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XENOPHILIA

A Symposium on Xenophobia's Contrary Part 4

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Xenophilia, Difference, and Indifference: Dialogical Introduction I

In his introduction to the third installment of this symposium, Jeffrey Perl writes of a Muslim student who visits the confessional at a Roman Catholic church in Akko, among other instances of interreligious behavior that fulfill, to one degree or another, the terms in which *exopraxis* is usually defined.¹ Perl naturally writes of exopraxis in the context of xenophilia, and no doubt his student likes and admires the priests to whom he confesses, but my own experience as a scholar of Muslim exopraxis leaves me hesitant to characterize the student's feelings toward Christianity or the Catholic Church as loving. Perl notes in passing that this symposium will dedicate one full installment, in which I am participating as both author and organizer, to exopraxis, and I would like to add, as a PS to Perl's "Postscript to Brown," a caveat on the identification of exopraxis as a form of xenophilia. It is not likely that a Muslim who loathes Christianity would make confession to a Catholic priest, but a love of Christianity (let alone a belief in its

An earlier version of this essay, "Ethnographie d'une pratique de l'indifférence: Les écritures votives de l'église Saint-Antoine à Istanbul," appeared in *Ethnologie Française* 44, no. 2 (2014): 319–30.

1. See Perl, "Introduction: Postscript to Brown."

principles or a commitment to its practices) would by no means be essential. Perl writes, as others in this symposium have done, about the love of difference—or, to be more precise, about the love of particular differences between one's own culture and another's. My suggestion, in line with Perl's that we find a "donnish vocabulary" to deal with xenophilia and with the cultural "adulteration that xenophobes so fear,"² is that we should speak, at least when dealing with exopraxis, less of the love of difference or differences than of an *indifference* to them.

Exopraxis—religious practices in places of worship associated with a religion not one's own—are not uncommon.³ Studies have shown that Muslims, particularly in the Mediterranean region, often attend Christian places of worship.⁴ The phenomenon was widespread under the Ottoman empire,⁵ and it has long been regarded as unexceptional in Turkey, where it continues to the present day.⁶ Christian sites in Istanbul that attract Muslim exopractitioners include at least one Roman Catholic institution, the Church of Saint Anthony of Padua, with hundreds of Muslim visitors daily,⁷ along with several Eastern Orthodox shrines: the chapel of Ayın Biri, known for a pilgrimage frequented by members of an unusual range of social classes; the Hagia Soros (the reliquary of the Virgin Mary's robe and girdle) at the Church of the Virgin of Blachernae; the Monastery of Saint George Koudonas on the island of Büyük Ada, which hosts tens of thousands of pilgrims every April 23rd;⁸ and the House of the Holy Virgin at Ephesus.⁹ As Michel de Certeau observed, those who worship in places shared by Christians and Muslims engage in a "practice of difference,"¹⁰ and it appears that this sense of religious difference is needed in order for God or his saints to be addressed in a manner perceived to be effective. This phenomenon is all the more intriguing in that it takes place against the backdrop of relatively widespread "xenophobic" violence,¹¹ which includes violence regularly perpetrated against

2. Perl, "Introduction: Coherent Mixtures," 403.

3. The term *exopraxis* covers the religious practices of a member of one religion in a place of worship of a religion other than his or her own. *Heteropraxis* covers practices perceived as diverging from the *doxa* of one's own religion. For example, when a Sunni Muslim in Turkey enters a church, it is an act of exopraxis, whereas his or her lighting a candle there would be an act of heteropraxis. Exopraxis is not explicitly disapproved of by Turkish religious authorities, but heteropraxis is punishable. Instances of heteropraxis, on the other hand, are often associated with exopraxis.

4. See Albera and Couroucli, *Religions traversées*; Aubin-Boltanski, "La Vierge, les chrétiens"; Mayeur-Jaouni, *Pèlerinages d'Égypte*; Seraidari, *Le Culte des icônes*; and Valtchinova, *Religion and Boundaries*.

5. See Hasluck, *Christianity and Islam*; Shankland, ed., *Archaeology, Anthropology, and Heritage*; and Carnoy and Nicolaidès, *Le Folklore de Constantinople*.

6. Fliche, "Les frontières."

7. Albera and Fliche, "Les Pratiques dévotionnelles des musulmans."

8. Couroucli, "Saint Georges l'Anatolien, maître des frontières."

9. See Pénicaud, *Le Réveil des Sept Dormants*; Sparks, "Ambiguous Spaces."

10. de Certeau, "Une Pratique sociale de la différence."

11. "Xenophobic" is in scare quotes since it refers here to people who are not foreign. The Alevis are no more foreign in Turkey than are Armenians, Greeks, or Jews of Turkish nationality, but Alevis are frequent victims of discriminatory, aggressive, and violent practices and are often positioned as if they did not belong to the "body" of the nation.

Alevi,¹² as also against Christians in incidents reported at Sivas,¹³ Gazi,¹⁴ and elsewhere in Turkey.¹⁵

There is also a pattern of systematic desecration of Christian tombs in the capital's cemeteries by locals who are rarely, if ever, punished. (The context of exopraxis at Christian sites in Turkey is charged with interfaith tensions that contrast sharply with the "tolerance" that the Justice and Development Party [AKP] government attempts to portray in promotional videos that play in the Istanbul metro.) In a cemetery of several hectares that I visited—until I was forcefully ejected when I took out a camera—there are no physical boundaries between the Muslim and Christian tombs, although the Christian tombs line the inside of the cemetery's outer wall, forming an internal crown that delineates the border between the living and the dead. Christian tombs might be assumed to be protected by their proximity to the cemetery's guardians but show signs of frequent desecration: crosses are broken and cracked and stand amid cracked slabs or tombs defaced by names that have been etched into the stone. This pattern of desecration recalls the frequent acts of vandalism by Turkish soldiers in Orthodox cemeteries in northern Cyprus—perpetrated “to kill the dead”—as well as the use of Greek tombstones to decorate traffic circles in Istanbul.¹⁶ The perpetrators act with complete impunity, since Turks tend to minimize such incidents by blaming them on errant gangs of young men. Newspapers periodically decry attacks on Greek cemeteries, typically in peripheral regions of Turkey, but similar incidents in the capital are rarely mentioned. Only one Catholic chapel remains open for services in Istanbul, but it is important to understand the connection between cemetery and church in order to grasp the connection between religious difference and divine alterity in this context. Praying to another's God is a self-conscious and deliberate act by which one crosses a zone of religious difference, while relying on the others not to withdraw their tacit welcome.¹⁷

12. Alevis are a religious minority considered heterodox by Sunnis and the Diyanet. The Alevis are heirs to a powerful type of religious syncretism dating to the Middle Ages in Anatolia; though they are not considered Shiites, they are known for their reverence for Ali and his family.

13. On July 2, 1993, participants in a cultural event organized by an Alevi association in Sivas were besieged in a hotel for eight hours. Thirty-seven of them were burned alive by a group of radical rightist protesters that included Islamists and nationalists.

14. In the Gazi neighborhood of Istanbul, on March 12, 1995, armed men in a taxi fired into a café and pastry shop frequented by Alevis and leftist militants before fleeing the scene without being identified. The attack left two fatalities and fifteen wounded. Rumors alleged that the police were involved in the attack, which was attributed to the radical Right, and a riot broke out at the police station.

In the days that followed, troops opened fire several times at mass protests, resulting in dozens of fatalities and hundreds of wounded. Turkey had not experienced this level of urban violence since the 1980 coup d'état.

15. Also worth mentioning in this context are the assassination of the Italian priest Andrea Santoro in February 2006 in Trabzon, followed by the attack on his Slovenian colleague, Martin Kmetec, a few days later in Izmir; the attack on Father Brunissen in Samsun in July 2006; protests against the papal visit of autumn 2006; the murder of the Armenian journalist Hrant Dink on January 19, 2007; and the murder of three Protestants in Malatya on April 18, 2007.

16. See Copeaux and Mauss-Copeaux, *Taksim! Chypre divisée*.

17. See Sparks, "Ambiguous Spaces," and de Certeau, "Une Pratique sociale de la différence."

There is here evident, I believe, a gap between two disparate elements of exopraxis that require differentiation. The question to be asked is simple to formulate: what is the nature of the exopractitioners' experience of difference when they enter a space not their own to write votive prayers, and how do they enact and appreciate that difference? These instances of religious poaching involve three kinds or dimensions of difference: divine alterity (a God other than Allah is implicated), spatial alterity (a church rather than mosque is visited), and social alterity (the congregation is Christian, rather than Muslim). In each of these three dimensions, the same discreet operation is at work. Rather than either xenophilic and irenic patterns of hospitality or xenophobic patterns of intolerance,¹⁸ we find that exopraxis in all three dimensions relies on the evasion of difference and ultimately on developing a stance and affect of indifference.

The ethnography of indifference is not easy to conduct.¹⁹ Indifference, in the sense in which I mean it here, tends to evaporate when Muslim exopractitioners are interviewed using audio-recording equipment. Under those circumstances, the interviewer is given stereotypical responses, especially those shaped by the particular brand of "tolerance" that is attributed to Turkish society and its "legendary" hospitality. Observing indifference requires other techniques. Notably, one must study thousands of votive messages in order to discern the attitudes toward church practices that Muslim exopraxy entails. The corpus of messages on which my own study of exopraxy in Turkey is based consists of 2,600 written prayers that I collected by photographing three ledgers spanning the years 1996–97, 1998–99, and 2008–9.²⁰ There were one thousand prayers recorded in the 1996–97 ledger, one thousand in 1998–99, and six hundred in 2008–9. I selected 1996 because during that year a bomb was planted (and later defused) in front of the Church of Saint Anthony. Although the press ascribed the device to the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK), the official investigation was inconclusive, and I thought that the incident might be reflected in that year's votive writings—a hypothesis that turned out not to be true. Pursuing a similar logic, I next turned to the 1998–99 ledger, in the expectation that social and political upheavals in the city's suburbs during that year might be a subject of at least some prayers. The notorious "postmodern" coup d'état of 1997 had triggered an economic depression. The question of joining the European Union was also under discussion at

18. *Irenic* should be understood here in its primary sense, which involves a search for agreement or an attempt to transcend divergent opinions that are generally associated with religion.

19. I am especially indebted here to a book by Karen Barkey, *Empire of Difference*, that thoroughly explicates the relationship between the Ottoman empire and the vast array of constituencies that comprised it.

20. The prayer messages studied were transcribed into MS Word documents, which allowed me to analyze them lexicometrically. I also used Lexico 3 in establishing the vocabulary of the message corpus. Approximately 14 percent of the messages are written in languages other than Turkish, including Italian, French, English, Arabic, and Armenian. Very few are written in languages that use the Greek alphabet. I analyzed only the messages composed in Turkish.

the time, and the EU was sometimes portrayed by Turks as a “Christian club” that excluded them because their country was primarily Muslim. I chose the ledger of 2008–9 because of a hunch that the prevailing anti-Christian atmosphere in Turkey might influence votive prayers. Although there was a notable drop in the number of Muslim visits to the church in 2008–9, there was no noticeable impact on the messages. Religious appeals of this sort appear to be independent of political context, and indeed “political messages” are very rare. The personal names inscribed at the bottom of the messages indicate (as an earlier study had concluded as well) that the majority of authors were women of the Muslim community.²¹ The quality of the handwriting, the frequency of Turkish language errors, and a sometimes rather hesitant style suggest that the authors came to Saint Anthony’s from a wide range of social backgrounds.

Sites of Scriptural Poaching

Before attempting to analyze the systematic exopraxis at the Church of Saint Anthony from an ethnographic perspective, it should be noted that for a Muslim to inscribe a prayer in a church transgresses two principles of Sunni Islam. Asking the Christian God or one of his saints for intervention leads—as Altan Gokalp reminds us—“directly to the unpardonable sin of association/idolatry (*sirk*).”²² In addition, such prayers express the desire for an ad hoc “break in a chain of causalities beyond the reach of being human”—a desire, that is to say, for the “random incursion of divine will into the domain of natural causality.”²³ Where one would expect “surrender” on the believer’s part, “surrender” being the original meaning of the word *Islam*, the believer asks in writing for God to void a written decree and ensure that an auspicious writ will arrive instead of one bringing bad news. Although the use of writing in thaumaturgical rituals, often involving the use of talismans, has been studied previously, votive writing of this kind has not been investigated and assessed.²⁴ The practice does not occur in Islam proper, because while, according to Islam, one may eat, absorb, or wear the divine word, writing directly to God is forbidden. Unlike the Hebrew and Greek Testaments, which were written by human beings, the Qur’an was written by God and is therefore both perfect and eternal. Writing to God would appear to suggest that something about the divine writ needs correcting and that the supplicant wishes to be God’s editor. The gradual development of such writing practices is, from the Islamic theological perspective, not a neutral phenomenon; hence its exclusive occurrence, until quite recently, in non-Muslim (Christian) places of worship.

21. See Albera and Fliche, “Les pratiques dévotionnelles des musulmans.”

22. Gokalp, “Les Yatir, idukut, ou la part de la Providence,” 121.

23. Gokalp, “Les Yatir, idukut, ou la part de la Providence,” 121.

24. See Hamès, *Corans et talismans*.

Votive writing has begun to develop at Muslim holy sites in the religious complex of Eyüp. The site is linked to Istanbul because it is the burial place of Ebü Eyüp el Ensari, a companion of the Prophet who perished under the walls of Constantinople in 670. His remains were “found again” by Mehmet the Conqueror at the time of the conquest in 1453, and the site also boasts a “footprint” of Muhammad, an eighteenth-century mosque, and the mausoleums of various Ottoman officials. Frequented by both Muslims and Christians under the Ottoman empire, Eyüp remains one of the most important pilgrimage sites in Turkey.²⁵ Although the ministry of culture and tourism is officially responsible for the country’s historical monuments, mausoleums and places of worship are in effect overseen and operated by the staff of the Diyanet İşleri Bakanlığı, the office of religious affairs. The staff and guards have placed signs throughout the site discouraging blatantly heterodox practices. The signs were relatively discreet until 2002, when they gradually became more imposing, with cardboard giving way to plastic and eventually to bronze. Although sanctions for infractions against the rules are not specified, the tone is overtly prescriptive. Reminders about banned behaviors are included as well in brochures distributed to pilgrims at most places of worship. Visitors are generally forbidden to make wishes, offer sacrifices, light candles, attach stones to tombs while praying, throw money inside the mausoleums, tie fabric to trees or tombs, leave offerings of food, circumambulate tombs, or press their hands or faces against mausoleum walls.

Within this orthodox Muslim setting, the mausoleums of two secular personalities are now covered in votive graffiti. These nonreligious government officials, whose biographies are summarized on panels at the site, are unlikely to inspire hagiography, so this new practice needs explanation. In the forecourt of one mausoleum, I had noticed some time ago that the base of a column was being used for “heterodox” ritual practices. The Diyanet attempted to discourage these by erecting a sign and, later, posting a guard.²⁶ Finally, in 2010, the column base was sealed off with a padlocked steel plate. The votive graffiti appeared at this time, and the walls of the mausoleums (*türbe*) are now covered with them. Every time they are erased they return, as do the votive expressions recorded on the enclosed column base. In open defiance of a sign reminding the public that votive graffiti represent a form of superstition, they have proliferated. This phenomenon is very new, and it merits attention because it could expand. I have noted, for example, three messages near the remains of a saint in an Alevi mausoleum in Antakya. Out of hundreds of mausoleums (*türbe* and *tekke*) that I have visited in Turkey, this was the first time that I had seen this type of writing. The messages suggested a surprisingly high cultural status on the part of their authors, given both their style and the nature of their requests (one message even asked for assistance with the outcome of a medical thesis).

25. Hasluck, *Christianity and Islam under the Sultans*, 108. 26. Fläche, “Les frontières.”

Although much of this writing is in contravention of Sunni custom, there is one “popular” Muslim tradition—on the festival of Hidrellez, which marks the start of the warm season on May 6th—of votive writing. The passing of the “verdant saint,” Hizir, who is associated with the prophet Elijah, is observed on that date, and the custom of writing was updated by the Istanbul city administration in the late 2000s as an attempt, abandoned a few years later, to “patrimonialize” Turkish heritage. The supplicants wrote prayers on pieces of paper that were to be placed under a rosebush during the night of May 5th, when the saint would “pass through” and grant their wishes. Writers were supposed to recover their prayers the following day and cast them into the sea. Significantly, this votive writing practice is the only one associated with a Muslim religious figure, though Maria Couroucli has amply demonstrated that Hizir is confused with another “Anatolian” holy man, Saint George, whose cult extends well beyond the Christian world.²⁷

If there is a time when Muslim residents of Istanbul traditionally visit a church and write prayers, it is during the pilgrimage to Saint George’s Chapel, which is located on the island of Büyük Ada.²⁸ Ecclesiastical officials have placed a votive prayer box beneath a mural of the Virgin Mary, and the box is continuously emptied and refilled during two annual pilgrimage days (April 23rd for Saint George and September 24th for Saint Thecla). When the box is full, the chapel officials bless the votive messages and then, to my enormous exasperation, burn them. Despite my repeated requests, they never have allowed me to examine these scraps of paper, adamantly informing me that these are messages from believers to God. That relationship clearly does not include a third-party ethnologist. No statistical analysis can be made, therefore, but the few photographs that I have been able to take and the fleeting, oblique readings that I have been able to perform suggest intriguing similarities in format to the messages written at Saint Anthony’s Church. A like situation obtains at the house of the Holy Virgin at Ephesus, which has a metal grate, several meters long, designed to receive the thousands of bits of cloth and paper covered in votive writing that pilgrims leave behind while on procession. Although the pilgrimage at Ephesus has been studied by researchers, these writings have never been available for scholars to analyze.²⁹

27. See Couroucli, “Saint Georges l’Anatolien, maître des frontières.”

28. See Couroucli, “Saint Georges l’Anatolien, maître des frontières.”

29. See Sparks, “Ambiguous Spaces,” and Pénicaud, *Le Réveil des Sept Dormants*.

Saint Anthony of Padua

The Church of Saint Anthony of Padua, located on a large pedestrian artery in the old Istanbul neighborhood of Pera, is visible from the avenue, and, as I have shown in an earlier publication, it is routinely visited by Muslims.³⁰ In addition to the candle wax used to write messages on the glass protecting statues of Saint Anthony and Jesus, worshippers have available to them, every Tuesday, a notebook in which to enter their prayers. The practice of making the notebooks available was initiated a few years ago by the Franciscans who administer the church, presumably as a means of “channeling” or calming public outpourings of piety. As both Clara Lamiraux and Marlène Albert-Llorca have shown, notebooks of this kind help to discipline the more zealous expressions of religious fervor, while also helping worshippers to develop their prayers by composing them for recording in an official format.³¹ Until recently, the Franciscans stored the collected prayer notebooks in the church cellar. Islam permits praying to departed saints, but the veneration of saints’ statues is inconceivable. Signs of devotional rituals in the church are apparent around the feet of the statues of Saint Anthony and Jesus, where worshippers leave flowers, bread, and oil. Words dripped in wax on glass, while prohibited, are conspicuously present.

Saint Anthony is the nominal recipient of this devotional attention, but the question remains whether he is indeed the object of veneration of Muslim visitors. He is not actually the addressee of this votive writing and is seldom mentioned in the notebooks. On average, only 8 percent of the messages mention Anthony along with Jesus, and the saint is even more rarely addressed alone (4 percent). For comparison, at the Eyüp complex I have seen no graffiti that refer to the two individuals buried in the mausoleums; most refer instead to Allah. Nor are any other mediating figures of Christianity, such as Maryam (Mary) and Isa (Jesus), appealed to with any regularity in the notebooks. Indeed, more prayers are addressed to Saint Anthony alone than to Jesus and Mary.

In contrast to the observations of Albert-Llorca, Sylvie Fainzang, and Claude Brévot-Dromzée in France, in Istanbul no mediating devotional figure is seen as providing access to God.³² The name Allah occurs in nearly all of the messages contained in the three notebooks that I have studied. Whether God is addressed as Allah or as *Tanri*,³³ the same expressions are used repeatedly to

30. See Albera and Fliche, “Les Pratiques dévotionnelles des musulmans.”

31. Albert-Llorca, “Le courrier du ciel,” 183–216. See also Lamiraux, “La Poursuite du divin.”

32. See Albert-Llorca, “Le courrier du ciel”; Fainzang, “Suppliques à Notre-Dame de Bonne Garde”; and Brévot-Dromzée, “Cher Saint Antoine . . .”

33. God is addressed as *Tanri* (Divinity) in about one-third of the messages. During the time of the Kemalist reforms, the call to prayer was translated from Arabic into Turkish, a matter of some controversy, and the word *Tanri* was employed instead of *Allah*. *Tanri* continues to be loosely associated with Kemalism, although it is also used in messages that include Muslim ritual formulas, such as *bismillah*, and messages containing both *Allah* and *Tanri* are relatively common. Consequently, it is difficult to deduce whether the authors who use this Turkish word instead of *Allah* can be assumed to be “Kemalists.”

invoke him. Instead of conceiving God as at a distance that must be crossed to send a “plea” that may “touch” him, the form of address is direct.³⁴ The initiating word is generally a possessive adjective—*Allahim* means “my God”—which is not exceptional in Islam. It is written in the informal “you” form—the formal second-person form is never used to address God—and the imperative verb form is typically used, usually in expressions such as *ver* (give), *et* (do), or *kabul* (accept). In these messages, God is “summoned,” as other studies of votive writing have likewise found, although here a remarkable lack of deference toward God is found, even when the authors have come to implore or beg him (*yalvarmak*), and he is addressed as “Most High” (*yüce*) in about one-fifth of the instances I have seen. Love of Allah is declared in only sixty or so of 2,600 messages, and expressions of gratitude are also rare. The expression *minnettarim* (I am appreciative) never occurs, for example, and only 7 percent of the messages express gratitude in any form, usually at the end, where, as Brévet-Dromzée has noticed, such expressions are less a way of offering thanks than a closure strategy identifying the message as propitiatory.³⁵ (For comparison: Geneviève Herberich and Freddy Raphaël found at Thierenbach in Alsace that 7 percent of such messages included thanks for the granting of a wish, while more than 12 percent expressed propitiatory gratitude.) The messages at Saint Anthony’s rarely promise offerings to God in exchange for requests granted. Although offerings of bread, oil, and other staples are regularly left at the church on Tuesdays, it appears that bargaining with God is unacceptable. References to sins committed (*günah*) are also uncommon.

While it might be assumed that writing implies a degree of formality and commitment, these prayers seem rather casual. Only 20 percent include even a first name; 20 percent include only a signature, and 9 percent both a name and a signature. Forty percent are marked with a distinctive sign. Among the Thierenbach pilgrims, 68 percent signed with either names or initials.³⁶ It would be possible to identify only a few of the authors of the Saint Anthony messages, a sign perhaps that discretion about how they are handled is an important aspect of communications that, from an official Muslim viewpoint, are to say the least imprudent. Fainzang argues that, for Muslims, signing a prayer is tantamount to questioning divine omniscience. If God knows everything, why write to him? Votive writing may be said to presuppose that something is lacking in God, which is why Islam considers it to be a form of heteropraxis. The supposed lack attested to in the act of votive writing appears, moreover, to reduce divine alterity. If God lacks anything, then he is not completely unlike ourselves. If writ-

34. See Albert-Llorca, “Le Courrier du ciel,” 209, and Fainzang, “Suppliques à Notre-Dame de Bonne Garde,” 68.

35. Brévet-Dromzée, “Cher Saint Antoine . . .,” 59.

36. Herberich and Raphaël, “Messages et prières des pèlerins de Thierenbach,” 26.

ing to the *tout autre* about what one lacks implies a corresponding lack in him, then perhaps signing a votive message underscores or redoubles the implication. This diminution or domestication of God corresponds to and enables the sorts of quotidian request that the authors of these prayers make. Dominant themes include *sağlık* (health), followed by ideals like *hayırlı* (fruitfulness), *mutlu* (happiness), *buzur* (calm, tranquility, serenity), *para* (money), and then difficulties with debts, married life, children, and academic success. The requests fall into two broad subcategories: those with a specific goal—curing a particular illness or resolving a specific financial problem—and those with a less specific focus, such as health, happiness, or wealth. Votive prayers often alternate between the two kinds of request, as in the following example: “My Lord, grant permission for my daughter to marry not Bedirhan but Mohammed. Protect us from Satan’s law, misfortune, and accidents. My Lord, give us health and many blessings. My Divinity, give many blessings to my children, health to my family, health to my husband. My Lord, accept my prayers.”

The structure of messages with a specified focus and of those with non-specific aims are the same. Addressed less in a tone of supplication than in that of a request or even a demand, God appears to be an acquaintance who can be summoned and asked to provide whatever is lacking.³⁷ This closeness or even intimacy occasionally leads the authors to address him as *canim Allahım* or “my beloved Lord” (*canim* is literally translated “my soul”), as in the following message:

My Lord, from you, I want health above all things, in a very short time. Allow my friend Turan to find a good and fruitful job, and allow him to save himself from the illness of drinking, my beloved God. My God, may the marriage of Arzu and Güney take place fruitfully and quickly.

Give happiness and serenity to the house of my older sister. Grant Veli and Handan a fine marriage. Give health to my father and my mother. Do not forget to give us your help. Write beautiful destinies for Neslihan and Güney, and ensure that they are well educated and in good health. Amin.

H. Ö

In prayers like this one, difference—difference between the addressee, who is *tout autre*, and the author—seems not to impede the writing process. As de Certeau observed, votive messages appear in this respect to be almost the opposite of mystical writing,³⁸ in which the Other is absent and it is the longing of the author for the Other that drives the writing. In mystical literature, the Other is absent but not lacking, whereas in votive writing he is present and accessible but suffers from a lack, without which making a request to him would make no logical sense.

37. A point of comparison might be John K. Campbell’s work on Greece, *Honour, Family, and Patronage*.

38. See de Certeau, *La Fable mystique*.

The author of a votive prayer longs not for God but for his or her own desire to be satisfied. The most frequently appearing word in all of the Saint Anthony's ledgers is *ver*, the imperative form of the Turkish verb meaning "to give." God is invoked to supply a desired benefit, never to participate in a dialectic of desire between the author and himself. Alterity, difference, and distance are minimized or evaded altogether.

Evasion: A Poacher's Strategy

Significantly, references to religious difference are also exceedingly marginal in this corpus of messages. There are a few declarations of faith or religious identity, but they are exceptional. The word *bristiyan* (Christian) occurs in a few instances but only in requests that a daughter be allowed to marry one. "I am Muslim" occurs rarely, and there are only fifteen occurrences of the word *Muslim* in 2,600 prayers. *Islam* occurs just three times, and the name of the Prophet only fourteen.³⁹ Forty-three mention that the author has entered a *kilise* (church) to pray. (The word *cami*, mosque, appears in three of the messages.) On those few occasions when reference is made to the church in which the author is offering his or her prayer, it is part of an ironically framed argument in which the church is described as a "house of God":

In the name of God the merciful and compassionate, God most high, I know that whether it is a church or the mosque, both of them are your houses. That is why I came to you here, calmly. Help me, please. Save me from the pains I have on my insides. Help me quickly establish a household. I beg you in the name of all of the Prophets. Help me so that she will come back to me with love and tenderness. Give me desire and strength in my work so that I can finish school. Help me so that my life can regain order. If it pleases you, God, I beg for your truth. If you please, please bring an end to my tears.

The will to transcend religious boundaries does not preclude the use of Muslim religious formulas. The ritual formula uttered before undertaking an important action, *bismillahirrahma-nirrahim* (in the name of God, the merciful and compassionate) occurs in nearly seventy of the messages, whether in the full form or in the abbreviation *bismillah*. About twenty messages call attention explicitly to the issue of religious difference. For example:

In the name of God, who is merciful and compassionate, in the name of God, the merciful and compassionate, all men are brothers. This is why the faith is a faith. Jesus and Saint Mohammed (may the peace of

39. The Prophet Muhammad is never invoked in the context of requests for intercession.

God be upon him) are equal, but the good prophet is ours because he is the last of the prophets.

Other messages more directly acknowledge that the author's presence in a Christian church is a transgression:

In my opinion, this is all absurd. My Lord, do not separate me from religion. I am a Muslim and thus will I remain. Allah is one. Jesus is the slave and ambassador of Saint Mohammed. So will it remain.

Still other messages express religious tolerance while acknowledging that the author, even while praying with Christians, is in a "Muslim" country:

I am waiting for the prayers I have made to be accepted by the Divinity. I would have liked to see the Qur'an with my own eyes among your books where the Old Testament and the Book of Psalms of David are also found, in your respectful and sacred space, as a reminder that we are in a Muslim land. I am convinced that would interest you. Respectfully, Serap.

No messages that would be seriously offensive to Christians were to be found among those studied, and perhaps that is why I did not find, as Lamiriaux's research does, instances of editing by either religious or secular officials. I saw no evidence of erasures; indeed the notebooks probably went unread until I began my research. The writers tend, as I have said, to be discreet, and in Istanbul (as distinct from France) custom appears to mandate that the authors not read each other's messages.⁴⁰ A few messages echo ones that precede them in the notebooks, but these involve series of two or three using identical formulas. Church officials' evident policy of nonintervention in these practices may reflect their sense that votive prayers are not sacred. Although the priests enable visitors to leave messages once a week, they clearly have learned to keep their distance. At one time, the priests integrated the ledgers into the mass and offered a prayer during mass for the writers, but doing so led to a crush of writers attempting to inscribe prayers before the priestly benediction. The priests therefore decided to offer less formal acknowledgment of the votive writings. They also began taking the precaution of removing the notebooks during mass.

In Brittany, Manoël Pénicaud has observed that Muslims are welcomed into the Chapel of the Seven Saints (Old Market), though as outsiders.⁴¹ In Istanbul, the Christian is the alien, and it is the Muslims who would need to extend a welcome, but what they offer, as I say, is indifference. The underlying logic of Muslim exopraxis in Istanbul is neither hospitable, on the Christians' side, nor

40. Lamiriaux, "La Poursuite du divin," 306.

41. See Pénicaud, *Le Réveil des Sept Dormants*.

irenic on the Muslims'. A political interpretation of the Muslim indifference is possible: to acknowledge that another faith has a legitimate presence on "Muslim terrain" suggests that one's country is not one's own. Ignoring the boundaries between religions enables one to benefit from difference without calling attention to the awkwardness of its palpable presence. Instead of xenophilia, syncretism, or *bricolage*, there is in Istanbul a form of poaching that demands silence for it to be effective, unchallenged, and enduring.

I should add that the votive messages in the Saint Anthony's notebooks are no more altruistic than they are irenic or hospitable. Nearly 60 percent of the prayers contain at least some first names that are not the authors' own, but there is often no indication of the relationship between the writers and the individuals named. The word *ben* (me) occurs in nearly every message, and *biz* (us) in 40 percent of them. This "us" does not encompass a wide social circle, however: there are few explicit references to uncles, aunts, nephews, nieces, or cousins. Even references to older brothers (*ağabey*) and sisters (*abla*) are infrequent, though there are a number of occurrences of *kardeş*, which are younger siblings. Children—whether *oğul* (son) or *kız* (daughter)—are mentioned in approximately 16 percent of the messages. The genderless word *eş* (spouse) and the word for husband (*koca*) occur in about 10 percent, while *baba* (father) appears in roughly 10 percent, and *anne* (mother) in 15 percent. Comparing these results to findings at other locations indicates that praying for others is not regarded by exopractitioners as a good enough reason for visiting a church. I have found no cases in which the primary request made is for the benefit of others, and messages that make an appeal for universal goods, such as peace, are extremely rare. Albert-Llorca and Fainzang have found, in a Catholic context in France, that thoughts about others are sometimes expressed, but in Istanbul altruism is absent from votive writing.

Reducing divine alterity, avoiding the acknowledgment of religious difference, and evading altruism, hospitality, and irenicism appear to be modes of social relations shared by the Istanbul exopractitioners whose writings I have studied. In this context, difference involves neither a rejection that might elicit intolerance nor a fascination that might be expressed in exoticism or syncretism, nor even an irenicism that would attempt to circumvent difference by seeking consensus.⁴² Instead, the principal factor appears to be evasion. When exopractitioners in Istanbul cross boundaries to inscribe their votive prayers, they are fully engaged in the experience and, although their actions are partially determined by institutions, they are rich in significance for the individuals involved. That a boundary is unmarked does not limit its significance for the actors who cross it. These pilgrims enter Christian sites as Muslims, though it is not unusual to see

42. Pénicaud, in *Le Réveil des Sept Dormants*, likewise declines to ascribe forms of irenicism to the pilgrimage at Ephesus or to that at the Seven Saints in Brittany.

exopractitioners awkwardly making the sign of the cross, quickly followed by gestures associated with Muslim prayer.⁴³

While the activities I have described here take place in ambiguous or blended religious spaces and thus might suggest a form of shared practice, it would be a distortion to characterize them in terms of interfaith dialogue or of an encounter between Islam and Christianity. Exopraxis does not necessarily lead to greater openness among participants or to the development of sites of religious syncretism. Praying to God in the space of someone else's religion is often grounded in the sort of "productive misunderstanding" that can be transformed quickly into suspicion or contempt, and indeed such often occurs when Christians and Muslims interact.⁴⁴ The practice seems initially to involve the sensation that one's own religious institutions are lacking and that only another faith, another's God, can help one in time of pressing need. As an omniscient God would already know of our need, the deity addressed must be in that sense lacking also. A deity lacking nothing would be inaccessible. For a Muslim to enter a church to pray is a means of taking advantage of that divine lack. Doing so, apparently, demands written rather than oral prayer as a portal through which those outside may gain access. Writing down a prayer seems to double its strength,⁴⁵ and doing so appears to enable God to participate discreetly. Indeed, the entire poaching process depends on discretion and silence, in that the otherness of the alien religion, on which the exopractitioner relies, can be maintained only if the outsider is indifferent to it and never acknowledges, draws attention to, or articulates it.

For the same reason, it appears, religious poaching is highly individual and is not undertaken irenically or altruistically, any more than other acts of poaching have ever been. On the other hand, the Muslim authors of votive messages in churches are not more selfish than the average Muslim or Christian believer. It is simply that entering into community with the Christians at Saint Anthony's Church or developing any sort of collective worship with them is, for Muslim exopractitioners, neither necessary nor indeed desirable. Exopraxis operates in accordance with the principle *every man for himself and God for each* (but not *God for all*). Constructing a "we" that includes exopractitioners would ruin the alterity of the site, transforming Saint Anthony's into "our" church and thus entailing the loss of capacity to access the other's God.

—*Benoît Fliche*

Translated by John Angell

43. For comparison, see Mayeur-Jaouen, "Que partagent les coptes," and Poujeau, "Partager la baraka des saints."

45. See Albert-Llorca, "Le Courrier du ciel."

44. See Fliche, "Les Frontières."

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