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VOTIVE EXOPRAXIS.

Muslim Pilgrims at a Christian Orthodox Monastery (Büyükada, Istanbul)

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While the twenty-third of April is National Sovereignty and Children's Day, commemorating the foundation of the Turkish Republic by Mustapha Kemal Atatürk, it is also the Feast Day of St. George, a major figure in Eastern Christianity. Early on the morning of the twenty-third, tens of thousands of pilgrims descend upon the Istanbul waterfront and take the numerous quays by storm. Their destination is Büyükada, the largest of the Prince Islands (*Prinkipo* in Greek), on whose peak stands a Greek Orthodox monastery that houses a miraculous icon of St. George. An hour after departure, an immense crowd disembarks and invades the small tourist port. As cars are not allowed on the island, some pilgrims queue endlessly for rides on phaetons, but most walk and patiently climb to the monastery. An hour or two later, they all gather at the center of the island, at Union Square (*Birlik Meydanı* in Turkish), which is bustling with merchants in ephemeral stalls, incessant phaeton crossings, and continuous clamoring under the discreet control of the authorities. The pedestrian path leading to

the sanctuary begins here, and on that day it seems to the pilgrims charged with an intense spiritual force.

From the scholar's perspective, what makes this day of pilgrimage—this “visit” (*ziyaret* in Turkish)—to a Christian holy place special is that the vast majority of visitors are not Christians. On St. George's feast day, the St. George Monastery attracts masses of people of Muslim faith. To be precise, we should say *women* of Muslim faith, because the ratio is about two women to one man on the arrival dock, and ten to one inside the monastery. Very few of the women visitors wear veils.

The “shared pilgrimage” to Aya Yorgi (Saint George in Greek) is perhaps the best attended and perhaps the most important in the contemporary religious landscape of the Middle East. Moreover it is also one of the most visited holy sites in Istanbul but is part of a broader sacred geography that extends beyond Christian churches and sacred springs (*ayazma*) to include mausoleums of Muslim saints (*türbe*) and other Muslim holy places (*yatır*). The phenomenon of visiting the sanctuaries of religions not one's own has spread both over time and geographically, and it has been increasingly well studied and documented by scholars, beginning with Frederick Hasluck in his book *Christianity and Islam under the Sultans*, which appeared in 1929, until recent studies.¹

Although confessional heterogeneity—the intermingling of Greek with Armenian and Roman Catholic Christians, as well as with Muslims and Jews—has been conspicuous at the St. George Monastery throughout the twentieth century, the attendance of Muslims has increased considerably during the last twenty years and particularly since 2010. The appeal to Muslims of the pilgrimage seems to be its reputation for votive efficacy: they go to the monastery in expectation of having their wishes granted. Around the monastery, the space is filled to overflowing with a robustly heterogeneous votive materiality. Various and often ephemeral iconographic

constructions (lumps of sugar, twigs, photographs, videos) and signs (candles, thread spools) are to be found there, as well as more conventional written messages. We propose to consider such votive rituality performed by Muslims as exopraxis, since they borrow both the place and the ritual practices from the “religious other”, generating the most inventive and cross-cultural poaching (“braconnage”) and bricolage (Fliche 2010: 89). We define “exopraxis” as a practice of the place of the Other, whether considered orthodox or heterodox. Thus, a Muslim who prays in a church practices “exopraxis” without necessarily being heterodox. However, the spacetimes of exopraxis are also privileged places of heteropraxis (that is to say practices considered as divergent from the doxa).

At St. George Monastery, how does the proliferation of these votive exopraxis disrupt the ecosystem of the pilgrimage, by discreetly reversing the belief that, up till now, structured the topography of the sanctuary shared by Christians and Muslims?

Miracles, healings and votive steps

Built probably in the tenth century, the St. George Monastery is the subject of local legends, one of which tells how, before it was plundered and destroyed by pirates at the turn of the fourteenth century, monks had saved the holy icon by securing it in a secret place. It seems that, centuries later, a shepherd dreamed of St. George instructing him to dig at a precise spot where he would hear bells ringing. The icon was found intact and the monastery rebuilt. Another story tells of a miraculous spring flowing from the spot where the shepherd found the icon, before becoming a monk himself and raising a chapel dedicated to St. George that island inhabitants began to visit.² Whatever the veracity of these founding legends, we can say with confidence that the monastery has long been dedicated to the cure of mental illnesses. As Georges Drettas has shown,

the healing dimension of the St. George Monastery and of St. George himself is important to the faithful of more than one sect in the Pontic region.³ The healing of mental disorders through the intercession of St. George is attested also, for example, in the Greek Orthodox Church of Al-Khader (Al-Khader being another name for St. George in Arabic), which is close to Bethlehem on the West Bank of the Jordan River and which, like the Büyükada monastery, is by tradition a place shared by different religions.⁴ The earliest account of the Büyükada monastery from this perspective is that of 1827 by Josiah Brewer, an American physician and Congregationalist minister who had resided on the island: in addition to describing the curative procedures, he condemned the inhabitants' superstitious practices.⁵ In 1852, the French poet Théophile Gautier visited Büyükada and described the monastery, in his book *Constantinople*, as a hospital for the “alienated”—a place in which

three or four unfortunates dressed in rags, with sullen and haggard looks, drag themselves along the walls with a rustle of scrap metal toward a courtyard flooded with sunlight. At the back of the chapel, by means of a baksheesh of only a few piastres, we were shown a few poor images of brown figures against golden backgrounds. . . . Saint George, patron of the place, crushed the dragon in the iconographically correct pose.⁶

The pilgrimage to Büyükada took on its current form and scale only after a miracle was reported in which a pilgrim was saved from an incurable cancer after hanging a watch against the silver-inlaid icon. Many pilgrims repeat that gesture today.

But it is the votive offering (*dilek* in Turkish) that is the heart of this pilgrimage. In the case of Muslims, the offerings are a matter of exopraxis since these visitors are

enacting their rituals in a Christian holy place and within the context of Christian beliefs.⁷ They do so with a creativity and effervescence that the Orthodox monks try to regulate, notably by posting signs—for example:

Warning: it is a sin [*gūnah*] to write within the walls of the church. Please do not write on the icons [using candle wax] or on the walls. There is a prayer box in the church! Write your comments on paper and drop them into the prayer box. We thank you.

On April 23, these exhortations to orthopraxis are mostly to no avail. The result is a staging of the self that is indifferent to the gaze of others. Pilgrims whose prayers on St. George's feast day are granted are expected to return on September 24, the feast day of St. Thecla (and vice versa) to express their gratitude. To do so, they position themselves at the door of the church and wordlessly hand lumps of sugar (*lokma*) to those exiting. This ritual is palpably practiced: the monastery grounds are soon littered with thousands of pieces of sugar, distributed anonymously and silently and then, after their participation in this mutually auspicious ritual, discarded by the recipients.

Downstream from the Monastery

Outside the sanctuary, at the foot of the hill leading up to it, stalls hatch out on the eve of April 23 and September 24—or even on the day before, because the best places are coveted. A large brick-and-mortar shop present here the year round takes on the appearance of a hive, offering souvenirs like Muslim beads (*tesbih*), Christian rosaries, blue-dyed pearl keychain talismans to ward off the evil eye, and banners bearing the image of Jesus, the Virgin Mary, or St. George, along with objects, for the most part

accompanied by Qur'anic verses, invoking Ali (suggesting the presence of Alevists here) or invoking Fatima. Everyone passes through this square before proceeding uphill, and the confessional heterogeneity is physically inscribed here for the members of every religious group to see; there is nothing hidden about the exopraxis on this Greek Orthodox feast day.

In the stalls, as noisy as they are ephemeral, is sold the bulk of votive paraphernalia, prominently the boxes of sugar for the ritual of thanksgiving. To the side are bottles of oil, which are typical offerings at monasteries in the Christian Orthodox world. Next come the candles, in which a veritable trade has developed. The monastery itself sells white candles to pilgrims, but the sellers downstream market candles specialized by color—one color each to accompany prayers for health, for marriage, for children, for employment. The same goes for the trade in amulets: entangled rings for a successful marriage, a horseshoe with an eye (*boncuk*) to ward off bad luck (*nazar*), a bell for good luck, a coin for financial success, a book for success in school, a house for acquisition of property, a key to unlock prosperity, a heart for love, a key-and-padlock for *kismet*, a fish for employment, and so on. The diversity and specialization of amulets greatly increased between 2006 and 2014, going from twelve to twenty-seven styles available to pilgrims. The semantic field of the pilgrimage has widened to include military service, school examinations, disability, grief, general happiness, serenity, freedom—and, most recently, amulets effective against magic have been added. These small medals are hung on a tree, pinned to clothing, or brought home. Some say that an amulet should be thrown into the sea once a vow made at the monastery has been fulfilled. There seems to be no rule about what to do with the amulets.⁸ Over ten years of observation, the increasing specialization has clearly

responded to the demands of purchasers, though the merchants too have suggested new votive perspectives that have not yet occurred to pilgrims.

Most merchants offer spools of multicolored thread for women who have not brought thread from home. This apparently insignificant item is required for the most emblematic and expressive ritual of the pilgrimage. Once on the dirt road to the shrine, many women tie the thread to a shrub and then unwind the reel as they walk in silence, formulating their vows—a bearing that contrasts sharply with the clamor and the crowd sensations down in Union Square. The pilgrimage path is heavily traveled, yet “coming up here is like listening to oneself [alone]. While walking, the vow of silence promotes listening to oneself. People need this type of ritual to confront themselves,” says a young Muslim woman, for whom the intimate experience of the pilgrimage takes precedence over her sensory perception of shared or objective phenomena. At mid-morning, the path, with its multicolored, interwoven threads, resembles a cheerful weaver’s loom, but, by the end of the day, the threads seem like a vast spider web, in which the women appear to be ensnared as they patiently await their predecessors’ next steps upward toward the monastery. The practice of unwinding spools of thread has been opposed by the monks—and also by the municipal services, which in 2009 pressed charges against one pilgrim in a vain effort to discourage this popular ritual’s continuance.

After about a kilometer’s climb, the pilgrims finish unwinding their colored spools, quite near the monastery, and tie them off among the surrounding pines and oaks, which are thus transformed by a flood of colors. (On the edge of the path, pinned carefully to the tree branches, one also finds the first patches of cloth, containing vows, as if the wait to reach the monastery had already been too long. The first votive offerings—among them, on this occasion, the form of a cradle with a stone inside,

representing a hoped-for or expected child—likewise appear at this point in the climb.) The pilgrims' interpretations of the ritual of unwinding vary. Some say that their wish will be granted if the thread is unwound without breaking, hence the absolute requirement to respect the threads of others. But there are, as well, pilgrims who say that the threads represent the time that will pass between the wish and its granting, and that a rapid break in the threads will reduce the waiting time. This divergence of views generates clashes along the pilgrimage route.

It is only at this stage in the ascent that one comes across groups of Evangelicals seeking to convert Muslims to their Protestant faith. The Evangelicals' live music attracts the ears and the curiosity of pilgrims, who are then given leaflets (in Turkish) on Jesus or the Gospels and invited to participate in a ritual laying on of hands. Often composed of Asians, these Evangelical groups get closer to the monastery each year, arousing the ire of the monks, and approaching ever closer to violating Turkish laws against direct acts of proselytism.⁹ About fifty meters from the monastery entrance, the crowd begins to stomp in place and forms a compact line for a wait of several hours under the sun: "For the sole feast of St. George, an average of 70,000 people may queue in one day. It is a really special day; it is beyond imagination! Sometimes people wait two or three hours. It is not so easy to enter the church of St. George," a Greek monk named Ezekiel explained to us in 2014. Barriers surround the flow of fervor, under the nominal control and vigilance of security forces. Bodies press and trample in the rising heat, and many pilgrims abandon the queue and resign themselves to remaining outside the monastery.¹⁰

Inside the Church

The interior of the church is occupied as soon as the doors open at sunrise, well before the beginning of the feast day service. The narrow entry generates a bottleneck in which the feeling of being strangled is a common sensation. Once past the foyer, pilgrims light their tapers in a room where they wait as the crowd surges into the sanctuary. Accompanied by a clamor of liturgical singing, they enter sacred space as an employee of the monastery struggles in vain to impose order, respect, and silence. But, since it is impossible to leave the church by the same door as it was entered, the pressure is palpably to move in the direction of the exit. Only the most fervent manage to approach the choir, where three monks officiate with apparent equanimity. “Most people who come here are not Christians,” Brother Ezekiel tells us. “They [come to] light candles. Once they have entered the church, regardless of their intentions, they end up praying and making vows.” Beyond prayers offered in Muslim style—a fervent open-hand gesture, palms up, which the individual passes over his or her face—written messages constitute the most important devotional practice here. Writing a vow or a prayer intention is quite ordinary in the Christian world.¹¹ Such practices, however, are far more complex when it is Muslims following them in a Christian place of worship.¹²

At the back of the church, a votive urn—a hexagonal glass box about 70 centimeters tall—receives dozens of messages per minute. Pilgrims must really concentrate if they would disregard the tumult in the sanctuary and write down their intimate wishes, while leaning against a wall or the corner of a chair, before slipping them into the urn. We moreover observed individuals passing their votive writings forward, in the crowd, from one anonymous hand to another, for placement in the urn, thereby adding another tactile element to the religious promiscuity. In 2014, Brother Ezekiel told us that, “sometimes, the prayers are very simple—for example that ‘May God to help my children to pass their exams at the university’, until very serious things

like ‘May God heal my child who has cancer.’ Or sometimes children ask for their parents to quit drinking, or reconcile because they are separated.” These requests for divine intercession require reading and blessing by monks before being burned, and the urn is emptied for that purpose several times a day. But, beginning in 2010, these written requests have been deposited all over the church, slipped under icons, behind wooden panels, even left in the monastery courtyard.¹³ Clearly, many pilgrims are not aware of, or do not much care about, orthopraxis, in general, or about the niceties of this Orthodox ritual, in particular. Many photograph their votive candles or their written wishes before placing them, thus rendering the act part of a performance. Astonished by this linking of playfulness with devotion, Brother Ezekiel told us: “The most surprising thing is that young people take pictures with me and share the image immediately with their friends on the internet: they call this a ‘selfie’!”

On the other hand, some Christian Orthodox rituals are followed with scrupulous devotion by the Muslim pilgrims to Büyükada. The icon of St. George, above all, is treated with reverence.¹⁴ The miraculous icon is protected under glass and padlocked. We observed a ritual implying insertion of a house- or car-key into a lock on the icon’s frame as a means of invoking the saint’s protection. But only the monks can introduce an ex-voto offering into the icon’s direct presence, a process requiring sustained mediation—and only they can permit those making offerings to touch the icon, embrace it, and feel it against their lips or under their fingers. A related but new, ad hoc, and swiftly imitated ritual consists in rubbing one’s wallet against the protective glass of a smaller icon of St. George; the smaller icon is moreover adorned with coins and identity photographs, implying that donations to charity are being made on behalf of those pictured.

Few Muslim women attend the entire liturgical service, which is lengthy. There

is a flow of congregants and thus a turn over, so that one soon finds oneself outside the church, where lumps of sugar are being offered in silence. While some recipients eat or conserve the lumps, others use them as new votive material, inserting them into the rough bark of a large tree in front of the monks' dormitory, which by the end of the day is covered in hundreds of white dots. Others reuse these lumps of sugar to inscribe iconic and rather explicit representations of their requests on a curb stone: a heart, a house, a baby, and so forth. At the end of the service, the monks go out among the congregants to bless each visitor who has remained and to distribute the Eucharistic bread. Another queue forms, and hands reach out for a bit of this edible blessing. Until the late 1990s, pilgrims also flocked, at this stage, to collect a bottle of water at the famous sacred spring for a ritual washing of the face. The practice was prohibited for security reasons. Below, a row of fruit trees has become a nearly obligatory, if unsanctioned, station of the pilgrimage. Almost every visitor hangs up a scrap of cloth, a kerchief, or an amulet purchased in the outdoor Union Square market. A few meters further, on a small median, figures composed of vegetable matter, wax, and pebbles appear yet again.

Disruption of a sacral centrality

The formal end of the intramural route inside the monastery is marked by passing an irreversible turnstile. But the votive performance does not actually conclude there; it continues outside the enclosure, on a stone wall where some thirty people deposit colored tapers, whose soft wax is then used for fastening coins to the wall. Indeed, wherever the pilgrims stop for a few moments, they find walls and trees that seem to invite further votive expression. When the feast day ends, ridding the monastery grounds of this superabundance is the responsibility of the monks. Extramurally, the municipal services are busy cleaning the surrounding area, beginning with the web of

colored thread. Once the pilgrims return to the harbor and board their vessels for the voyage home, the expression of their most cherished wishes amounts to no more than ritual waste.

Over the past ten years, the votive topography has expanded considerably. The votive urn no longer holds the central place so instinctively for pilgrims; nor indeed does the church, which many pilgrims do not visit; nor even the miraculous icon of St. George. Most formulate their vows and prayers outside the walls of the monastery proper, then write and deposit them almost anywhere in the surrounding area. In this way, divine agency has been extended beyond the chapel, just as Christian saints have become foci of devotion for non-Christians. The logic of this unexpected decentralization demands closer examination than it has so far received.

The extramural overflow can be explained, first, by the very large attendance—the crowd in 2014 was estimated to exceed 75,000—which extensive press coverage has encouraged. Camera crews regularly film the pilgrimage, and reporters have contributed significantly to its renown by publicizing case histories for miraculous cures. The grounds are so saturated with pilgrims that only about a third of them actually *can* enter the church. A meticulous effort to count visitors at the turnstile, when exiting the sanctuary, placed the number of visitors at 20,000 during the day, between 9 a.m. and 6 p.m., suggesting that a large majority never enter the sanctuary; hence the proliferation of votive writings deposited outside. Still, even if the expansion of the votive topography and thus the loosening of ecclesiastical control over ritual praxis can be explained by the large increase in attendance at Büyükada, there is no quantifiable, material explanation for why pilgrims innovate and why the imagination reaches farther here than elsewhere in Istanbul. The aesthetic of the pilgrimage on St. George's feast day is exceptionally polymorphous and demonstrative.

During a series of interviews that we conducted in 2014, a young Muslim, who said that she made the pilgrimage every year, told us:

In the end, we are in the house of God. Mosque or church, there is no difference. Thanks to the synergy present here, without using any intermediary, we send our deepest wishes directly to the universe. My best wishes have come true. This year again, I have some wishes to make and I hope that they also will come true. The important thing is to want from the bottom of your heart and to believe. That is why I'm here.

Asked about whether she had entered the sanctuary, she replied: "Of course, I came in, I sat down, I made my prayer, I wrote my vows on a paper which I presented to the icons before placing it in the box, I prayed, I opened my heart, I felt my wishes would come true, I thanked [God], and I left [the sanctuary]." Another woman we approached said that "this was the first time I entered with open hands and praying to God. [As soon as] I finished [my own prayer], I went out." Again, whether one prayed in a mosque or a church did not seem to matter: "We thought about this as we were coming. Christians also visit our mosques, you know, so why shouldn't we . . . anyway, we finally came, telling ourselves why *shouldn't* we visit [a church]?"

This sort of rhetoric ("why shouldn't we?") is recurrent among the visitors whom we interviewed, and we found it as well, almost word for word, in a 1998 report for French television called "The Church of the Muslims,"¹⁵ for which a more accurate title would have been "The Church of Unveiled Muslim Women." Most of the visitors are Muslim women, only one percent of those wear the veil—and the broadminded Muslim and female sociography of this pilgrimage may be responsible, more than any

other factor, for its special kind of creativity. These women, traveling outside the context of their own religion, which apparently lacks something that they crave, have little to fear from unconventional behaviors or ad hoc practices at a Christian monastery, and even within their own religious context they demonstrate a certain independence by refusing to wear the veil. Moreover, they visit this shrine to express hope that elements of their lives may turn out otherwise than as apparently fated, a hope that Islam discourages. Scriptures of hope, these women bespeak a relationship to God that is not quite intelligible to the monks who welcome them to the St. George Monastery, nor to the Evangelical Protestants who seek to convert them in Union Square, nor even to the Diyanet (State directorate of religious affairs) and the Municipality, whose representatives struggle to maintain order on the island.

Oblivion of the Saint

From our observation of these Muslim exopraxis at the St. George Monastery, it is clear that there is no saint at work on the Muslim side. Their visit (*ziyaret*) has a concrete purpose, but without an identified saint host (George or Thecla). If the intervention of a holy man or woman is a felt need on the part of some Muslims, they must look to their neighbors' religions. Still, even for those Muslims the particular saints involved appear scarcely to matter. Surveys that have been conducted during the September 24 pilgrimage show that very few Muslim visitors know which saint (Thecla) is celebrated on that day, and the same is generally true even for April 23. Certainly the pilgrims know that Aya Yorgi is the name of the monastery and that there is a famous icon of St. George there, but can we assume they have come to attempt communication with him? The question must be asked, because it has been shown that, for example, at the Catholic Church of St. Anthony of Padua in Istanbul, visiting Muslims rarely address

themselves to the saint when writing in the book of prayer intentions; instead they address God, which is to say Allah, directly.¹⁶ Out of the thousand votive writings that we collected, photographed, and transcribed at Büyükada and in its environs, we found only three occurrences of St. George's name, but 247 of Allah's.

Fliche has assembled votive writings comparable in number for two other Istanbul churches: the religious complex of Eyüp and the Roman Catholic Church of St. Anthony.¹⁷ In both of these cases, visitors wrote down their wishes, either in a book of prayer intentions provided for the purpose or on the walls (not provided for the purpose). In the case of Eyüp, all of the votive writings mention Allah, which is unsurprising, seeing as it is a Muslim sanctuary—but fully 77% of the votive messages deposited at the Church of St. Anthony mention Allah as well. Ebü Eyüp el Ensari was named only a dozen times among the thousand votive messages at Eyüp; St. Anthony is invoked in nearly one hundred messages at the Istanbul church bearing his name. That St. George's name goes almost without mention in votive messages at Büyükada is explicable, then, according to a logic that prevails elsewhere in the vicinity. Clearly, Muslim visitors to the shrines of Christian saints prefer to communicate their wishes to God without an intermediary's help.

To make sense of these special characteristics, we may turn to Altan Gokalp, who, in an article as important as it is unknown,¹⁸ makes a distinction, rarely made when dealing with Anatolian religious practices, between a “cult of the saints,” formalized in a mausoleum (*türbe*), and “worship in the *yadır*,” which is any place marked by the presence of a spiritual force and/or inhabited by a holy person not otherwise enshrined in a dedicated mausoleum. Such a place might be a group of trees, a rock formation, a natural spring, a landscape feature endowed with some numinous quality.¹⁹ Anyone who has walked in Anatolia will have noticed such elements of the

landscape adorned with colorful scraps of tissue and other votive materials. The fundamental distinctions that obtain between the *yatur* and the *türbe* are differences in kind: in the *yatur*, it is the whole experience of the visit that is sacred, rather than exclusively the relics of a saint or the evidence of a past miracle. The Muslim visitors to Orthodox Christian shrines tend to treat the *türbe* as if it were a *yatur*.

Discreetly but firmly, therefore, the St. George monks direct the visitors' attention to that difference and call upon them to respect it:

Attaching threads, ropes, and nylon strings to the branches of trees, [and] attaching [items] purchased with votive intent—[whether] keys [or representations of] cars or houses [to trees or buildings] in the vicinity—is [evidence of] false beliefs. Acceptance by GOD of your vows is possible only [for those] with a pure heart and loving faith. We encourage our dear visitors not to abide by inane beliefs. —The Monastery of Aya Yorgi.

Among those encouraging alternative codes are the Evangelical missionaries who proselytize Muslim visitors outside the monastery compound. We saw, for example, an Evangelical poster offering “the most beautiful free keys for the most successful vows.” Inside the compound, in 2011, there was a series of posters, attractively arrayed on the walls of the church, presenting short and predictable passages from the Gospels (“Knock and it shall be opened to you,” “Blessed are the poor,” and so on). Some, however, were much more explicit and, one might say, polemical about what could be expected of God—for instance, this unsettling verse: “Naked came I from my mother’s womb, naked will I depart.”²⁰ For the pilgrim asking favors from God (“May my children pass their exams”), that verse from Job is a blunt reminder that it was God who

devised the system of causality from which each pilgrim, bringing her thread and sugar cube, prays for release and relief.

The rationale and logic of pilgrim behavior is wild hope, in the Lévi-Straussian sense of *wild* (*The Savage Mind*, 1966). The pilgrims come to the sacred place not so much for communication or contact with the patron saint as to be in a place of hope at a time of need. Thus, to our question of whether candle lighting at the shrine has a particular meaning, a young female visitor to Büyükada replied:

It is a tradition. In my opinion, you can also come under this tree and make your vow, the place does not matter. The important thing is your connection with heaven and your wish coming from your heart. In the end, everywhere . . . well . . . if you want something from the bottom of your heart, there is no reason why it should not come true. But here, there is a particular synergy that, apparently, makes the wishes come true sooner.

This sentiment is typical of those visiting sacred spaces, but the same space is traversed in accordance with various and sometimes contradictory logics.²¹ Still, those logics, however different, converge toward a common denominator, which is a belief in the effectiveness of rituals, however ad hoc, and of vows. The pilgrims are happy to follow whatever path or practice brings the desired results. What emerges from this peculiar combination of wild hope and pragmatism is a form of interreligiosity that goes beyond confessional and institutional divisions, often to the dismay of those urging orthodoxy and strict orthopraxis. Yet, though the monks may hang signs warning against heteropraxes and the Diyanet may warn Muslims not to participate, neither the Christian nor the Muslim and government authorities do more than warn and grumble.

To conclude, the same sacred space is traversed and practiced according to multiple dynamics. The concentrated arena of the Büyükada pilgrimage favours encounters between a variety of protagonists each following his or her own paths, each following different and potentially contradictory logics. It appears that pilgrims use a wide range of tools, gestures and material supports as if their use were "free of rights". Basically, this place is attractive because people are free to express themselves as they wish (Eade and Sallnow 1991), even if it seems contradictory or confusing. Another important point on the Muslim side is the elision of the saint, which takes place in this holy place, which thus belongs more to the logic of the *yatır* (sacred space) than to that of the *türbe* (holy tomb), at least in the case of exopractic Muslim attendance.

Ultimately, what matters during the pilgrimage to Büyükada and other such places is the performance of votive exopraxis: what the pilgrims write and the fact of their writing are of decisive importance. According to Muslim tradition, as Denis Gril reminds us, God's first creation was the *qalam*, a calligraphic pen, and with it the writing (*kitâb*) of all things for all time.²² In other words, Allah has predestined everything, for everyone, forever. Votive writing is a writing in opposition to the Creator's *kitâb*—a tangible declaration that destiny should "never cease"—must ever continue—"to be written" and thus revised. Votive exopraxes are intended, with the aid of ad hoc rituals, to open the Creator's originary writing to contingency. Also a kind of writing is the multicolored thread of fervent and anonymous pilgrims, unspooled and intertwined along the ascent to the Monastery of St. George. Each thread is a personal writing. And the pilgrimage is revealed as a vast machine for the interweaving of vows and desires.

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¹ See Albera and Couroucli, *Sharing Sacred Spaces in the Mediterranean*; Barkan and Barkey, *Choreographies of Shared Sacred Sites*; Fliche, “Une ethnographie de l’indifférence”; Pénicaut, “Muslim Pilgrims at the House of Mary in Ephesus”; and Zarcone and Hobert, *Pilgrimage and Ambiguity*.

² See Pinguet, *Les îles des Princes*, All the book is relevant.

³ See Drettas, “Saint Georges le Fou, un modèle de patron,” All the article is relevant.

⁴ See Tsourous, “Veneration of Icons by Muslims and Christians,” All the article is relevant.

⁵ See Brewer, *Residence at Constantinople, chapter 15-16*.

⁶ Gautier, *Constantinople*, 343–44.

⁷ See Fliche, “Les frontières de l’ ‘orthodoxie’ et de l’ ‘hétérodoxie’,” All the article is relevant.

⁸ These votive objects are not specific to Büyükada and are sold as well elsewhere in Istanbul, in particular in front of some Orthodox Christian churches attended by Muslims, such as Notre Dame des Blachernes and the church of Ayn Biri in the Vefa district.

⁹ Without analyzing this missionary activity, we observed its evolution: very marginal in 2005–6, the groups were competing with young Muslim proselytes distributing Qur’ans published by the Office of Religious Affairs. The latter then disappeared, leaving the field clear for Evangelical Protestants who gradually approach the doors of the monastery.

¹¹ See Lamireaux, “La poursuite du divin,” All the thesis is relevant.

¹² See Albera and Fliche, “Muslim Devotional Practices in Christian Shrines,” and Fliche, “Une ethnographie de l’indifférence.”

¹³ The same tendency is visible in the Catholic sanctuary of the House of Mary in Ephesus, where Muslim women place their votive writings under the carpet of the chapel in order to be in more direct contact with the holy place. See Pénicaud, “Muslim Pilgrims at the House of Mary in Ephesus.”

¹⁴ See Preston, “Spiritual Magnetism,” All the chapter is relevant.

¹⁵ The report *The Muslim Church* (1998) was directed by Malek Sahraoui for the television program *Faut Pas Rêver*, France 3. Source INA: CPC9800595.

¹⁶

¹⁷ See Fliche, “Une ethnographie de l’indifférence,” All the article is relevant.

¹⁸ Gokalp, “Les yatır, ıdukt, ou la part de la providence.”

¹⁹ See Albert, “Des lieux où souffle l’Esprit,” All the article is relevant.

²⁰ Job 1:21.

²¹ The success of the holy place, constantly fueled by the granting of prayers, seems to have reached a peak in the spring of 2014. The following year, bad weather saw a drop in attendance. In 2016 the pilgrimage was almost canceled by the authorities because of a rumor that “Islamic State” (ISIS) was planning an attack.

²² Gril, “De la Création au Jugement dernier,” 336.