturally different people can live together and in peace. The sharing of sacred places is only a compass, a sort of common thread. Unlike Albera, who remains Mediterranean-centered in his analysis, Bowman looks for a global answer. The case studies included in the book focus on China, India and Nepal, Vietnam, but also Turkey.

A global and comparative approach is also a major characteristic of the volume published in 2017 under the direction of Thierry Zarcone and Angela Hobart (Hobart and Zarcone 2017). This book is also not limited to the Mediterranean area, but studies cases from the Indo-Persian world, China, and Amazonian countries. Articles on Switzerland and Brittany figure together in the same section with a study on the relationship between Islam and Buddhism. Zarcone and Hobart’s work aims to answer the question of shared beliefs; shared spaces represent a secondary issue, and this is its main difference from the books mentioned above. The collection contains an article by Dionigi Albera claiming the legacy of Hasluck.

The authors of another collective work, edited by Elazar Barkan and Karen Barkey, focus on the notion of “coexistence” in shared sacred places but also study the factors that contribute to interrupting or cancelling sharing. More than the sites themselves, they seek to highlight the socio-political context in which the sharing of places is achieved.

At least two remarks emerge from this brief bibliographic overview. First, recent research on shared sacred places is mostly collective. The need for comparison imposes this mode of operation. Secondly, this research is pluridisciplinary, and even interdisciplinary. Indeed, alongside anthropologists, who are undoubtedly the most numerous, we note the presence of philosophers, sociologists, and historians in this field.

The question this short article aims to answer is a little different from those raised in the aforementioned works. Here, the ambition is to understand how and to what extent the practices of sharing and transgressing cultural boundaries have

survived within nation-states. What happens to the heritage of cultural diversity once transferred to “homogeneous” nations?

From 1923 onwards, when the republic of Turkey is officially proclaimed with Ankara as its capital, a new chapter starts for the city of Constantine, which is no longer the center of political power. An increasingly Turkish and Muslim population replaces the former multi-cultural human landscape. Its Christian (Greek, Armenian, Catholic, Protestant...) and Jewish components gradually disappear—they either melt away through assimilation or simply physically disappear—and become more and more invisible after the Second World War. However, in contrast to the human landscape, the architectural religious heritage—Muslim and non-Muslim—remains *in situ* and continues to be used during the entire twentieth century.

What forms did sharing sacred spaces take within the new Kemalist and secular Turkey? How did the authorities deal with practices inherited from a rejected world?

To understand the transition from the imperial model to the national one, as far as the sharing of sacred spaces is concerned, post-Ottoman and mostly Muslim Istanbul is probably the most relevant case to focus on. It will serve as a field of inquiry. The singularity of the former Ottoman capital is that, during this “republican” era, an increasing number of Christian places of worship was used by Muslim pilgrims. This phenomenon has not been systematically studied. My contribution provides some indications but remains insufficient for a global and exhaustive overview.

As in many major Ottoman cities, the “cohabitation of religions” has always been a dominant attribute of the sultan’s former capital. Plurality of historical strata and different layers of use of space are also among Istanbul’s basic characteristics. More than two thousand years of history have produced a multitude of religious sites, dedicated to various uses depending on the period. In addition, Constantinople / Istanbul, the capital of two empires, is considered a “holy city” in both Christianity and Islam.

Throughout the following pages, the link between the weight of history and the twentieth/twenty-first centuries’ realities is strongly underlined. Turkey certainly entered a secular phase from 1923 onwards. However, this Kemalist secularism, inspired by the French model, is hostile to clergymen rather than to religion (Berkes 1964; Landau 1984, 126). People continue to perform their religious observances; the feast of Ramadan is celebrated every year; *iftar* meals are regularly offered at the presidential residency (Şahin 2011). Despite the dramatic changes due to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the istanbuliot society of the inter-war period seems to live an illusion of suspended time. The heritage of the “cohabitation of religions” is deeply rooted in the collective memories. However, after the 1940s, the Christian and Jewish

presence in the city unceasingly diminishes.<sup>3</sup> Many Jews leave for Israel, created in 1948. Greeks feel pushed to migrate massively after the events of September 1955.<sup>4</sup> In 1964, in an extremely tense atmosphere between Athens and Ankara due to the Cyprus question, 10,000 Greeks, all of them Hellenic citizens, are expelled (Akar and Demir 1994; Anastassiadou and Dumont 2011; Akgönül 2004). They are, at least, followed by the members of their families. A total of nearly 50,000 people disappear in a very short period. Step by step, twentieth-century Istanbul is emptied of its non-Muslim inhabitants, and it becomes less and less possible to consider it as a “multi-religious” city. Undoubtedly, cultural diversity still remains a major characteristic of the local society: instead of Greeks, Armenians, and Jews, newcomers of various other origins settle in large numbers from the 1980s onwards. Most of them are Kurds or Alevis from Eastern Turkey. There are also immigrants from Asia (Caucasus, the former Soviet Union, Central and Southeast Asia), Africa, and, more recently, from the Arab World. Although certainly “multi-cultural”, the present composition consists mostly of Muslims.<sup>5</sup>

As a consequence of these intense migrations, at the beginning of the twenty-first century Christian places of worship are vacant and many of them remain closed and silent. Is the question of shared sacred spaces still an issue to discuss? What is there to be shared with ghosts?

On the basis of these few introductory remarks, the study presented on the following pages is structured into two parts. The first one aims to recall some “useful” elements of the historical background. These are necessary for a better understanding of current modes of behavior, which are linked to the “others” religion and gained visibility after the 1920s. The second part re-visits some major sacred “shared” spaces which have become increasingly popular during the last decades. A cross-sectional question is whether or not shared practices provoke transgressions of (or the temptation to transgress) religious boundaries—in other words, conversion.

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3 The bibliography on non-Muslim minorities in post-1923 Turkey is extremely rich and continuously updated. Among many other references, see Akgönül 2005; Akgönül 2010; Akgönül 2013; Alexandris 1983; Anastassiadou and Dumont 2011; Bali 2001; Bali 2005; Bali 2012; Bayır 2013; Bruneau 2015; Çetinoğlu 2009; Doğan 2016; Théodorides 2016.

4 About the events of September 1955, see Vryonis 2005; Güven 2005; Anastassiadou 2009b.

5 Migration to Istanbul at the end of the twentieth century is a distinct and large research field. Some bibliographical indications include Dumont-Pérouse-Tapia-Akgönül 2002; Bazin and Tapia 2012; İçduygu 2003; İçduygu and Kirişçi 2009; Tapia 2006.

## A Complex Historical Background

### A Holy City of Christianity and Islam

The holy character of the city of Constantine for both Christianity and Islam is a first element to underline. In both cases, this sacredness has been almost entirely produced by political power. In his article “Constantinople, a Christian Holy City” (1996), Cyril Mango describes this process, which aims to confirm and consolidate the power of the Roman emperors of the East with substantial religious weight (Mango 1996, 7-11; Ousterhout 2006).

In a world in which political power is systematically deified, it is crucial that the capital city is endowed with all required legitimacy in this respect. The advent of Constantinople as a holy city of Christianity clearly serves this political objective. At the beginning of its Christian era, the city (also called New Rome or New Jerusalem) looks like a replica, a *bis*, of Christianity’s main, founding sacred spaces. During the long Byzantine era, it will become emancipated and develop its own geography of *loca sancta* (Flusin 2000, 51-70). When they settle in the fifteenth century, the Ottomans do exactly as their predecessors did and make their capital one of the holy places of Islam. In the Muslim world, Istanbul, and especially the Eyüp district, is considered a holy site, together with Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem.

Various means have been used to underline this status. The systematic collection of relics certainly deserves special mention. Holy Relics—such as the Holy Lance, the Sponge and the True Cross, the Virgin’s Robe, the bodies of Saints Andrew and Luc, the head of Saint-John the Baptist, but also the body of Joseph and the right hand of Saint Stephen—were of immense value to Christians and have crucially contributed to the fame of Constantinople throughout Christianity.<sup>6</sup> Many of them, notably the most significant ones, were acquired personally by the emperors, who used them as major symbols of their authority. Having arrived in Constantinople in 473 CE, the “Veil of Mary,” for example, regularly served as banner and amulet during military campaigns (Vyzantios 1851-1869, 1587). When the Crusaders took the city in 1204, the relics represented the main spoils of war. Since then, most of them have been kept in various European cities, mainly in Italy (Venice, Florence, Torino...) and France, but also in monasteries of Mount Athos.

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6 In his monumental work, entitled “Konstantinoupolis”, Skarlatos Vyzantios provides, in three volumes, an exceptionally rich survey of Istanbul’s major landmarks of his time (mid-nineteenth century) with systematic references as far back as the very founding of the city. An extremely precious tool for a diachronic perspective on the spot: Vyzantios 1851-1869.

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, the Church of Constantinople, which experienced the fall of not only Byzantium but also the entire Ottoman era, is trying to restore continuity by reconstituting, at least symbolically, a part of this distant inheritance. In this context, the relics of Gregory the Theologian and John Chrysostom, who, together with Basil the Great, are known as the “three Hierarchs” and considered among the most intellectual figures of the early Church, were solemnly returned to the Ecumenical Patriarchate in 2004 on the initiative of Pope John Paul II. Their holy remains are preserved in the patriarchal church of St. George (in the district of Fener) next to those of three sanctified women. Two of the latter—namely St. Euphemia the Great Martyr (fourth century) and St. Theophano the Empress (ninth century)—are closely related to the history of the city. The origin of the third set of relics is less certain. Although attributed to Solomoni, mother of the Maccabees, it is also said to belong to Mary Salome, one of the myrrh-bearing women. The patriarchal church also hosts a portion of the column to which Jesus Christ is said to have been bound and whipped before his crucifixion (column of Christ’s Flagellation) (Chryssavgis 2014).

The Ottomans, for their part, strictly implemented the same strategy of constituting a high-level reliquary heritage. The “sacred relics of Islam” (*kutsal emanetler*), kept today at the Topkapı Palace, were collected by the Ottoman sultans between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries (Davis 1970; Aydın 2004). Among them, objects that belonged to the Prophet as well as remains of his body (hair, tooth...) are the most valuable ones. Just like in the Byzantine case, they mainly conveyed the legitimacy of the political power. Muhammad’s mantle (*hırka-i şerif*) was an extremely significant trophy for Selim I after his victory over the Mamluks in 1517. It represented the transfer of the spiritual center of gravity within the Muslim world from the Arabs to the Ottomans. And just like the Byzantines, the Ottomans used “holy items” as talismans in a military context. Thus, as the Virgin’s veil had previously done, Muhammad’s banner played a crucial role when the imperial army was on campaigns, such as those against the Habsburgs at the end of the sixteenth century.

From its very beginning, the Eyüp mosque, located at the base of the Golden Horn, had an identical function, namely to legitimate the Ottoman and Muslim presence and authority in the city. Abu Ayyub al-Ansari, one of the Prophet’s companions, is said to have been killed here, during the first siege of Constantinople in 674. His tomb was “discovered” in 1453 and Mehmed II laid the founding stone of the first mosque, dedicated to al-Ansari. Nowadays, the place is still extremely popular; thousands of people come here to pray, especially during the Ramadan period.

## *Itineris Sacrae* and Pilgrimages: A Major Economic Product

A second element to be considered as helpful for comprehension is the practice of pilgrimage (or the so called *itineris sacrae*), which goes back at least to the fourth century in Istanbul. Generally placed under the supervision of the authorities or the communities' organizing bodies, since the very beginning of the Christian era pilgrimages have been strictly controlled activities. They represent a considerable market and, therefore, a valuable economic product. For example, the church of Blachernae and its miraculous source are known to have been the most visited pilgrimage place throughout the whole Empire until the fall of Constantinople in 1453 (Schlumberger 1884; Mango 1998; Papadopoulos 1920). The church was also very famous for its pannychides (παννυχίδες), vigils organized regularly in honor of the Virgin. However, Blachernae is quite exceptional: even in the Byzantine era, similar pilgrimages, well supported and highly visible, are very few in number.

Instead, the city was—and still is—a huge park of all sorts of sacred mini-topoi, such as neighbourhood churches and mosques, convents (*tekke*), chapels, and sacred sources. The main and regular visitors of these places are generally people from the neighbourhood or inhabitants of other areas of Greater Istanbul. That is to say, in Constantinople as in Istanbul, besides some exceptional pilgrimages which attract crowds on specific dates and are known to everybody, ordinary life's religiously ritualized practices take place in modest and invisible sites.

On this point, some vocabulary clarifications regarding “pilgrimage” and derivatives are needed. Even if these terms conventionally refer to the same phenomenon, the words have divergent etymologies and meanings in Italian, French, Greek, and Turkish, the most commonly used languages in the time and space under study here. This is because they probably corresponded—at least at their beginnings—with different situations and experiences.

The English word *pilgrimage* or the French *pèlerinage* derive from the Latin word *peregrinus*, foreigner, man of the countryside. *Peregrinatio* refers to traveling in a distant and foreign land.

In Greek, the sense of what is considered nowadays as the equivalent is entirely different: *προσκυνώ* means to bow down, which often implies kneeling.<sup>7</sup> Bowing down intends to show humility and submission to the divine will. The words *προσκυνώ*, *προσκύνημα* are used both for the saint's icon venerated in the neighbourhood's church

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7 According to Babiniotis Dictionary (Γ. Μπαμπινιώτης, *Λεξικό της Νέας Ελληνικής Γλώσσας*, Αθήνα, 1998), the initial meaning of *προσκυνώ* is “to greet by showing submission with kissing”: *κυνέω* > *κυνώ* > *κύνεσμι* > *kuss* > *kiss*.

and the pilgrimage to Jerusalem or Mount Athos. Even if pilgrimage and *προσκύνημα* are practically synonymous today, they are far from having the same origin.

The linguistic landscape in Turkish is also very different. The word *hac* refers, as the Arabic *hajj*, to the pilgrimage to Mecca. For “pilgrimage” elsewhere than to Mecca, the Turkish word commonly used is *ziyaret*, which is of Arabic origin, too, and literally means “visit”. In everyday life, within the Turkish Muslim world most of the *ziyaretçi* (pilgrims) worship mainly the *yatır* (from *yatmak*, to lie down), that is to say illustrious dead whose actions during their lifetime brought them close to Allah. There are dozens of tombs (*türbe*) of these *yatır* throughout Istanbul and its surroundings. They are called *adak yerleri*, literally “places of vow.”

## Silent Sources. No Mention of Sharing Sacred Spaces in Nineteenth-Century Greek Written Literature

Available evidence on shared practices within the nineteenth-century written production in the Greek language is another useful element to take into account. Until the end of the imperial era (1918), Orthodox Greeks represented not only the most numerous Christian community of the Ottoman capital but also the most ancient and historic one; this is why their positioning towards sharing places of worship is highly significant.

For Istanbul Greeks, the long nineteenth century is a period of prosperity from all points of view, economic, demographic, and intellectual. It is, in particular, a period of intense editorial activity. A number of books, newspapers, and periodicals were published in the Greek language in Constantinople.<sup>8</sup>

In this literature, the presentation of places of worship is prominent. The objective is evidently to patrimonialize, that is to say to create a collective awareness of centuries-old roots on the spot, especially for those Istanbul Greeks who came from the provinces (and settled as new immigrants) (Anastassiadou 2009a). Greek intellectuals are not necessarily conscious of their effort to transmit to their coreligionists a sense of “ownership” towards the orthodox sacred spaces throughout the city.

It is noteworthy that nowhere in this production is there the slightest indication about sharing some places of worship with Muslims. Only in one case, a common celebration on the occasion of St. George is briefly mentioned. It is Manouil Gedeon, great chartophylax<sup>9</sup> of the Patriarchate, one of the last Phanariots and probably the

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8 Today, an important part of this material is kept in the libraries of the Phanar’s Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Halki Orthodox Seminar (Heybeliada, Princes Islands).

9 Great Chartophylax: in charge of official documents (χάρτες) in the Greek Orthodox Church of Constantinople during the Byzantine period. Nowadays it is only an honorific distinction. Until the

most illustrious scholar of this Greek-Constantinopolitan world of the late Ottoman era, who affirms this. In his article “St. George in Constantine’s City”, published in 1937 (Gedeon 1937), Gedeon notes that until the end of the eighteenth century, Muslims used to bring offerings to St. George and participate in the communal meal after Mass. He also reports that from 1859, when his family settled in the district of Phanar, every year he could personally see from his window on the opposite shore of the Golden Horn, on the hills of Kasım paşa, lights sparkling during the whole night of April 22 to 23. It was, he assures, Muslim Gypsies, who (also) venerated the saint until dawn.

Obviously, both the silence of the Greek sources and the Gedeon exception need some interpretation. The question to be answered is whether available written materials “tell the truth” and whether there were indeed no shared places of worship with Muslims, or if they simply reflect a taboo on the subject.

It is likely that the situation described by Greek scholars is somehow offset from reality. The period strongly argues in favor of this hypothesis. The emergence of nationalisms in the nineteenth century encourages the development of proto-nationalisms. The intellectual elites of Ottoman society’s various components draw their collective identity’s outline without leaving any kind of ambiguity (or hybridity) to interfere. Greeks do likewise. Many of them avoid Athenian nationalist debates, but especially so Istanbul Greek scholars, who also seek to distance themselves from “Ottomanism” by avoiding any kind of mixing between Greek orthodox and non-Greek orthodox. Could things be different in such a time?

However, everyday reality must have been quite different from what is reported in the books. From oral testimonies,<sup>10</sup> we know, for example, that Christians used to go on pilgrimage to Rumeli Kavağı<sup>11</sup> on the tomb of Telli Baba (alias İmam Abdullah Efendi), who had been killed as a martyr at the time of Mehmed II and considered one of the four guardians of the Bosphorus. Telli Baba had an excellent reputation among young women who wanted to know whether (and to whom) they would get married, become pregnant, or have a boy. Needless to stress that written evidence of such practices can be found buried in personal diaries of young girls. Buried and not stated: it is certainly meaningful that published material in Greek language does not include any indication about them.

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end of the Ottoman Empire, this function was attributed mostly to intellectual figures. That was the Gedeon case.

10 Interviews realized in Istanbul from 2005 to 2015 with Greek Orthodox and Catholics, men and women, aged between 60 and 80.

11 Rumeli Kavağı: neighbourhood on the northern part of the Bosphorus, not far from the Black Sea on the European shore, district of Sarıyer. Checkpoint for commercial vessels in Ottoman times.

Why then, in such an atmosphere (of probable self-censorship), does Manouil Gedeon, whose authority is indisputable, adopt a countercurrent position and mention the feasts of Muslim Gypsies worshipping St. George? We can suppose that the information given about this shared feast aimed mainly at highlighting the presence of Gypsies, transgressors by excellence, as it were, and thus underscoring the relative discretion of “other”, ordinary Muslims. During the *Tanzimat* era (from 1839 onwards), religious conversion is still quite a common phenomenon, especially in the anonymity of the city, and the various communities remain extremely vigilant towards their “troops”.<sup>12</sup> In such a framework, it is almost impossible for a Greek author, in addition dignitary of the Phanar, to attribute Christian religious practices to “ordinary” Muslims.

Besides, were Kasım paşa’s Gypsies really worshipping St. George? Gedeon probably did not ignore that that very same day, April 23, Muslims celebrated Hiderellez<sup>13</sup> to welcome summer. Was there in fact any transgression? Something to “share”?

Hiderellez and St. George are considered to correspond with the same figure. Hasluck explains this (Hasluck 1929, 320–321):

In Turkey, generally, Khidr seems to be a vague personality conceived of mainly as a helper in sudden need, especially of travellers. He has been identified with various figures of the Old Testament, notably with Elias of whom he is considered a re-incarnation, and with the Orthodox St George, whose day...he has taken over; the characteristics he has borrowed from St George include the reputation of a dragon-slayer, which St George himself may have borrowed from a pagan predecessor.

Whatever the link between Hiderellez and St George is, their feasts occurred on the same date (April 23, according to the Julian calendar), at the very moment of the Pleiades constellation’s appearance in the sky (Gökalp 1978). This astronomical phenomenon, which happens twice a year (on April 23 and October 26, according to the Julian calendar), divides one year’s time into two main seasons, winter and summer.

When Gedeon observed Kasım paşa’s Gypsies, Orthodox Greeks were indeed using the Julian calendar. In the 1920s, the Greek Orthodox Church adopted the Gregorian

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12 The challenge was to not lose people and weaken the demographic presence in a very antagonistic context. Many thorough studies have been dedicated to religious conversions at the end of the Ottoman era. Among many others, see: Deringil 2012.

13 Hiderellez is the day where Hızır (Al-Khidr), a major Sufi figure, and Ilyas (prophet Elijah) meet. The first is linked to spring and revival; the second brings rain. Hiderellez is also the first day of the warm season. On the joint feast of Hiderellez and St Georges, see Hasluck 1929, 48, 321; Doumanis 2012, 125–127.

one,<sup>14</sup> albeit without changing the feast dates of its numerous saints; April 23 is still the St. George day. However, between the two calendars (Julian and Gregorian/ revised Julian, known as old and new in the Orthodox world<sup>15</sup>) there is presently a difference of 13 days. This is why nowadays Hiderellez, which follows the Pleiades movement, is celebrated on May 5/6.

## Sharing Sacred Spaces during the Second Half of the Twentieth Century

Since the Second World War, the visibility of “shared” places of worship in Istanbul has unceasingly grown. When there is “sharing”, that is to say worshippers from different religions, a source of water almost always dominates the space; and not ordinary sources, but “holy” ones, with “proved” therapeutic and miraculous qualities.

Water sources abound in Istanbul—and this is a geological characteristic! They appear, disappear, and reappear through the centuries and represent major landmarks, material and mental ones, for the city’s successive occupants. In his book published in 1990, Nikos Atzemoglou claims to have identified and inventoried more than 500 sources, but estimates that the total number probably exceeds one thousand holy springs throughout the agglomeration (Atzemoglou 1990; see also Kourilas 1958). More recent studies focus on the Byzantine period and the importance of water—sacred water—for healing from all sorts of suffering (Shilling and Stephenson 2016; Pitarakis and Tanman 2018; Ousterhout 2018).

The Greek word *ayazma* (*αγίασμα*), used in Turkish to name holy water sources, reveals that their presence in the local context goes back to the beginning of the city’s historical itinerary, when Greek was the most widespread spoken tongue before becoming Byzantium’s official language. In modern Greek, *αγίασμα* means exactly what *ayazma* does: not any source, but exclusively the sacred one. In this respect, it is useful to note that *αγίασμα* [holy water source], *άγιος* [saint], and *αγνός* [pure] have the same etymological origin, sketching out purity, purification, pure.

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14 Gregorian? Not exactly. The calendar used by most Orthodox Greek Churches (Phanar included) is known as the “Revised Julian Calendar.” All feasts fit to the Gregorian calendar except for Easter, for which the old calendar remains in force. The Church of Greece adopted this revised Julian calendar in 1923. In Turkey, the Gregorian calendar was introduced from January 1, 1926.

15 It is estimated that at the end of the twentieth century, there were 700,000 to 1 million old calendarists in Greece (Greek Helsinki Monitor, *Religious Freedom in Greece*, Report 2002, 3, quoted by Maghioros 2013, 138). On the old calendarists, see Kitsikis 1994, 17–51.

For those practicing Islam in Istanbul, going to a water point to make a vow is a natural part of everyday life's pious activities. Most often, with regard to Muslim sites, the water point is either a well or a fountain. For example, the place called Niyet Kuyusu (literally: wishing well) in Eyüp is a well (*kuyu*) visited mostly by women who seek to communicate with people gone or dead, but also to get back a lost object (Alus n.d.). Those who suffer from jaundice go to the baths (*hammam*) of the Süleymaniye mosque:<sup>16</sup> here, it is more the bowl used for drinking than the water itself which is efficient.

It is to be observed that wells (or fountains) and sources generate diametrically opposite actions. In the first case, the visitor / pilgrim throws in an object (a stone or coin) but has no direct contact with the water. In the second case, the water comes to the worshipper and chases suffering away. The difference is obvious.

*Ayazmas* are a Greek Orthodox specificity in Istanbul. Currently, many located in private spaces (such as gardens, restaurants (!), and houses) are either abandoned or visited only occasionally. A considerable number of *ayazmas* is also found in churches or their courtyards and maintained by the parishes. Istanbul Greeks still frequent these places, which are usually strongly linked to the community's collective identity or the sense of belonging to the city. Because they are quite a ways away from touristic spots, the *ayazmas* on the Bosphorus, in particular (Yeniköy, Çengelköy, Arnavutköy, for example), illustrate these "local" pilgrimages well. In the historic center, certain *ayazmas* interest and attract Christians from outside, pilgrim-tourists who come mainly from Greece but also from other orthodox countries, such as Russia, Romania, Bulgaria, etc. In this respect, the most famous one is, as it was during Byzantine times, the sacred spring in the church of Blachernes on the Golden Horn, not far from Eyüp (Anastassiadou 2014). For the Greeks, wherever they are, this Virgin's shrine is a central piece of their cultural identity. Many of them go not only for the spring but also for the icon of Mary; when they come from far away, they practice what anthropologists call "tourism of memory".

In *ayazmas* where Muslims come in large numbers, local Greeks remain, if not invisible, at least discreet. Are they reactivating the nineteenth century's reflexes? Do they abstain from showing up with "others" who represent, as in the last Ottoman phase, a potential danger of conversion? It is also plausible that a massive Muslim presence can be perceived as a desacralizing factor for practicing Christians and transform the religious feast into a folk event.

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16 The bath (*hammam*) constitutes a part of the installations (complex, *küllüye*) around the mosque.

Whatever the reason, nowadays some popular *ayazmas* and the churches that house them are pilgrimage places not only for Christians but also for a large number of Muslims. Four of them are worth being presented briefly here.

The most famous Muslim pilgrimage to a Christian *ayazma* takes place every year on April 23<sup>17</sup> at the Byzantine monastery of St. George Koudounas (“with the bells”) in Büyükada (Princes Island).<sup>18</sup> Even if Hiderellez and St. George are not celebrated on the same date any more, connexions between the two festivals are still subconsciously present in the collective memories. People, especially women, climb up the hill to Ayo-Yorgi (Greek and Turkish form of St. George) to make a vow and take water from the source. Since the last twenty years, the pilgrimage has been strongly supported and advertised through television. Ayo-Yorgi’s popularity leads over 40 000 pilgrims and visitors to the island in one single day. This strong affluence of Muslim worshippers underlines the absence of Christians even more. In contrast, the latter, inhabitants of the islands but also Istanbul residents, used to be very present before the 1990s. According to oral testimonies,<sup>19</sup> “in the old times”, probably referring to the 1950s and 1960s, the Greeks went up the hill regularly for Easter. Nocturnal processions of Holy Saturday, with lit candles and chanting, have marked the memories of the elders and are repeatedly recounted. It is certainly interesting to note that in these accounts, like in those of the nineteenth century, there is never any Muslim mentioned.

Although Ayo-Yorgi of Prinkipo (the Greek name for Büyükada) has by far become the most mediatized Muslim pilgrimage to a Christian place in Turkey since the 1990s, there are many other sites throughout Istanbul known to be “miraculous” that receive crowds of visitors on certain dates. The installations of all three Orthodox *ayazma* presented hereafter were destroyed during the events of 1955 (September 6/7, pogrom against the Greeks).<sup>20</sup> They constituted a privileged target for the mob, which apparently did not ignore their extreme symbolic value for Greek collective memory.

The sacred source (*ayazma*) of Ay-Tarap is one of the oldest pilgrimage places. Ay-Tarap is the Turkish form of the Greek Agios Therapon (Άγιος Θεράπων), literally

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17 It must be noted that in the Greek Orthodox Church, if April 23 falls during Lent, the feast is celebrated on Easter Monday. Muslim pilgrims either ignore or override this rule and come to Büyükada on April 23 without taking into account Easter calendar regulations.

18 In this case, too, the bibliography, especially in Greek and in Turkish, is considerable. For an excellent synthesis, see the film of Mathias Gokalp, *Dilek / Le voeu*, 2004, Karé Productions, 27 mn. See also Couroucli 2012.

19 Information given by Greeks of Büyükada, who lived on the island during the 1950s.

20 On the 1955 events, many published works are available in Greek and Turkish (see footnote 3). For an approach in English, see Vryonis 2005.

meaning St. Healer, the word *θεράπων* deriving from *θεραπεία* / therapy. He is imported from Cyprus, where he is identified with St. Arab. Let us read Hasluck again:

...S. Arab, Larnaca (Cyprus). This is another ambiguous cult... At the present day this sanctuary is still frequented both by Turks and Greeks. By the former it is known as Turabi Tekke, by the latter as S. Therapon. Turabi is the name of a wandering dervish from Kastamoni in northern Anatolia, who lived in the reign of Mohammed II and was noted for his liberal views as to religions outside Islam. S. Therapon is a well-known saint and healer in Cyprus, where he has several churches; he is not however especially connected with Larnaca. As to the origins of a cult of this sort, it is impossible to be dogmatic. From the evidence we have it seems probable that it began as a secular cult of an 'Arab' jinn, later identified with Turabi (perhaps through the Greek του Αράπη ο τεκκές, η σπηλιά), from which it is an easy step to the Christian Therapon. If this theory is correct, we have here a cult now shared by both religions, whose origins were neither Christian no Mohammedan, but secular... (Hasluck 1929, 87-88).

Officially, from the point of view of the Orthodox Church and according to the Orthodox lives of the saints, Agios Therapon is a seventh-century martyr whose relics had been transported from Cyprus to Constantinople. The *ayazma* dedicated to him is close to Topkapı Palace. In the 1820s, after significant work, the source's bed was transferred outside of the enclosure of the Saray. Presumably, the place was among the busiest of the city at that time already. In the beginning of the republican era (1920s and 1930s), the Greek school of the neighbourhood (district) was fully financed by the *ayazma* revenues. During the 1970s and 1980s, a priest met the pilgrims, henceforth Muslims, every Monday afternoon (Atzemoglou 1990, 17-19).

In Kuruçeşme (Xirokrini / Ξηροκρήνη, in Greek), a village on the European shore of the Bosphorus, long queues in front of the church of St. Demetrius (Agios Dimitrios in Greek; Ayo-Dimitri in the local tongue) can be seen on certain days of the year. Here, the source lies at the end of a 40 meter long narrow and low-ceilinged tunnel that is constantly wet. Water drops (of sacred water!) hang from its rocky walls. When arriving at the source, the pilgrim / visitor is already soaked in *ayazma*. Those who go to Xirokrini know that the efficiency of their pilgrimage and the fulfillment of their wish require precise rituals. A piece of cloth or a garment has to be left in front of the source when the vow is expressed; until recently, there were rings around the source which mute children were supposed to bite in order to be able to speak again (Atzemoglou 1990, 104).

Open on Thursdays and the first day of every month, the *ayazma* of Vefa is another Orthodox space of worship extremely fashionable among Muslims nowadays (Atzemoglou 1990, 21-23). The place is dedicated to the Dormition of the Virgin (Κοιμήσεως της Θεοτόκου), and this is its official name. The popular form “Virgin of Vefa” (Παναγία του Βεφά) comes from the homonymous neighbourhood. The site has been known since Byzantine times. A church dedicated to Mary’s death existed here long before the fall of Constantinople. After the Ottoman conquest, it was demolished and the source dried up. The water re-appeared in the eighteenth century, and construction on the current building began in the 1870s. Several elements were added until the beginning of the twentieth century, but also after the damages of September, 6/7 1955. In the 1960s and 1970s, Istanbul Greeks used to come as families on every first day of January to make a vow and ask for the blessing of the Mother of Jesus. This pilgrimage (προσκύνημα) was part of religious rituals related to the New Year. Muslims became increasingly present and visible, especially from the 1960s onwards.

Representatives of official Islam do not recognize these practices but turn a blind eye to them; it seems preferable to let events take their course and watch from afar rather than prohibit. For its part, the Ecumenical Patriarchate, responsible for these places and for controlling large crowds of people, is obligated to provide a reinforced security service. Just like in Ayo-Yorgi of Büyükkada, in Sirkeci (Ay-Tarap), in Kuruçesme (Ayo-Dimitri), and in Vefa (Virgin), religious practices are perfectly framed and ritualized. Neither improvisation nor surprises are admitted.

What is to be deduced from these few examples of shared places of worship in twenty-first-century Istanbul? First, we can claim that the disappearance of the Greeks from the urban landscape and the desertification of their churches, chapels, and other sanctuaries made the Muslim presence visible, and that the latter benefited from the eradication of Christians.<sup>21</sup> However, this explanation, which seems logical, does not take into account the socio-economic evolutions within the Turkish metropolis during the last decades.

Indeed, due to a massive rural exodus, Istanbul’s population underwent spectacular growth especially after the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>22</sup> Not only are there no more Greeks, but the new inhabitants of the city are overwhelmingly Muslims (Sunni or Shiite) and rural, adhering to a popular piety and familiar with, and open to, *hुरafe* (superstitions) that official (and urban) Islam strives to eradicate. As immigrants, they look for landmarks and support in their new home. The places of worship, theirs but also those of others, are spaces of solidarity par excellence. Places to hang on to, where to share hope and

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21 In 2019, more than 90 Greek Orthodox churches (places of worship) are still open and active throughout the Istanbul area.

22 1.16 million inhabitants in 1950; 4.75 millions in 1980; 15 millions in 2017. Source: [www.ibb.gov.tr](http://www.ibb.gov.tr)

despair. Making a vow before a non-Muslim sacred figure does not entail abandoning one's own faith. It can be an added value or a neutral event. But it neither hurts nor damages what already exists. As a sacristan at the Vefa *ayazma* was heard to murmur to a hesitating observer once, "Go ahead and get one, there is no risk in taking a small flask of *ayazma*, nothing terrible can happen to you!"

These observations raise a new question, which leads to new working hypotheses that go beyond the limits of this brief study but may give rise to future research. Is a correlation between the increasing visibility of Islam within Turkish and Istanbuliot society and the Muslim presence in Christian religious spaces plausible? In other words, could the latter simply be an aspect of a much more general phenomenon? Timing is favorable to such a hypothesis. Not only do the Greeks disappear gradually after the 1950s, leaving behind an immense religious heritage that is no longer used, but during the same period, the Kemalist parenthesis is over and signs or symbols of Islam are steadily reintroduced into the social landscape. Religiosity is now expressed more and more publicly. To these contextual elements, it should be added that the question of shared places of worship in Istanbul (that is to say, on a strictly local scale) in the inter-war period is understudied; not much knowledge on this subject exists. Written sources are lacking and those who could testify orally are less and less able to do so.

## Concluding Remarks

The main observation that emerges from the preceding pages is that popular forms of religiosity are very resistant and part of a remarkable continuity. Continuum and continuity: this is probably the major outcome of this study.

Continuum / continuity with respect to chronic fears (on both sides) of conversion. A question rarely put in words but present in the mind is whether Muslims who become accustomed to going to Christian sacred places are likely to convert to Christianity. A constant fear of Christian priests and other clergymen in Turkey is to be accused of proselytism. Although active in Anatolia (and in the southeastern provinces), Protestants have a discreet presence in Istanbul and seem relatively protected against such suspicions. The same is true for Catholics. In practice, the Orthodox—that is to say the Phanar—are potentially the main concern for Islamic religious authorities, because of places of worship which are under their responsibility and attract masses of Muslim pilgrims. This is why the Church of Constantinople strictly controls such activities.<sup>23</sup>

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23 Concretely, when people start going to "others' religious places", they are probably, in the beginning, only pushed by curiosity. But this curiosity can create religious complicity likely to lead to conversion. The opacity on the subject is nearly total. Impossible to say how many are those

Continuum / continuity also as regards the relationship between shared practices or spaces and public authorities. As already stated, since the very founding of the city, religious activity in Istanbul has always been under state scrutiny. When looking at the present situation, we can remark that Ankara has the same attitude towards the religious practices of Muslims on Christian places as the Ottomans did towards all kinds of social deviance (begging, prostitution, vagrancy<sup>24</sup>): be watchful, organize, and to monitor in order not to lose control. Even if official Islam does not approve of either the candles lit in front of Christian holy icons or the prayers Orthodox priests address to Muslims, it turns a blind eye—at least as long as boundaries of strictly religious practices are not transgressed.

Continuum / continuity finally as to the national narrative. Recall that “cultural diversity” was introduced into national discourse from the beginning of modern Turkey onwards. Despite the nation-building process, it is in accordance with an official ideology. Even the Kemalist authorities sought to stress the multicultural roots of Turkey and to support the idea of Anatolia as the cradle of civilisations.<sup>25</sup>

In twenty-first-century Turkey, cultural diversity is an Ottoman heritage, all the more precious as it underlines the legitimacy of the Turkish state to claim the exclusivity of the imperial succession. It recalls the tolerance and magnanimity of the Ottomans towards their *zimmis* that Ankara takes into account to better highlight the superiority and supremacy of Islam. In this context and during the same period (2005), the choice was made to exhibit Christian and Jewish sacred relics at the Topkapı palace, kept in the Saray's deposits since Ottoman times, together with Muslim ones. The message is clear: “interreligious sharing” is wished, organized and controlled by the state.

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who eventually embrace Christianity, after years of pilgrimage to the *ayazmas* of the city. Very rare cases, notorious within the Greek minority, are almost always mentioned as exceptional.

24 Beggars and vagrants in the Ottoman period have been extensively studied. Among many other references, about Istanbul, see Özbek 1999; Tekin 1999.

25 Mustafa Kemal himself largely promoted this idea since the very beginning of the Turkish Republic. Over sixty years later, Turgut Özal (Turkey's prime minister and president in the 1980s) developed and elaborated it in his *La Turquie en Europe* (Özal 1988).

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