

Sites of religious syncretism in Istanbul

Konstantina Georgiadou | University of Liverpool

The early 20th century saw the separation of Christian and Muslim communities in the eastern Mediterranean with the Lausanne Treaty of 1923 and the establishment of modern Greece and Türkiye. Aeons of cultural coexistence in the Mediterranean basin had resulted in a plurality of cultural expressions blending or overlapping within the built space. While the architectural heritage of these territories is a testament to their former diverse cultural interactions, urban space was employed by both countries to portray the new desired national identities through campaigns of cultural cleansing and ethnic homogenisation.

The devotional crossovers between the Muslim and Christian groups in the lands of the Ottoman Empire, closely linked to their shared culture, traditions and dogmatic flexibility, have been conducive to the creation of mixed spaces of worship. The Population Exchange marked the cessation of the majority of syncretic practices, as the two religious groups were separated and removed from their original settings. Displacement led to loss of architectural heritage and its associated traditions, which resulted from centuries of practice on the territory and had been influenced and shaped by the interactions of neighbouring ethnic and religious groups.

With the support of a BIAA Study Grant, the research project Sites of Religious Syncretism in Istanbul documented surviving interreligious spaces of worship along with their historical and contemporary contexts. This work is part of a wider project which delves into the causal nexus between the survival of architectural heritage and its religious importance as perceived by Muslim and Christian communities.

In the summer of 2022, six Christian and Muslim religious sites in Istanbul and on the island of Büyükada, identified in the foundational work of F.W. Hasluck, *Christianity and Islam under the Sultans*, were documented and studied. Fieldwork consisted of architectural and ethnographic surveys examining the use and role of the built fabric in the conduction of interreligious practices past and present. At three sites – the Christian monastery of Balıklı, the Eyüp Sultan Camii and the Sünbül Sinan Efendi Tomb – traces of such activities have almost disappeared. However, these sites have retained their religious importance for their respective communities. Syncretic traces on the built fabric are gone, having been forgotten, neglected or physically erased by recent restoration efforts.

In contrast, the other three sites are still actively used for such practices. Every year on 23 April, thousands of Muslim pilgrims climb the hill to visit the monastery of St. George on Büyükada island, tying colourful threads on trees and expressing their wishes to the Saint. A monthly pilgrimage of Muslims also occurs at the Dormition of the Theotokos (Ayin Biri Kilisesi) at Vefa. Although the church is regularly attended

by the Rum Christian community, Muslim women visit it on the first day of each month and using a small golden key and other votives perform a ritual involving the icons and architecture of the church. Similar practices take place in Our Lady of Vlachernae church, centred around the icon of the Virgin.

A century after the separation of the populations, these practices have re-emerged and redefined these buildings, adding a new layer to the historic palimpsest. The two religious communities operate separately but not independently in these spaces, forming a novel practice, stemming from their syncretic interactions and often surpassing dogmatic limitations. Muslim visitors follow a new procession type, interacting with the icons, using votives and interacting with the holy water springs. The visitors' experience is deeply shaped by the physical arrangement of space, and in turn it challenges and reconfigures it.

In contrast to Christianity, the syncretic rituals are centred on physical objects and their interaction with the built space. The objects are not strictly votives, as some are brought to the religious spaces, while others are kept by the pilgrims as talismans. Additionally, the relationship between objects, icons and ritual is deeply rooted in the built space, as even though the practices are similar between these sites, they are also distinctly adapted to their context and are not transferable.

Regardless of the degree and intensity of the recorded interreligious activities, the analysis aided our understanding of the evolution of religious practices in all these important monuments, which are closely linked to their continued use and endurance. The fate of these structures contributes to cross-cultural understanding and dialogue between the countries, while fostering cooperation in the field of cultural heritage preservation.

