

The location of Islam:

Inhabiting Istanbul in a Muslim way

ABSTRACT

In this article, I emphasize the endeavor of religious Muslims to weave Muslim practices and institutions into the heterogeneous lifeworlds of modern society. Pairing a practice theoretical approach with a phenomenological one, this article shows that an important aspect of "inhabiting Istanbul in a Muslim way" is the active perception of this heterogeneous lifeworld, which foregrounds certain of its elements as distinctive. Through these strategies of inhabitation and perception, I suggest, social heterogeneity can be at once recognized and transcended. [*Islam, Istanbul, Turkey, space, phenomenology, practice theory*]

In October 2000, during a tea break at the library of Istanbul's Islamic Research Center (ISAM), a student at one of Istanbul's theology departments who was working at a desk close to my own volunteered to me an introduction to the city's social geography. Sketching a map on his writing pad, Nevzat located both "Muslim" (*muslim*) and "secularist" (*laik*) neighborhoods and explained that religious Muslims lived mostly in those old neighborhoods of Istanbul with Ottoman mosques and other old buildings, whereas secularists lived mostly in the modern areas of the city. The physical structure of such old neighborhoods as Fatih, Nevzat suggested, reflects Turkey's Islamic culture and constantly reminds its inhabitants of their Muslim heritage and way of life. Together with the regular sounding of the Muslim call to prayer (*ezan*) and the five-times-daily prayer itself, which, as he put it, provides "natural propaganda" (*dogal propaganda*) for Islam, it was crucial in maintaining the Islamic faith of the inhabitants.

Over the course of my fieldwork I sometimes heard similar accounts, especially from older people. For many of my acquaintances in Istanbul who were actively engaged in the Islamic revival movement, however, Nevzat's cultural map was not convincing. For them, it belonged to an earlier moment in Turkish history. And, also for me, Nevzat's sketch called to mind an era in the mid-20th century when religious Muslims and secularists more clearly than today formed two distinct sociological tiers (cf. Mardin 1989). Although Nevzat's Islamist critics, too, considered the ongoing struggle between the Islamic revival movement and the Turkish Republican project of *laiklik* (that version of secularism championed by much of Turkey's state elite, which considers the state the legitimate guardian of religion) the defining feature of Turkish society, for them this antagonism was no longer equated with two clearly distinguishable societies, let alone clearly demarcated territories as Nevzat's map suggests.

The loosely connected group of young men and their families that became the main focus of my research had come of age in the late 1980s and 1990s, when the Turkish Islamic revival movement gained both considerable political success and self-confidence. Most of them worked in

white-collar, middle-class jobs or studied in preparation for them. Like most of their peers in Turkey's religiously committed middle class, this meant that they no longer experienced modernity from its periphery, as it were, but participated in Turkish society as businessmen and women, doctors, lawyers, clerks, teachers, and software engineers. Seyfi Say has summarized their project well as an endeavor to "Islamicize modern society" (*çağı İslamlaştırmak*) (1997:10). This project of individual and collective reform is thus at once less sheltered and less bounded by the perception of two distinct societies within Turkey.

Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (1992) have pointed out that many anthropologists have become weary of accounts claiming the neat integration of cultural "worlds." Anthropologists, they write, now recognize that the assumption of an "isomorphism of space, place, and culture" had often enabled "the power of topography to conceal successfully the topography of power" (1992:7-8). Rather than taking for granted the identity of a place with a culture (and both with "a people"), anthropologists are therefore now increasingly interested in processes of place making. As the reaction of my interlocutors to Nevzat's map shows, such weariness is not limited to anthropologists. For many religious Muslims in contemporary Turkey, too, what once may have appeared as the obvious correlations between, for instance, the old neighborhood of Fatih, Muslim culture, and the neighborhood's inhabitants has become problematic. As it becomes more difficult to simply assert the "Muslim identity" of Turkish society—or even of individual neighborhoods—the question of how Muslim space, and, indeed, Muslim society, is generated comes to the fore. This article is concerned with the question of how religious Muslims in contemporary Turkey generate Muslim space, and with the role distinctly Muslim space plays in the Islamic revival project.

Elaborating a Gramscian position, Raymond Williams has argued that for any social project vying for hegemony maintaining the concept of a particular "social totality" is of central importance. Only placed within such a totality, which orders history and the universe at large in a way supporting the foundational claims of the project in question, can its hegemony be maintained (Williams 1980). Asserting the Muslim identity of Fatih (or Turkey), for instance, must be read as a strategic move supporting a particular social totality within which Muslim forms of reasoning maintain their authority or hegemony similar to narratives that tell the history of Turkish Muslims embedded in the history of Islam, and a cosmology centered by the Muslim community's privileged relationship to God. So why has claiming Fatih as a Muslim neighborhood become unconvincing for many Muslim activists? Is Fatih today less Islamic, less distinct from Istanbul's modern neighborhoods than, say, 30 years ago? Perhaps, but simple recourse to empirical common sense does not help much in this instance given that the evidence is doubtful and for some, like Nevzat, it is still

a convincing claim. More importantly, I would suggest, for many religious Muslims this proposition simply no longer fits with how they experience their life as *Muslims* in Istanbul. The divide they perceive within Turkish society is no longer a territorial one.

Williams writes that the hegemony of a social project depends on "a whole body of practices and expectations; our assignments of energy, our ordinary understanding of the nature of man and of his world" and on "a set of meanings and values which as they are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally confirming" (1980:37). But, if indeed, as I suggest above, it is now the coherence of the lives and lifeworlds of religious Muslims that are the main context in which coherence is achieved, how does this square with the enormously heterogeneous character of contemporary society in Istanbul, characterized by disparate sets of public and private institutions, transnational social systems, competing political projects? How, and in what sense can these heterogeneous lifeworlds be perceived as Muslim spaces?

To address this question I combine a praxis-theoretical with a phenomenological perspective. In the first move, I explore elements of the Muslim project of creating Muslim space by tracing my interlocutors' endeavors to weave Muslim practices and institutions into their heterogeneous lifeworlds. The argument here proceeds along lines similar to a number of recent studies that have emphasized the role of Muslim regimes of practice as (self-)disciplines that shape the dispositions and subjectivities of Muslim practitioners (Asad 1986, 1993, 2003; Henkel 2005; Hirschkind 2001; Mahmood 2001, 2004). In the second move, I expand the notion of "practice" to include the active aspects of experience and perception. In other words, I complement the practice-theoretical emphasis on the formation of a distinct habitus through the enactment of the lifeworlds' structures with a phenomenological concern for the ways in which social actors perceive the world they inhabit. I show how, by foregrounding Muslim elements and backgrounding other elements, by designating certain elements as significant and others as unimportant, and by visiting felicitous Muslim spaces, lifeworlds that otherwise appear as heterogeneous can be experienced as Muslim. This notion of "Muslim space" will eventually lead us back to Istanbul's old neighborhoods, with their Ottoman mosques and tombs, not as the last strongholds of an embattled Muslim society but as chosen points of reference in a thoroughly contemporary social project.

I set out by visiting one of the old neighborhoods designated by Nevzat as Muslim. The result of this visit turns out to be mixed. Despite the highly visible references to the Islamic tradition, Istanbul's old city is, like the city's other neighborhoods, heavily integrated into the institutions of secular Turkish society. The rest of the article then turns to one of Istanbul's modern neighborhoods. Here, amidst the neighborhood's nondescript architecture and despite its

inhabitants' modern lives, the Islamic tradition still flourishes. Now it is precisely the neutrality of the background that makes the location of Islam especially visible, in a way of living rather than in a territory.¹

Muslim territory?

If one spends some time in the old neighborhood of Fatih, located within the ancient town walls on the city's historical peninsula, it is easy to understand what Nevzat meant when he referred to the confluence of physical structures and Muslim social practices as reinforcing the Muslim faith of its inhabitants. I vividly remember the distinct feeling of having arrived at an auspiciously Muslim place when I first came to Fatih. This impression was most intense in the vicinity of Fatih camii, the great Friday mosque at the center of the neighborhood. Commissioned by Sultan Mehmet II (the Muslim conqueror of Constantinople) and completed in C.E. 1470 (rebuilt after an earthquake in 1766), Fatih camii is situated on one of Istanbul's seven hills, overlooking the waters of the Golden Horn. It is part of a much larger assembly of buildings, including the Topkapı palace, which was designed to impress on the visitor the splendor of Islam and the Ottoman Sultan.² With its clear lines and sparse ornamentation, the mosque is one of the more austere examples of Ottoman architecture. Its massive central dome and numerous smaller surrounding domes and half-domes are embellished, like its two minarets, with golden spires bearing the characteristic Ottoman crescent at their top. Adjacent to the mosque is the tomb of Mehmet II, one of many Muslim tombs in Istanbul and the site of popular reverential visits.

Even outside the main prayer times there are often dozens of men in the mosque enjoying its meditative atmosphere, performing additional prayer, or listening to the continuous recitation of the Quran. At the beginning of the prayer times, the mosque quickly fills up in such a way that the men take their seats, shoulder to shoulder, in parallel rows facing the mihrab and, thus, directed toward the Kaaba in Mecca.³ Especially important, and well attended, is the canonically prescribed communal Friday prayer, which generally draws a very large congregation also from beyond the neighborhood of Fatih. The quadrangular courtyard surrounding the great mosque is a wide, open space, with walled-in gardens, whose trees provide both shade and a lush green contrast to the serenity of the gray mosque, as well as numerous buildings that formerly housed institutions such as a hostel, a hospital, and a *medrese* (or *madrassa*, an institution of Islamic higher learning). The large number of men from the adjacent business district that frequent the mosque suggests that the mosque-market nexus, famously the backbone of traditional Muslim urban society, is still very tangible here in Fatih.

In the vicinity of the mosque are many religious bookstores, and the clothing stores of the neighborhood often

sell distinctly pious attire. Apart from Fatih camii, there are numerous smaller mosques in the neighborhood's streets, as well as Ottoman fountains and tombs. Over the past decades, the neighborhood has emerged as a center of the Turkish Islamic revival movement. The İskenderpaşa mosque, which, for much of the second half of the 20th century, was the center of the powerful İskenderpaşa branch of the Naqşbandi *tarikât* (Sufi brotherhood), is just a few streets away. The Nurculuk movement (a Muslim reform movement gathering around the legacy of Said Nursî, 1876–1960) once had its headquarters in the vicinity, and numerous other Muslim communities, like the Sufi Cerrahiler, have bases in this part of the city (Çakır 1990; Çalışlar et al. 2000). Since 1999, the municipal government of the neighborhood has been dominated by the Islamist party, which organizes, among many other activities, well attended neighborhood meetings held in separate rooms for men and women.⁴ The full boards of the shopkeepers in the bazaar district of Fatih; the majority of women wearing the Muslim headscarf, and, sometimes, even the full black overcoat required by some conservative Sufi orders; as well as banners of the Islamist party strung over the narrow streets, all add to the impression that one is deep in Muslim territory.

This is not, however, the classic Islamic city integrated by Muslim institutions and the law of the sharia.⁵ Despite its many markers of Muslim identity, the neighborhood is thoroughly shaped by the secular nation-state's institutions and the capitalist economy's infrastructure. Its inhabitants, although today overwhelmingly Muslim, are by no means all religious (*dinci*), and, thus, precise boundaries between "Muslim" and "secularist" neighborhoods are impossible to draw. The very modest margin within which the Islamist municipal government can implement any social reforms, moreover, underlines the degree to which Fatih is woven into wider Turkish society with its political and economic power structures. Businesses in the neighborhood are locked into relations of production and exchange largely determined by the capitalist market and regulated not by Muslim guilds but by an administration, eager, nowadays, to harmonize its economy with international neoliberal standards. Even the neighborhood's mosques, including the Fatih camii, are part of a central government bureaucracy, which, as in the case of public schools and universities, employs its staff and closely controls its activities. Neither civil, criminal, nor commercial law in Turkey follows the sharia, and lawmakers neither base their authority on it nor do they normally justify their policies with reference to it. Rather, as in any other neighborhood in Istanbul, it is the law of the fiercely secularist Turkish Republic that provides the legal framework for its inhabitants. And, yet, the everyday of many inhabitants is permeated with Muslim practices, practices, however, that are not specific for Fatih but that are shared with religious Muslims all over Istanbul and Turkey. The neighborhood, in other words, is both more and less than an "Islamic island."⁶

thoroughly interwoven as it is with wider Turkish society, in which Islamic precepts and discourses play an important but limited role. To locate Islam and to understand how the Islamic tradition maintains its authority, we therefore must start with the notion of "place-making," with social projects and ways of life that are connected to certain places and their perception in far more complex ways. "Where" people live, in other words, is closely related to how they live.

The new city

Let us therefore leave the old city behind and go to one of Istanbul's newly developed neighborhoods in the district of Ümraniye, a few kilometers inland on the Anatolian side of the Bosphorus. In one of the neighborhood's newly constructed apartment blocks, Hakan and Emine Görmez have recently bought a spacious three-bedroom apartment. Both Hakan and Emine are practicing Muslims, affiliated with a prominent branch of the Naqşbandî tarikat. A closer look at the place of Islam in their everyday lives, and especially in their relationship to the spaces they inhabit, is instructive for considering more generally the location of Islam in contemporary Istanbul.

Over the past half-century, Turkey's urban centers have experienced a massive in-migration from the countryside. Istanbul's population rose from an estimated 1 million in 1940 to 3 million in 1970, 7.3 million in 1990, and 12–14 million in 2003 (Istanbul Büyükşehir Belediye n.d.:11). The sweeping development of this neighborhood is directly related to this demographic trend. Most of the neighborhood's residents, like Hakan and Emine, were born in the villages and small towns of Anatolia, and like many of their neighbors (but unlike the majority of Ümraniye's population) Hakan and Emine occupy professional middle-class jobs.⁷ Different from earlier expansions of the city, which usually began as illegal settlements (*gecekondu*), characterized by their makeshift construction and lack of infrastructure, this is a planned development. The apartments are sold on a now flourishing real estate market, reflecting both a more general shift toward a market-driven economy in Turkey and the emergence of a new, urban middle class (Keyder 1999a).

As in so many new neighborhoods of Istanbul, the physical structure of the area is indistinct and its layout amorphous. It is nevertheless a well-kept neighborhood, with new cars in the parking lots and carefully tended flowerbeds. One of the reasons why Hakan and Emine liked the apartment they bought is the newly built playground, complete with lawn, swings, and sandpit, just opposite their balcony. In contrast to Fatih, the neighborhood lacks conspicuous markers of Ottoman history. If it has a center at all, this is constituted not by a central mosque but by a few busy shopping streets 20 minutes walk from where Hakan and Emine live. It is not only the physical structures of the neighborhoods that differ, however. The great majority of residents

are new in the area and do not share a history of local social ties. Fewer people are dressed in pious attire, and there are generally far fewer public markers of Muslim presence in the streets. The couple's apartment itself is one of standard industrial design, resembling most other newly built apartments in Turkey in terms of its layout, building material, and even furnishing. Different from the vernacular architecture of the Kabyle house (Bourdieu 1977), or Anatolian dwellings (Delaney 1991) that reinforce the religious cosmology that frames their inhabitants' worldview, this industrial architecture shows little or no reference to Muslim cosmology.

The lifeworld that emerges here, with its changing and heterogeneous character, can only to a very limited extent be taken for granted by its inhabitants and certainly does not per se echo Islamic cosmology. It is thus one not anticipated by classical phenomenological lifeworld concepts in the Husserl tradition, such as Alfred Schütz and Thomas Luckmann's (1975). Hakan and Emine's world does not automatically provide a mold in which they are shaped, naively, as it were, as religious Muslims. Rather, into this heterogeneous and shifting world, Hakan and Emine weave a matrix of Muslim institutions and disciplines that facilitate their continuing commitment to the discursive framework of the Islamic tradition.

A central aspect of this matrix is the immediate family. For both Hakan and Emine, the religious commitment of their future spouse was crucial in their choice of a partner. The nuclear family of husband, wife, and two children is in their case extended by a close relationship to Emine's parents, who have moved from Trabzon to Istanbul and bought an apartment nearby. They look after the couple's younger daughter during the day. The older son goes to a kindergarten, recently set up by the wife of one of Hakan's acquaintances from the *cemaat* (the informal Muslim congregation gathered around the brotherhood's sheikh). Moreover, numerous members of the *cemaat*, with which Hakan and Emine are affiliated, live in the neighborhood. In fact, a nearby mosque, newly built in an early Ottoman style, "belongs" to the *cemaat*.⁸ One could thus speak of an emerging neighborhood, one that is actively settled rather than simply lived in.

Like most of his neighbors, Hakan commutes to another part of the city during the day, and so does Emine, who works as a doctor in the day clinic of a private hospital. The hospital is owned by a holding company with close ties to the couple's *cemaat*. For Emine, the fact that she can wear her headscarf to work (impossible for a doctor in a public hospital in Turkey) is an important reason to work there. Not all of the doctors and employees have a connection to the *cemaat*, however, and not all the women working in the clinic or coming in as patients wear the headscarf. Hakan works in the management of a trading company, which does most of its business with the central Asian republics. The company seeks to run its business according to Islamic criteria,

which consists in the first place of respecting the ban on interest and accommodating the religious obligations of employees. The firm is part of the vibrant, explicitly Muslim economy that has emerged since the political reforms of the prime minister and, later, president Turgut Özal in the 1980s. These policies combined a radical neoliberal departure from Turkey's state-centered economy with the government's encouraging religious communities to become economically active (Heper 1991; Keyder 1987; Mardin 1980).

Dale Eickelman and Jon Anderson (2003) have pointed out the increasing importance of new media for the creation of a Muslim public sphere and the transformation of the Islamic tradition in contemporary societies. This observation holds true for Turkey as well although this public is by no means restricted to "new" media, nor is it altogether separate from a wider Turkish public. Hakan and Emine are keen participants in this public, mediated by television and radio channels, websites, newspapers, journals, and not least books and booklets. The Muslim media that they consult do not, of course, interpret Islam in a uniform way or agree on how to live a properly Muslim life in contemporary Turkey. Far from it. But what unites them, and justifies the gloss Muslim media, is that in one way or the other, they are concerned with one question: how to live a Muslim life today? For religious Muslims like Hakan and Emine, this project has many dimensions, for instance, the issue of mastering and performing the ritual duties (*ibadet*) and the wide field of social obligations (classically referred to as *muamalat*). Both are the subject of the Muslim *fiqh*, that discipline of Muslim scholarship that deliberates the practical implications of the Quranic revelation for the believer (often, but somewhat misleadingly, called "Islamic jurisprudence"). Another dimension is those Muslim practices related to *tasavvuf* (Sufism). And another dimension yet is the sunna practices, in which practitioners seek to emulate the exemplary life practice of the prophet Muhammad. Even a brief account of this social project's many aspects, as they pertain to Hakan and Emine's lives, would go far beyond the scope of this article. The next section briefly discusses a few of them.

Constructing Muslim lifeworlds

Hakan and Emine's domestic arrangements to some extent reflect what Emelie Olson (1982) has called the "duo-focal family model." This model, Olson argues, is typical for most Turkish families, and its persistence represents an alternative to what is often assumed to be the normal trajectory leading from the traditional patriarchal family to the modern egalitarian couple-as-companions model (1982:33). In contrast to the latter, in duo-focal families husband and wife occupy largely separate social domains, and in the absence of a "single centre of intra-familial relationships... each adult tends to be the focus of his/her own rather separate social

network" (Olson 1982:36-37). In Hakan and Emine's case there is clearly an emphasis on gender separation concerning both their domestic and extradomestic social relations, most visible in the fact that Emine's and Hakan's circles of friends are exclusively female and male, respectively, and social gatherings tend to be homosocial spaces in terms of gender. However, whereas Olson seems to take the division into a female domestic and a male public sphere for granted, in our case the situation is more complex. Emine, like Hakan, has graduated through Turkey's education system and now holds a professional job. Her engagement outside the domestic sphere, moreover, is no exception. It was the emergence of a highly visible female Muslim movement in Turkey, in which educated and professional women play a major role, that was the most dynamic and influential aspect of the Muslim revival movement in Turkey over the past two decades. It is thus not simply the "duo-focal family model" that characterizes Hakan and Emine's household but a particular interpretation of it. Whereas Olson and others describe the model as a Turkish model, Hakan and Emine reinterpret it as a Muslim model. For instance, Hakan and other younger religious Muslims emphatically reject the discursive framework of "honor and shame" as a guiding principle, labeling it both un-Islamic and unsuitable for the modern world. In contrast, they refer to Muslim precepts of "modesty" to justify the practice of gender separation that, in their interpretation, pertains equally to both sexes.

The creation of male and female social spheres introduces a far-reaching ordering principle into the lifeworlds of Muslim practitioners like Hakan and Emine. Together with the emphasis on early marriage (ideally organized or at least condoned by the spouses' families) that it complements, it is a crucial component in regulating sexuality and gender relations according to principles derived from the Islamic tradition. It thus both re-creates the homosocial spaces of the duo-focal family as Muslim spaces and generates a deliberate contrast to Kemalist and liberal notions of domesticity and gender relations.

Although the reinterpretation of the duo-focal family model as a Muslim family model can reinforce gender separation, it can also lead to its modification. Emine, for instance, needs to integrate her extradomestic activities with her commitment to (her interpretation of proper) Muslim practice. For her, as for many other religious Muslim women in Turkey, wearing Muslim *tesettür* (i.e., the kind of "carefully composed ensemble" of dress [White 2002:51], including the headscarf and often a long overcoat, that has emerged as the standard for pious attire not only in Turkey but also in many Muslim communities worldwide) has become a way of combining commitment to Muslim standards of modesty with the need to interact in mixed social settings.⁹ The headscarf is thus (also) a creative response to new social demands, prompted as much by the desire to gain education and a professional career as by the need to generate two incomes

