

Anna Gehrman

**Ethical Pursuits and
Heart Cultivation in
Contentious Cityscapes.
Sketching Religious
Experience Among Western
Muslims in Istanbul.**

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Abstract

In recent years Istanbul has gained popularization as a religious center among Western Muslims, who continue to settle in the metropolis, attracted by an Islamic environment, Muslim diversity and an infrastructure catering to everyday Muslim life. The present working paper is based on an eight-week-long fieldwork among the city's Western Muslim migrants, in which the author examines the nature of her research participants' relationship to the city, with a specific focus on their religious experience therein. The working paper shows that the urban environment creates conditions fecund to the fostering of a religious consciousness and ethical subjectivity, both of which are situated in the spiritual heart. It also delineates the process, by which the urban environment with its sensory, invisible and irritating properties becomes a source for the cultivation of piety, virtue and gnosis.

Zusammenfassung

In den letzten Jahren hat Istanbul eine Popularisierung als religiöses Zentrum unter europäischen und amerikanischen Muslimen erlangt, die zunehmend – angezogen von einem islamischen Umfeld, muslimischer Diversität und einer an muslimisches Alltagsleben angepassten Infrastruktur – in die Stadt immigrieren. Das vorliegende Arbeitspapier basiert auf einer achtwöchigen Feldforschung mit westlichen muslimischen Migranten in Istanbul, worin die Autorin die Natur der Beziehung ihrer Forschungsteilnehmer zur Stadt mit Schwerpunkt auf ihrer religiösen Erfahrung innerhalb der Metropole untersucht. Das Arbeitspapier zeigt, dass das urbane Umfeld günstige Rahmenbedingungen für die Formierung eines religiösen Bewusstseins und ethischer Subjektivität schafft, welche ihren Sitz im spirituellen Herzen haben, und erläutert den Prozess, in dem die städtische Landschaft mit ihren sensorischen, unsichtbaren, und irritierenden Eigenschaften zur Quelle der Kultivierung von Frömmigkeit, Tugend und Gnosis wird.

Schlagwörter / Keywords

Ethische Selbstkultivierung, religiöses Bewusstsein, Herzenstheorie, sinnliche Religion, islamischer Traditionalismus, Ethik / ethical self-cultivation, religious consciousness, heart theory, sensorial religion, Islamic Traditionalism, ethics

Die Autorin

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Almost two years after I first began fieldwork in Istanbul, I am finalizing my master's thesis. I had been often debating with myself whether to finish it or not, but I've stuck to the belief that I owe the completion of my work to all the wonderful people I have met in the field. Two years later, still, I often find my thoughts trailing back to Istanbul and on some days, I find myself, mistakenly, catching a glimpse of a familiar face in the crowd at the bus stop. Moments like these show me the indelible mark fieldwork leaves on anthropologists. And to that, I owe my gratitude to everyone who let me partake in their life and the unique social world of the expatriate community in Istanbul. I want to start by thanking them first.

My hope is that the thesis is received as a token of gratitude by everyone who was so kind to talk to me and offer their help, both formally and informally. I want to extend special thanks to all the research participants who generously gave their time for interviews. This work would not have been possible without the thoughts and opinions that they shared with me. Throughout my fieldwork I also became a recipient of open-hearted invitations and sincere counsel, without which Istanbul would have been a less enjoyable and more impersonal place. For that, I am truly grateful.

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this thesis, who have become my teachers and who made Istanbul a place of *tawaddud*.
It is to them that I would like to dedicate this work.

Notes on Transliterations, Abbreviations and Names

This work is reflecting the multilingual patchwork that my field has come to represent, where next to English, both Turkish and Arabic are counted among the most-commonly spoken languages. My interlocutors, conversant in all three of them, made occasional use of Arabic and Turkish in our conversations when using religious vocabulary or reflecting on their environment. For this reason, it is my aim to retain my interlocutors' linguistic diversity where applicable.

Moreover, what factors into the choice of transliteration is the emergence of what Barbara Metcalf calls "Islamic English" (1996: xv). The anglophone Muslim world is stretching across at least five continents and given the wide proliferation of English language Islamic material, in the form of books, pamphlets and video lectures, it is fair to use Arabic-derived terms in ways reflective of their user's linguistic habits. Therefore, and to ensure flow of reading, I omit diacritical markers and present conventional spelling for widely used Arabic words, such as Qur'an or dhikr. Similarly in the interest of readability, I will omit in-text translations for religious vocabulary unfamiliar to the reader (in italics upon their first mention). However, I will provide their translations in the appendix. For verses and traditions quoted in the original, I will include in-text translations. Below I provide a general overview of the transliterations as used in this thesis:

For Arabic words and names, the combination of the letters dh represents the letter, ذ and ذ, the letters gh represent the غ, the letters kh represent the خ and the combination of th represents the ث. The letter s is equivalent to the letters س and ص, the letter t to the letter ت and ط, the letter d to the letters د and ض and the letter h to the letters ه and ح. The ' represents the letter ع. I have generally omitted the glottal stop unless it occurs in the middle of a word, where it also appears as an apostrophe.

For Turkish words and names, I use standard Turkish orthography. Some of its religious vocabulary can be traced back to Arabic cognates. In such cases I use the more common Arabic transliteration unless used otherwise by my interlocutors. Turkish place names are referred to by their Turkish spelling.

An abbreviation used in my work is 'MIM' for the association 'Majlis of Istanbul Muslims'. I will spell it out fully at the first mention and abbreviate it thereafter. All names are pseudonyms to ensure the anonymity of my field participants. Finally, to refer to religious authorities, I use the common terms Sheikh, Ustadh or Ustadha (fem.).

– “In this city you will find what you are looking for, if you want to party you can do it, and if you want to pray you can do it”, Farah.

– “but in the large view, no lines or changeless shapes: the working in and out, together/ and against, of millions of events”, A.R. Ammons, *Corsons Inlet*.

Introduction¹

1. Setting the Scene

This work is about piety and the people who aim to cultivate it. Set in Istanbul, the city isn't a mere container for the action happening in it, but an integral part of the selfhood, spirituality and journey for those I worked with. The phenomenon I came in touch with – Muslims from the West carving out new lives for themselves in Istanbul – although recent, also echoes past histories. Therefore, I want to preface my introduction with a short history of Istanbul and take stock of the physical and temporal site, in which those lives are situated, and how they got there.

For over one millennium Istanbul has been a global city (Smart and Smart 2003: 264, Fisher-Onar 2018: 8), defined by the popular image as 'bridge' between major cultural and geographical formations that rendered it "a natural arbiter in flows of trade, ideas, and people" (Fisher-Onar 2018: 8) and a dense "palimpsest" (Assmann 2009: 18). The former capital of the Eastern Roman Empire, Byzantium and the Ottoman Empire (Keyder 2008: 504) had for a long time been a cultural, religious, economic and political hub attracting scholarship, trade and human diversity. Waves of migrants of differing origin found a safe haven to weather political storms, resulting in substantial fluctuations of the city's population (Keyder 2008: 506).

This came to an abrupt halt with the abolishment of the Ottoman Caliphate in 1922 that saw a new nationalist and laical regime taking power. The founding fathers of the Turkish Republic oversaw massive cultural upheavals to architect a new nation from the ashes of the former empire, with dramatic results. Ethnic and religious minorities were violently expelled, Muslim religious life was virulently policed and curtailed, and the administrative capital moved to Ankara (Keyder 2008: 508).

The following decades were marked by tight regulations on religious life, censorship on cultural expression associated with the Ottoman era, and growing patterns of Westernization. The fifties were marked by transformations in industry and economic liberalization (Fisher-Onar 2018: 2), which drew waves of rural-to-urban migration to Istanbul throughout the better half of the 20th century. Consequently, the rapid population

¹ The present work is an edited version of my Master's thesis, submitted in 2025 as part of the graduate course on the Anthropology of the Global at the Department of History and Cultural Sciences at the Johannes-Gutenberg University.

increase drove hap-hazard construction and urban expansion, while parallel economic development and new consumption patterns, gave rise to middle-class housing and spatial class divisions in the city (Keyder 2008: 510-13). Together, this paved the way for the city's current image, which has turned into a hub for transnational trade, flows of people, ideas (Jaffe and de Koning 2016: 104), as well as tourism and economic migration from Asia and Africa.

But quietly, beneath the din of neoliberal industry and continuous nation building, another turn has occurred in the city's history. Since the caliphate's demise, Istanbul's religious and intellectual role across the region became significantly diminished (Keyder 2008: 508), notwithstanding the Islamic revival of the nineties. That is, until the Arab Spring. Its political turmoil and subsequent civil war in Syria were key reasons for the influx of many Syrian scholars and religious figures into Istanbul. With this new momentum, the city gained popularization as a center of religious learning in the Near East, especially among Muslims from Europe, North America and Central Asia. Resonance is growing among an ever-broadening number of Western Muslims, who visit the metropolis for religious purposes and flock to annual programs and seminars featuring renowned religious scholars from the Middle East. Some of these visitors, however, choose to settle.

“Between Modernity and Tradition: Why Turkey Appeals to Western Muslims and Students of Islam“ (Inanc and Erken 2023) sounds the title of a recent article of an online tabloid specializing in the Middle East. In it the authors shine light on Western Muslims increasingly relocating to Istanbul, attracted by an Islamic environment, as well as Muslim diversity and infrastructure catering for the necessities of Muslim life (Inanc and Erken 2023). Yet the city is subject to both religious and non-religious lifestyles and meaning-making (Fisher-Onar 2018), blending conflicting spatial norms (Secor 2002: 6) and converging in a pluralistic cityscape. In this context, the new stream of North-South migration by Western Muslims produces new narratives, networks and local formations in the form of migrant associations, religious learning circles and activist conferences. What happens when Western Muslims, in search for change and a more fulfilling life, gather in the Turkish metropolis, integrate into extant spaces and create new socio-cultural formations? This is the baseline question I first set out to explore.

2. Doing Research

I started preparations for my fieldwork in July 2023, by preliminarily gathering information on my field and sphere of interest. That phase can be identified by an engagement with a “broad range of cultural texts” (Jaffe and de Koning 2016: 16), such as videos, podcasts and online-articles about life in Istanbul from the perspective of Western Muslims who had taken up residency there. Around the same time, I began conducting digital ethnography, by observing on-site events and online discourses in Istanbulite Telegram groups. Later, membership in those groups proved to be an excellent entry gate to the field on the ground.

Then, on the 15th of February 2024 I travelled to Istanbul for a field trip of nearly eight weeks. The second half of my fieldwork coincided with the month of Ramadan, which observant Muslims spend fasting. I conducted fieldwork overwhelmingly in the districts of Fatih and Eyüp Sultan on the European side, and Üsküdar on the Asian side. To the keen-eyed, these names are near-synonymous with Istanbul’s archipelagic religious geography and reveal a particular direction in my research activity.

For the most part I partook in my field community’s associational life by attending talks, iftars, a city-walk, a praise-singing event for the Prophet Muhammad and a regular class on *hadith* which covered a classical work on the subject. Throughout, I conducted digital ethnography and interviews with research participants. I spent those eight weeks commuting daily on overcrowded busses and trains, studying, listening to religious scholars, conversing with field participants, running from one appointment to another, praying in the mosques, fasting, dealing with family, learning Turkish, and transferring notes on my laptop late into the night. Overall, my activities, in many ways similar to those of my research participants, were embedded in city life, social circles and Islamic practice. This is why my own engagement and emplacement in the city was highly informative for my research and the later development of its direction.

3. Religious Experience of Western Muslim Migrants

This thesis is concerned with religious experience among Western Muslims migrants² in Istanbul. I set out into the field with the goal of understanding place-making processes

² Though I prefer to use the term migrant for levelling the distinction between unequal forms of mobility, alongside I will use the term ‘expatriate’, as it is more commonly used.

hinged to field participants' environmental perception. I also had in mind the investigation of socio-cultural dynamism engendered by a process of establishing a living among the diverse communities that make up Istanbul with a tentative hope of formulating a political critique within the framework of the anthropology of the otherwise. Unexpectedly, however, I ended up with a research topic that zooms into the religious practices of my field community. In hindsight it surprises little. My early focus on urban anthropology, environmental perception and place-making placed me into an attention nexus that was germane to researching religious experience in the city. The conclusions formed in my thesis emerge directly from this initial line of inquiry.

Yet a particular question propelled me into the discussion on religious experience and practice. Responding to the cues of my interlocutors, I began to ask about the facets of city life that made dwelling in Istanbul pleasurable. I will elaborate on the particularities of this question later in chapter three. For now, a general observation suffices that this question helped promote a deeper insight into the importance of religious experience in city life. That is because, by trying to understand the 'livability' of the city, I set out to explore a dynamic interaction between research participants and urban space – its sensory and social saturation. This exploration has brought enchantment back into the discussion on faith and spirituality and has challenged me to think beyond routine conceptual rigidity. The wish to grasp what makes it worth living in Istanbul helped me craft a connecting pattern for a coherent narrative about religious experience, which holds together this thesis' various sections.

The resulting work argues that facets of the urban environment and its invisible landscape inform a pious consciousness and attending practices of ethical self-cultivation, both of which shape aptitudes necessary to perform spiritual exercises and cultivate virtuous habits. The wide spectrum of practices belonging to the fold of urban sensorium, perception of the unseen, pious habits and God-consciousness is what the main part of my thesis will investigate.

4. Thesis Structure

That said, my thesis is characterized by some degree of eclecticism. Although I will try to ensure readability and cohesion, I see a need to explain my choice for structuring this work. This introduction is followed by a chapter on researching urban religion, titled correspondingly "Researching Urban Religion. Sensuous Methodologies, Affective Em-

placement and the Search for Religion in Anthropology”. It will examine challenges, research methods and positionality in more detail, including the issue of religion in anthropology. Next, I will introduce the community in which I conducted fieldwork. This second chapter, “Community as Aesthetic Formation. Traditionalism and the Making of Moral Selves” will comprise a brief description of the field, its networks and people, in which I bring up my research participants’ identification with religious traditionalism and situate its study within theoretical strands of the anthropology of Islam.

After familiarizing the reader with the broader introductory and conceptual commentary that underpins this work, I will then turn to the main part and first reconstruct my field entry and adjustment of my research question in chapter three, titled “A Difficult Homecoming”. Next, I will turn my attention to the pious urban sensorium, which is a central element in constituting the cultivation of a religious consciousness. Under the chapter heading of “Sensorial Religion”, I assemble a succinct overview on the nexus of religion, the senses and urban space, before ethnographically describing this phenomenon across several subchapters and concluding with the notion of cultivating ethical dispositions and pious selves.

Chapter five shifts away from the initial focus on the senses and is set to continue where the sensory paradigm has left off. Titled “(In)Visible Landscapes”, it seeks to connect the built environment to deeper dynamics of faith, invisible relationships, and discernment with the spiritual faculty of the heart, demonstrating their joint influence on the formation of religious consciousness and ethical selves. At this point, narrative, rather than theory, will guide the ethnographic account. Although this may be an unusual choice for ethnographies, I see it as a consequence of valuing fieldwork affordances. Taking this ethnographic tangent hopefully gives result to a piece of writing, which, to borrow from Paul Stoller, “dwell[s] upon the sideroads of discovery rather than the main highway of results” (1989: 143).

Chapter six, “With or Against the City”, builds on previous ideas ethical self-cultivation, religious consciousness, and heart theory, and examines the interplay between virtuous habits, spiritual exercises and resistance to the city environment as means that serve interlocutors’ progression in their spiritual development and God-conscious living. With this chapter I conclude the discussion on the senses, corporeal piety and its enmeshment into the unseen, and seek to advance an alternative understanding of how

Muslims cultivate a relationship with God, centered around habits, conscious choices and spiritual faculties, in a manner that ultimately favors the perspective of those I had the chance to do research with.

To conclude, I will briefly summarize the thesis and recapitulate my main lines of argument. Harking back to the idea of fluidity and momentary nature of anthropological writing, I offer the reader an outlook into the uncertain future of the socio-cultural constellation of Western Muslims in Istanbul while highlighting regional, political, social and human interconnections and their contributions to shaping the city.

5. Context from Above and Below

Finally, I want to comment on the context in which my research took place and how it has shaped my perspective. The year 2024 was characterized by continued economic and political volatility in Türkiye. Inflation and the progressing cost of living crisis were having a considerable impact on housing and its effects reverberated through most poor- and middle-class households. At the same time presidential elections were looming at the end of March. Populist, xenophobic and racist rhetoric was permeating not only political promises, including tighter migration controls and so-called voluntary repatriations for Syrian refugees, but also everyday interactions and refusals. In many ways, the city was stressed, not to mention the everyday annoyances, tensions and indifferences of life in a metropolis. The political climate in which everyone navigated existence cannot be compared to a harsh winter, but certainly to a moody spring.

While the abovementioned circumstances are tendentially representative of top-down processes putting a strain on life in the city, there is also the bottom-up ‘feel’ to the city. The constellation of infrastructure, people and places on the ground is in steady motion and transformation. People move in and out, spaces change, shut down, others open. The scene of construction is etched into the cityscape just as the scene of demolition – a reminder of people’s alertness towards the ever-growing threat of an earthquake. The cycle of life and decay, as well as fluctuations in landscape, people and fortunes, all beget an urban ecology of impermanence and processuality, one that has informed my perspective on my informants’ lifeworld.

The processuality of my field does not lend itself to linear schematization nor essentializing imagination. Its motion and instability convey a sense of assiduous action. I believe that this atmosphere has guided my focus towards action and becoming within

a dynamic context. Religious experience in Istanbul is not played out on the stage of a pristine Islamic environment. This perspective ignores the complexity of ethical self-cultivation as process, in and out of sync with the city's environment. Therefore, it is my intent to highlight interstices and intersections of that pious becoming and to allow the in-betweenness of urban piety to be fully expressed.

Lastly, it is important to remember that this work represents the momentary snapshot of a phenomenon in constant change and transformation, written from a situated perspective. To this end, I will reiterate what is most-commonly accepted in our discipline, that with this representational attempt, I am:

“(...) enjoying the freedom that
Scope eludes my grasp, that there is no finality of vision,
that I have perceived nothing completely,
that tomorrow a new walk is a new walk.” (Ammons 1965: 125-128)

1. Researching Urban Religion. Sensuous Methodologies, Affective Emplacement and the Search for Religion in Anthropology

Researching within a city and researching religion are both phenomena that pose unique challenges and urge the researcher to think beyond conventional approaches to doing anthropology. In the case of my work, it happens that both thematics are connected to my positionality. Therefore, I begin by outlining challenges associated with urban research and what methods I employed to overcome them. The discussion proceeds to senses and bodies as research tools, and the manner in which my being a practicing Muslim amplified their use in an environment laden with religious culture. This will be followed by a glance at my positionality and what it means for the situated knowledge emerging from this ethnographic account. Finally, I want to examine the contentious issue of religion and religiosity in anthropology and offer a cogent explanation of ways in which this fusion can be productively understood in the context of my research.

1.1 Research Methods and Challenges in an Urban Setting

Conducting anthropological research in the city comes with challenges. Prototypical fieldwork is complicated by lack of a bounded area that is characteristic of communal life. In the vast expanses of the metropolis, people's lives are distinguished by high mobility and social relationships distributed individually across space (Jaffe and De

Koning 2016: 14-15). During my fieldwork these and similar issues were also exacerbated by the fact that networking opportunities primarily arose at events, most of which took place on weekends. Missing a key event or not getting in touch with the right people potentially meant missing out on data collection for a week.

Another challenge was the busy lives of those with whom I conducted fieldwork. Most of them were young professionals, or jobbing students, and many were additionally privately enrolled in programs of Islamic studies or highly committed to community service. Due to the intersection of private responsibilities and a habit of using one's time efficiently, it was difficult for people to contribute much time to the research project. To overcome this impasse, I opted for a range of creative methods I had selected in advance.

On the one hand a significant amount of my field data is derived from interviews, ranging from informal conversations to semi-structured interviews, and participant observation during events and classes. On the other hand, creative methods from the anthropologist's toolbox complement classical approaches by adding new research strategies relevant for fieldwork in urban centers.

One such method is 'deep hanging out'. It complements participant observation insofar that it strongly leans on sensory-rich participative activities, which is considered an epistemic launchpad for understanding local cultural processes (Jaffe 2012). Another such method is "polymorphous engagement" (Gusterson 1997: 116). This approach consciously transcends spatial limitations, by exploring multiple sites, social groups and actors across the cityscape, as well as their interactions. My engagement with the city brought me into contact with locals, tourists, refugees, endowment staff and religious teachers. In subtle ways, those encounters contributed to a layered city experience, echoing my research participants' own forging of multifaceted links to the metropolis. Furthermore, gathering impressions from various sites, such as mosques, cafés, shops, *madrasas*, parks and public transport, served to recreate a comparative perspective to that of research participants, so I could become familiar with the feeling tones of social life in the city.

In rare instances, I was able to fall back on a go-along. Also popular among geographers and urban scholars, this method seeks to capture space from human agents' emic point of view. To that end, the go-along offers insight into everyday spatial practices, „experiences and logics of movement, as well as the tacit knowledge of the urban

landscape that such movement presupposes” (Jaffe and De Koning 2016: 18). The participative nature of these methods aims at making productive the urban mobility of research participants, as well as the eventful nature of a global metropolis. Given their close relation with sensory input, those methods speak to a sensory methodology largely associated with sensory- (Stoller 1989, 1997), visual- (Pink 2009), and acoustic anthropology (Eisenlohr 2018, Feld 2012[1982], Sykes and Byl 2023).

1.2 A Sensory Approach

This brings me to my next methodological point. Sensory-oriented data gathering draws through the entire urban experience and is not confined to the methods mentioned prior. My own sensory involvement in the city as intuitive research practice, contributed to the epistemic use of my sensorial and bodily emplacement in the environment. As research tool, it helped me share the quotidian sensory register of my field participants.

Anthropologists immersed in their fields will find that the field yields embodied knowledge (Stoller 1997: 23), making the body a prime epistemological tool (Faust 2021: 183-4, Fernandez 2003: 187). This inevitably extends to the senses, whose hierarchies, at the cultural level, can structure epistemic orders, and hence what we can perceive and how we do so. Because our environments exhibit a richness of cultural meanings (Howes and Classen 1996: 88-91), to perceive them, we are invited to engage the full spectrum of our senses in research.

It remains necessary to reflect on the use of our senses. The reason is that both our sensory hierarchy and socialized sense of the kind of perception acceptable for scientific eligibility prefigure our understanding of and engagement with the field. Do we limit our engagement to observation, potentially objectifying our field (Stoller 1989: 8)? What senses can we fall back on to make sense of the life-worlds we study? What modes of perception can be foreclosed by our own cultural background?

By raising these questions, I already hint at the issue of positioned sensory approaches to the field. The different standpoints from which anthropologists are using their senses can have a critical value for epistemological sensibilities within their respective fieldwork contexts. Because while a sensory diversity can be said to represent external access to the field, the modes of their use and reach are dependent on one's positionality, representing internal epistemic currents.

With that, I want to sketch a desirable perspective on how to understand my own

situated sensorial register, stemming from me being a practicing Muslim in the field. Sensorial input is subject to attention and inattention, instant evaluation, all of which informs differences in perception, and is ultimately derived from our subject positions. We are subject to differing experiences in the same environment by attaching different meanings and priorities to sensory cues, by unearthing layers of sensory and visceral experience through sensuous research, and by embracing divergent affordances that sensory cues invite us to.

The inquiry into the interactive dynamic between a relative sensorial register and positionality can make productive situated knowledge for enriched ethnographies. In my context, what deserves attention is embodied religious experience in research. While detaching fieldwork from religious experience dominated 19th- and 20th-century anthropology, and doing otherwise meant laying oneself open to the charge of lack of objectivity (Pierini and Groisman 2016: 2), today anthropological outlook is becoming less insular on this matter. No longer conflating objectivity with abandoning one's subject position (Bernard 2006: 372-3), religious experience and its bodily dimensions involved in ethnographic research (Pierini and Groisman 2016: 5, McGuire 2008) can be effective means of contributing to knowledge production.

Working from the position of a situated sensorial register, wherein I find myself high on the scale of identification with activities like visiting mosques or joining religious events as an active participant, not just a participant observer, is a circumstance that I use to enrich my perspective on my research participants' religious commitment.

1.3 The Situated Ethnographer

Given this closeness to my field, is it valid to say that my experience is synonymous with that of my research participants and does this project qualify as doing research at home? By addressing this question and its ramifications head-on, I seek to weigh the freight of positionality and knowledge in my work, beyond the senses. The question itself, one that religiously committed anthropologists are commonly asked (Howell 2007: 372), was posed to me on different occasions, leading up to and following my fieldwork, by members of our colloquium group.

Despite its innocuity it is redolent of a "false impression of "native" ethnography" (Hage 2021: xi), as closeness is not sameness. What I share most prominently with many research participants is being a practicing Muslim socialized in the West. This com-

monality is worth noting, as it later helps me explain my sense of ‘affective emplacement’ in the social constellation on the ground. At the same time, I am not part of the community of expatriates in Istanbul, an experience whose features I am trying to access through the range of methodological tools.

Being half-way in and half-way out, I argue that it is best to think of my position as a ‘halfie’ anthropologist. “Halfie” is an expression co-termed by Kirin Narayan (1993: 673) and Lila Abu-Lughod (1991: 137, 161) and primarily denotes individuals whose identities enfold mixed subject positions due to complex educational and familial biographies (Abu-Lughod 1991: 137, Narayan 1993: 673). This term is concomitantly well-suited to describe many of my field participants’ lives, characterized by the convergence of transnational mobility, multilingualism and numerous educational paths³. By virtue of working among people with dynamic identities, it is possible to see myself as ‘halfie’ among ‘halfies’. This positioned closeness between me and my field community represents the wider surface of intersubjective verifiability that I tap into.

Being a ‘halfie’ can yield a powerful way of becoming affectively situated and thereby influence how cultural life-worlds are understood and evaluated. By laying open my own sense of affective emplacement that accompanied the journey into the life world of my research community in Istanbul, I want to make an additional point about ways of perception, that hopefully enriches the present work. I started with charting a sensory approach to the field, which, if investigated further, reveals a subversion of conventions in which “self and other are considered separate” (Stoller 1997: xvii). Self and other are in fact immutably interwoven in my research context, reflecting my relation to the field itself.

Anthropologists have previously been criticized for emptying their field of affective relationships and rendering life worlds into “text” (Rosaldo 2014: 126). This is achieved through an objectifying and mechanical gaze employed by the ethnographer (Rosaldo 2014: 136), who is “excluded from the real play of social activities by the fact that he has no place (...) in the system observed” (Bourdieu in Rosaldo 2014: 136). This is usually reflected in the prosaic style of ethnographic representation, refraining from

³ While it is important to keep in mind the instability of totalizing markers of identity, my use of the term ‘Western’ in qualifying my research participants identity refers to a dominant cultural trait, grounded in socialization, language, thought, taste, subjectivity, and self-identification.

sensuous, subjective and sentimental accounts of anthropological participation in others' lives (Stoller 1989: 50-51).

An ethnographer's affective emplacement allows another perspective on the human condition, as poetic qualities of human life become tangible through affective relationships emerging from being situated in the field. The lack of situatedness bears directly on perception and appraisal, as mentioned above, thus modes of appraisal follow a sensory structural design. In this reading, the critique of the disaffected and distant anthropological observer is commensurate with his conventional, visualist epistemological instruments (Stoller 1989: 51). This insight blends the sensory, positioned and affected.

Different occurrences during fieldwork spoke to such affective situatedness. Yet its emergence was not only due to my 'halfie' position, but also by way of being captured by instances in the field, where I became the object of another's actions. This was part of a grounding and situating experience in the field that placed me into affective relationships with field participants and the broader research community. My conclusion is to understand my affective emplacement in the field as a fieldwork-epistemology that prefers the affected over the distanced, the sensory over the sterile, the involved over the observing and as a channel for capturing the poetic qualities of human life.

1.4 In Search of Religion in Anthropology

So far, I have discussed senses, positionality and affective emplacement. Together with the initial methodological considerations these discussions aimed to elucidate various epistemological implications in the present work. In this section I will touch upon a last contentious point pertaining to knowledge production, which directly relates to my subject position, namely religion and religiosity in anthropology. Here, I seek to contend with selected aspects of religion as a variable in anthropo-logical research and practice and offer a constructive understanding of their fusion within the context of my fieldwork.

Despite the interconnected histories of social theorizing and religious traditions (Robbins 2006: 286, Lansing 2006: 2-3), the relationship between anthropology and religious subjects is an uneasy one. Institutionally, anthropologists often face skeptical and disdainful attitudes toward their open profession of religiosity (Baldacchino 2019: 351). Sometimes these sentiments even extend to religious subjects of anthropological research, where piety is met with the dilemma of repugnance by those who aim to study

it (Mahmood 2005: 37, Howell 2007: 372, Harding 1991). Underlying this state of affairs are anthropologists' own reductive assumptions about religion (Cannell 2005), resulting in the dismissal of religious experience at home and in studying others (Meneses and Bronkema 2017: 4-5). Typically, these problematics are indicative of the fault lines in ontological positioning within a strictly secular academic discipline (Baldacchino 2019: 351). At its heart lies the question of what can be known as true, and consequently, how it can be known.

Religion and its underlying indeterminacy pose a problem for anthropologists. Scholars engaged in the study of religion, which is posited to lie beyond rationalist secular thought, seek to combine two difficult tasks: taking other people's worldviews seriously and accounting for one's approach towards the 'unexplainable' both methodologically and theoretically (Di Puppo 2024: 62). Anthropologists of religion grapple with the question of how to explain and confront radical alterity, be it the form of a 'religious other' or Divine presence. However, constrained by their inability to approximate religious experience, "using conventional methods of inquiry" (Di Puppo 2024: 62) proves insufficient for the task.

To overcome the barrier between secular reason and religious alterity, anthropologists propose to embrace humility, "surrender, letting go" (Di Puppo 2024: 64) and the willingness to accept an "existential transformation of the self" as part of one's lived field experience (Willerslev and Suhr 2018: 73). These proposals constructively hark back to a recent turn to radical "openness to be displaced to the very core of one's ontological foundations" (Baldacchino 2019: 352) and combine it with the imperative to take interlocutors' ontological claims seriously (Baldacchino 2019: 352-353, Di Puppo 2024: 64).

To those anthropologists who wish to offer holistic decolonial ethnographies on spiritual and religious practices, the ontological turn constitutes fertile ground (Baldacchino 2019: 352, Di Puppo 64, Willerslev and Suhr 2018: 67, Luhrmann 2020, Lemons 2021: 405, Meneses and Bronkema 2017: 2) for opening up anthropological inquiry into potentialities of existence (Holbraad, Pedersen, and Viveiros de Castro 2014: §5). While this recent turn has made it easier for researchers to bridge the alterity divide, proposals like these overlook a number of problems that arise from their underlying presuppositions.

Firstly, in my reading, the ontological turn's position remains unsatisfying on the

grounds of accepting radical alterity as a given. Likewise, I want to problematize the perspective of those anthropologists who exhibit a similar tendency to relate to their subjects as the ‘other’ (Di Puppo 2024, Willerslev and Suhr 2018, Luhrmann 2018: 79-80, Ewing 1994: 571, Hollywood 2004: 524). That is because the sense of alterity as a question of positionality and perspective doesn’t align well with my positioning as a practicing Muslim within my research community.

Secondly, anthropologists have expressed that faith goes beyond the superficial, which is “why faith takes work and why faith changes the faithful” (Luhrmann 2018: 81). Similarly, the religious practices observable among my community of faithful in Istanbul, can be viewed as a process of learning to discern and see beyond material forms of things, although material forms are catalysts for those reflective processes. Given that this is an acquired ability, rather than deeply entrenched cultural difference, I believe that there is ample room for validating my interlocutors’ perceptions without recurring to ontological self-displacement.

Instead, to arrive at a productive understanding of religious knowing in anthropology, it is worth pointing out that “anthropologists who are themselves religious believers may in fact contribute in significant ways to the study of religious faith and should not simply be ignored as matter out of place” (Willerslev and Suhr 2018: 65). That in mind, I propose to follow the directive of feminist ethnography by rejecting the opposition of “subject and object, (...) knower and known” (Stacey 1988: 21) and understand religious commitment in the context of fieldwork as “analogous to other subject positions which are characterized by moral/ethical commitments” (Howell 2007: 372). Like feminism, religious commitment builds “communities of interest” and eschews “otherness” (Robbins 2006: 287).

Commitment choices in research invariably contribute to the establishment of common ground with interlocutors. That is why, as a researcher, I came to experience this commitment as essential to full and multifaceted participation in community life and as an invitation to membership in it “even before I arrived” (Howell 2007: 376). Baseline religious literacy bridged the experiential and analytical divide experienced by outside anthropologists, equipped me with insight into my interlocutors’ mode of existence and allowed me to validate their experiences. Thus religion, alongside sensuous research and positioned perception, acts as another epistemological variable within the study of

religious culture among Western Muslims in Istanbul. Their social formation, distinctive affinities and theoretical location within the anthropology of Islam will be the subject of the next chapter.

2. Community as Aesthetic Formation. Traditionalism and the Making of Moral Selves

This chapter aims to provide an introduction to the community of Western Muslim migrants, among whom I conducted fieldwork. I want to begin this chapter by offering a more precise description of their social formation, constellation and spaces. Thereafter, I want to define its scope by proposing to view the community as aesthetic formation, bound by shared religious discourse and urban practices, whose elements I will briefly outline. Lastly, I will situate the study of my community in currents of the anthropology of Islam and expound on the positions I have found most helpful for my writing.

2.1 The Foreign Community Here Has Established a Village⁴

Thus far I have been referring to the social formation in which I conducted research as ‘community’. But what I call ‘community’ is, strictly speaking, a heterogenous, anglo-phone network consisting of families, university students, professionals, and students of sacred knowledge. It includes participants from North America, Europe, Singapore, Egypt, Nigeria and beyond. Spread out across the metropolis, it subsumes a variety of spaces which function as community hubs.

During research in this broad network, I zoomed in on the section I call Western Muslims, which includes individuals from the US, Canada, UK and Germany. Because of their self-designation as community, I also adopted this reference. Yamina for example, one of my research participants who was studying in Istanbul at the time, described the formation as a “foreign community” that has “established a village”. Her description evinces a communal self-understanding of closeness between its members, likening it to a village where everyone knows and looks out for each other. This portrait broadly reflects her personal experience within the migrant network.

Social media helps maintain that sense of connection. There, announcements, invitations to events, and practical advice on living in Istanbul are regularly distributed.

⁴ Quote from an interview with Yamina, a research participant.

Social media activity supplements in-person interaction and underlines the role distribution of new media technologies plays in producing contemporary religious communities (Meyer 2009). Superseding spatial containment, binding media allows for the redefinition of religious community and its dispersion throughout the cityscape (Lee 1999: 92), where individuals maintain high urban mobility, such as in the case of my research participants.

That is not to say that space is irrelevant for field participants. On the contrary, community is often, albeit not solely, associated with specific districts, such as Üsküdar, where many anglophone Muslims deliberately settle. Likewise, interlocutors pointed out the importance they attached to spatial closeness and belonging to the community of Western Muslim migrants, as it facilitated the cultivation of social ties and spontaneous expression of sociality in urban space. Social proximity therefore imbued urban life with dense social architecture and relationships (Kusenbach 2003: 466) formed by social practices. Such practices could assume a number of forms. For some it meant frequenting community spaces and events, such as those organized by Majlis of Istanbul Muslims (henceforth MIM), a student organization catering for English-speaking Muslim students in Istanbul. Its educational events mainly attracted foreign students seeking to connect.

For others it meant visiting the 7k café, also central to community life of anglophone Muslims. On my first visit there, I met several people whom I would regularly encounter during fieldwork, which serves as a testimony to the importance of the place as community hub. Its communal orientation is known from the fact that its owner generously offered the upper floor of the venue to be used for cultural and religious events, many organized by MIM. Cafés, such as the 7k, on a general note, have a ubiquitous presence as third spaces (Mirza 2024) in the lives of my research participants. While they are important as study places and spaces that help mediate urban distance (Meyer 2009: 3), they additionally bear the curious possibility of being transformed into loci for religious study and gatherings.

It is normally in the social realm of such gatherings that community-building becomes visible, as they are replete with interactions and affective constellations that serve the upkeep of friendships and communal relationships across multiple generations and different nationalities. In a conversation with Fareed, a research participant in his twenties, who lived in Istanbul with his wife at the time, we came to talk about the nature

of these events. As for spiritual gatherings, he explained to me his rationale of attending the following way: “I go there sometimes when I feel I need it or when I go for a social gathering”. Fareed’s reasoning speaks to the way people expect to experience religious gatherings in their social dimension. From this I understand that Islamic learning and spirituality in the community are not only a matter of the individual but are also moored in opportunities for social binding and bonding.

2.2 Aesthetic Formation

Western Muslims’ migrant lives are processual and dynamic, characterized by continual engagement in crafting new life worlds, community cohesion and individual self-fashioning within a heterogenous network of expatriates in a blended, contrasty cityscape. What transpires through this vivid picture is a seeming resistance to fixed categorizations. Despite this, I am repeatedly making categorical statements about the lives of research participants. The rationale behind doing so brings me to the topic of commonalities shared by my research community and what sets them apart from other Western Muslims and expatriates in the city. Western Muslim migrants in Istanbul aren’t a stable unity, as their discourses and practices are occasionally at odds with each other. As Saba Mahmood points out, that is because “very different configurations of personhood can cohabit the same cultural and historical space, with each configuration the product of a specific discursive formation rather than of the culture” (2005: 120).

Common denominators of identity among my community can be found first and foremost in their connection to the same spatial network, which points to a shared social sphere. But further, and more importantly, I argue that it is the understanding of the emplacement of one’s variety of Islamic practice in urban space that primarily supports communal self-identification. A single focus on shared space overlooks that “a community is not a preexisting entity that expresses itself via a fixed set of symbols”, writes Birgit Meyer, “but a formation that comes into being through the circulation and use of shared cultural forms” (2009: 4).

In this vein, it is important to pay attention to the shared discourses both in and outside communal spaces, as well as individual and collective urban practices. Regarding religiosity in the city, it can take multiple forms through relating to its landmarks, hallmarks and marketplaces, hence producing differing modes of consumption (Jaffe and De Koning 2016: 87), discourses on history (Bowen 1993: 40), and „sensational practices“

(Verkaaik 2013: 150). These habits lay the foundation for my research community as an “aesthetic formation (...) though [sic] which subjects are shaped by tuning their senses, inducing experiences, molding their bodies, and making sense” (Meyer 2009: 7). In the next section I want to provide more detail on the religious affinities feeding this aesthetic formation and its relation to the city.

2.3 Valorizing Tradition

Characteristic of my research participants’ discourse is the valorization of and self-identification with religious tradition. Many people within the wider network I was moving in were either students of Islamic sciences or their teachers, or sometimes both at once. Three out of four of my closest research participants had studied the Islamic sciences formally or were doing so in the present. The community’s orientation toward Islamic tradition could be glanced from the importance accorded to *isnads* that connected individuals to important scholars of both past and present, or from the fondness of local Islamic heritage, such as the *türbe* of Istanbulite saint Aziz Mahmud Hüdayi, which field participants regularly visited and passed by.

A further dimension of identifying with tradition is evidenced by their embrace of the city’s historical layers. Field participants often remarked on Ottoman history, which they associated above all with the historical presence of Islamic values in the form of people, places and socio-political constellations. This translated into their engagement with the urban environment. During Ramadan, some were looking forward to public neighborhood *iftars*, while others were thrilled to catch a glimpse of the *davulcu*, a relic of Muslim traditions of ancient times.

Valorization of tradition was accompanied by the affinity for *tasawwuf*, or Sufism. By and large Sufism tends to be one of two kinds, either associated with eccentric, liberal expression of Muslim devotion or that which is rooted in sober and orthopractic conduct. While confoundingly, Islamicists do not readily distinguish between the two (Ernst 1997, Schimmel 2003, Frishkopf 2012), my community, associated with the later type, does. Hence the only form of Sufism valued and accepted is one that stresses good character, ethical living, devotion to God (Ernst 1997: 23-24), “spiritual development and change through self-discipline” (Mathiesen 2013: 211) in accordance with sacred law.

Combined, these affinities squarely place my research community in the denomination of Traditionalism within Sunni Islam. As Traditionalism recently came into the

focus of academic writing (Mathiesen 2013, Newlon 2017, al-Azami 2022, Quisay 2023), it was investigated chiefly among Western Muslims. The fledgling character of Western Islamic contexts rendered Traditionalism since the eighties more outspoken as a discursive tradition (Mathiesen 2013: 191-192), whereas in the Muslim world it is often still adhered to matter-of-factly. Traditionalism is characterized by the disciplinary triad of jurisprudence and theology with Sufism at its core (Mathiesen 2013: 210). This places my field participants in proximity to much of Ottoman religious history and its attendant heritage in Türkiye, due to shared external textual referents (Messick 1993: 3, Bowen 1993: 7). Thus, Traditionalist understanding of Islam shapes the communal aesthetic formation and its religious urban practices to a large extent. In the next section I seek to schematize a favorable theoretical framework that is geared towards studying such practices, as well as piety at large, as experienced by research participants belonging to the Traditionalist persuasion.

2.4 Discursive Tradition and Moral Selves

Talal Asad's proposal for anthropologists to understand Islam "as a discursive tradition that connects variously with the formation of moral selves" (1986: 7) has fostered a now classic way of thinking about Muslim piety. Drawing on MacIntyre, Asad views such tradition as "discourses that seek to instruct practitioners regarding the correct form and purpose of a given practice that, precisely because it is established, has a history" (1986: 14).

However, there are a number of ways in which Asad's discursive tradition differs from Traditionalism. Asad places emphasis on descriptive examination of the processes of establishing correct practice. Anthropologists using this framework investigate the discursive element of modern debates (Bowen 1993) and scriptural habits (Messick 1993) in the way these elements modulate and authorize 'tradition'. Concurrently Traditionalism as denomination is concerned with investigating the means of establishing correct practice and its content. As such it has inherent, prescriptive, modes of authenticating practice by reference to knowledge from the past, through *taqlid*, *madhhabs*, isnads and other tools.

What these two understandings of tradition have in common, though, is a grasp of how references to the past shape today's practice. This conceptual intersection affords Asad's framework a particular usefulness for conceiving of the temporal continuity of

traditionalism as culture. The currency that past practices hold today is usually critically dismissed as either an invention of tradition (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1992) or harboring innate incommensurability with modernity, which is viewed as a catalyst of “constant (...) novelty” (Moumtaz 2015: 127). Asad’s view allots a rightful space to past practices in the present, by emphasizing discursiveness and temporal flexibility.

Moreover, he connects conceptions of tradition to the making of “moral selves” and wider examinations of agency. Belonging to a tradition means holding certain values and sensibilities. In a gradual process, termed self-cultivation or self-fashioning, people shape their subjecthood to adhere to their respective tradition and with special techniques, they learn its embodiment. But before this paradigm had gained currency, anthropologists had to overcome some hurdles to arrive at the study of ethical self-cultivation.

Research on Islam in the second half of the 20th century was dominated by a focus on power, polity, social order, and law, not dissimilar to overarching themes associated with academic study of society and culture (Reckwitz 2012). The sixties and seventies were dominated by debates that ascribed Islamic practices to either false consciousness or using religion to resist external power, especially in feminist readings of women’s piety (Mahmood 2005: 6-7). The reductionist focus on “the psyche, the economy, social relations, or politics” (Moumtaz 2015: 133), coupled with a dual understanding of agency as resistance or reproduction, has narrowed the scope of representation of piety and learnedness within Muslim contexts.

These tropes were provocatively challenged by Saba Mahmood’s reinvestigation of agency in Egyptian mosque circles of female Muslims. In her pioneering work, Mahmood seeks to destabilize the binary of agentive resistance or reproduction with the “Platonic notion of self-mastery over one’s passions, or the more religious notion of realizing oneself through self-transformation, present in Buddhism and a variety of mystical traditions, including Islam and Christianity” (Mahmood 2005: 11). The notion of tradition that “defines the good life of man” (Moumtaz 2015: 133), present within her formulation, however challenges liberalism’s assumption about the link between self-cultivation and desired “individual autonomy” (Mahmood 2005: 11), for such a coupling leaves no room for the authority of past practices and knowledge, that instruct in how to achieve a good life.

Combining intellectual positions promulgated by Mahmood and Asad allows for

taking seriously anthropological subjects, who seek “to be better Muslims” (Moumtaz 2015: 133) and willfully practice forms of ethical self-cultivation that elude the scope of liberalism. Additionally, this framework is valuable for levelling the distinction between the pious and the everyday (Deeb 2015), which coincide in spiritual strivings of my research participants. Therefore, it is these positions that I most heavily lean on in my ethnographic account and that I have found most helpful to sketch a desirable perspective on the religious experience of my interlocutors.

This paradigm only represents one major facet of piety in the field. It doesn’t cover the entire spectrum of agencies and subjectivities encountered there, those that would present an even more substantial challenge to liberal conceptions of agency and subjecthood (Mittermaier 2012). I will briefly shine light on some of these in chapter five, yet for the most part, Mahmood’s compelling framework bespeaks the spiritual sobriety of my research environment. Therefore, to sketch religious experience of Western Muslims in Istanbul, I come to rely on this prosaic religious register that draws on a wide repertoire of pious urban habits. These habits are the subject of the next, main, part of this work. But before that, I want to reconstruct my field entry, its apparent contradictions, and the specific research question I came to formulate that guided my interpretative process.

Istanbul

3. A Difficult Homecoming

3.1 Homecoming and its Burdens

During the first week of fieldwork, equipped with much time but few contacts in the city, I went to visit an endowment as part of the polymorphous engagement strategy. The endowment was located about twenty minutes away from the nearest metro station in Fatih. The way from the station led through the busy streets uphill towards the core of the district. On the main road, elderly Turkish men were selling *simit* from their carts, a constant draft of Arabic filled the sidewalks against the din of sluggish inner-city traffic. I reached the old building that housed the organization and entered its inner courtyard, where I was about to meet Ilma, an employee at the foundation. A woman in what seemed her late thirties or early forties, she has been living in Istanbul with her family for many years. After giving me a tour of the facility, she invited me to sit down for a coffee.

The building used to function as a religious school for several centuries during the Ottoman Empire. Built in a rectangular form, its hallways were lined with pointed arches that framed the lawned patio adorned with potted flowers. The building of old has been extensively refurbished, the arched hallways painted white and furnished with glass panels to provide protection from the elements. Tables and rows of chairs sat in both corners of the structure, alluding to the regular visitors who come here for lectures and Turkish classes. The place had the feel of a museum, a public garden, an educational facility and Islamic heritage, all at once. As we were waiting for the coffee, Ilma struck a conversation with me, curious about how I felt about my stay in the city up to that point. I told her about enjoying my visit and being happy about it. “It is like that”, she agreed, “that when you come here you immediately feel like home”.

It was a regular conversation, as most people I spoke to started talking enthusiastically about life in Istanbul. But as we got deeper into the conversation, it never took too long for the narrative to unravel and for interlocutors to reveal the struggles they faced in the city. When I probed Ilma on the sour faces I encountered every day, she explained that people had to work a lot, then complained about the skyrocketing prices, the housing market, and then gradually moved on to recount how difficult it has been for her to adjust to life in the city. Here is an extract from Ilma’s comments, drawn from field notes and memory: “People unfortunately don’t respect polite distance here, and they ask you about your private life”, something, that she admitted, has often left her dismayed.

She also directed a personal critique at the perceived lack of Islamic behavior. Drawing a contrast between that which is culturally acceptable among Turks and what she understands as actual religious norm, she highlighted comportment she viewed as problematic from a religious standpoint: “they are used to doing things the way they think is right. But here, for example, you see that people don’t follow Islamic rules, they litter the city, and they spit wherever they want”. To Ilma, this behavior conflicts with both her own cultural norms and her understanding of Islam. The mix of economic challenges, cultural disparities and a lack of Islamically accepted behavior among the city dwellers, jointly made up her pronounced frustration at life in Istanbul, despite it evoking feelings of being home.

A similar conversation took place in Üsküdar, where I met Yamina, whom I’ve introduced in the last chapter, for an interview. She sat in front of her laptop and remembered how she had initially reacted despondently to the prospect of a prolonged stay in Istanbul: “if you’d asked me in my first year here, whether I’d like to live here, I would’ve told you ‘no way’!” After a short pause, she started thinking out loud, probably rewinding conversations she had with herself: “is it worth staying here? People don’t like you, it is expensive, they are fighting you, they make it difficult for you to obtain your *ikamet*.”

Time and again people came up against challenges and difficulties in the city, which included the economic crisis, local authorities, fraud, racism, discrimination, xenophobia, as well as a lack of adherence to Islamic norms, such as piety or common courtesy. But by the end of our conversations people paradoxically reiterated their keenness about life and Istanbul, despite the hardships that came with it. “Things fall into place, and you adjust to living here”, Yamina affirmed, though later acknowledging that her stance seemed contradictory. Such accounts by my research participants stood out routinely to me after entering the field and they palpably complicated the neat and carefully curated media discourses surrounding migrant lives of Western Muslims in Türkiye (see Inanc and Erken 2023, TRT World 2023, Mollaalioglu 2021). But they also proved to be the right impetus for me to understand this paradox and redefine my research question. If living in Istanbul was so burdensome, why were people enjoying life in the city? In other words, what made it worth living in Istanbul?

3.2 Simple Wishes and Puzzling Answers

Having set out to understand what outweighs the burdens of living in the Turkish metropolis, I started approaching field participants with this question. Some of the basic answers were simple wishes, repeated by people at large: having mosques and facilities for ablution at one's disposal, *halal* food, a sense of relief and security from living among fellow Muslims and practicing one's faith without eliciting unwanted attention. "Honestly, for any American person it is *jannah*", Fareed, who was introduced in the previous chapter, suggested about life in Istanbul. "You don't need to worry about the *salah*, the food, racism – or I should better say islamophobia." Sophie, a young woman in her early twenties who moved to the city together with her family, told me that it is about the "small things":

"there is still Islamic tradition in society, although Turkey is obviously a more secular country, but people still have this Islamic culture, so on the bus, people do stand up for older people and then they make *du'a* for you. Or when you go to the market, you buy something, the sellers make *du'a* for you. You're not gonna get that in the West".

An environment accommodating Islamic lifestyle, which runs through all facets of everyday life, had a high priority among most interlocutors' talking points. Yet equally often the responses were more ambiguous than expected. One such instance was the *adhan* being mentioned almost exclusively at the beginning of conversations by research participants. "As for somebody coming from the West, here you have those aspects of the East and the West coming together: you have mosques, the *adhan* is played five times a day", Yamina weighed in, giving importance to the acoustic phenomenon, when explaining her satisfaction with life in the city. Another aspect that frequently found mention among my interlocutors was history. Most seemed to agree that the city was teeming with history. "Istanbul is a special city, here you've got everything: beauty, history, the sea", Sophie told me when we first met. Fareed reiterated: "at every corner there is history and traditions."

These answers were, at first, by far the most puzzling. How is it that field participants ascribed such a high value to the *adhan*, essentially a sensory experience? And how did they see history, an abstract concept, concretely manifesting in the city? These answers didn't map neatly onto the customary understanding of 'priorities', as *halal* food or a sense of security would. Hence, I started looking to reconcile the ephemeral nature of these phenomena with their perceived importance – one that was enough to outweigh

the tangible negativity of urban life. My interlocutors' perspectives have challenged me to think beyond a perceptual sterility that doesn't invite the full sensuous spectrum spanning the cityscape into one's ethnographic life. This in turn pushed me to hone my interpretative strategies and refine approaches to resolving the supposed contradictions from my field entry. In the next chapter I aim to describe and analyze the role and influence of such sensory phenomena on the religious experience of my field community and suture it with theoretical approaches germane to the study of ethical self-cultivation.

4. Sensorial Religion

In this chapter I turn my attention to an element conducive to cultivating a religious consciousness, which is the pious urban sensorium. I'm focusing specifically on how the sensorial city environment shapes the religious experience of my research participants. Here I consider one side of my interlocutors' ambivalent relationship to the city, namely that of attraction. I am chiefly interested in ways they let their environment influence their religious lives and argue that by deliberately surrounding themselves with material markers of Islam and pious messaging, they incline to locating virtues in the sensorial environment: acoustically, visually and atmospherically. Repetitive reading of environmental cues replete with religious meaning enables my research participants to remember them, put them into practice and embody them. The cumulative sedimentation of everyday reminders is what helps them kindle religious consciousness, inculcate virtuous capacities and craft ethical selves.

In the following subchapter I offer some additional theoretical and ethnographic grounding for a baseline analysis of the tripartite relationship between religion, senses and urban space. I will then explore my research community's lived religion through this prism across multiple subchapters and offer analyses that both evidence this three-fold connection and showcase the productive environmental influence on ethical selfhood and religious consciousness.

4.1 Religion, Senses, and Urban Space

To begin with, one must understand that the connection between religion and the senses can be identified through their relation to material objects and practices. Because religion can find material expression in tangible objects, its materialization generates sensorial sensibilities, aptitudes and knowledge (Meyer 2009: 5-6). The sum total of sensorial

knowledge of the world is captured by the term aesthetics, but in its more original, Aristotelian sense, referring to “the whole region of human perception and sensation” (Eagleton in Goonewardena 2005: 48). An aesthetic understanding of religion suits best to account for corporeal and embodied dimensions of religious and spiritual practice (Meyer 2009: 7).

Sensorial perception and embodiment are closely intertwined in religious life. It is difficult to think religion without corporeality and most religious practices devise bodily techniques in combination with sensory impressions that “heighten our spiritual focus and evoke meaningful religious experiences” (McGuire 2008: 99). Together they serve to remind practitioners of shared outlooks and values, activating their “embodied memory” (McGuire 2008: 100). Therefore, human bodies are the prime vehicles for continuous remembrance and practice of religious virtues and for access to religion as it manifests in the natural, built and social world around (McGuire 2008: 97-98).

Having opened with the materialization of religion, how can we think about it as related to urban space? Classical studies on religious spatiality predominantly focus on interreligious relations, religious geopolitics and spatial imaginations (Hervieu-Léger 2002: 99-100). But approaches as these evince an *etic*, top-down theorizing character. What better explains the interaction between religion and space in urban contexts for the purpose of this study is a perspective on how adherents of religious traditions deal with urban environment and its social life (Hancock and Srinivas 2008: 619), whereby religion materializes in spaces, practices and discourses. This includes contemporary investigations of “sacred place-making” (Jaffe and De Koning 2016: 25), the often spontaneous and ephemeral reassertion of religion in city space (Wilson 2008, Henn 2008), and its accompanying sensorial-affective “sacralization” (De Witte 2008: 690) through urban sensory practices.

The totality of these practices and impressions can be thought of as the urban sensorium, which describes the urban environment as densely populated by sensorial flows (Krieger and Holman 2007: 228). It helps conceptually appreciate the linkage between the material and sensory in urban religious experience and directs attention to ways in which sensorial regimes convey and deconstruct meanings, thereby affecting people’s thought and modes of appraisal (Classen 2012: 178-9, Elmore 2008, Hirschkind 2006). In modern cities, a multitude of sensory contexts densely coexist in an area,

making city space rife with competing sensorial practices (De Witte 2008: 690). Istanbul is certainly no stranger to this phenomenon, where political, musical and religious public broadcasting contest public opinion and norms, each vying for a patch of aural space.

The diverse visual- and audioscapes, etched into the fabric of the metropolis, evoke different sets of lifestyles, subjectivities and sensibilities, which individuals come to embody by partaking in those differing sensory evocations. By the same token, religion can sensorially manifest in urban space and engage its dwellers through sensory provisions that craft religious aesthetics. In sum, sensorial multitudes and practices conceptually suture religion and urbanity.

This connection might not be obvious given that my interlocutors' expression of environmental frustration complicates a popular equation between the city and a pristine Islamic environment that caters to religious needs. Nevertheless, people kept telling me about the city's Islamic properties, which they experienced as highly meaningful. This, on my part, made me turn my attention to their environmental perception and the urban materiality of religious life. Because virtuous becoming "takes place in the material world" and "relies on affordances that exist in the world" (Benussi 2020: 701), I argue that the cityscape and my interlocutors mutually engage each other in a way that supplies them with religiously meaningful and pleasurable sensory cues. My own experience attests to this, as I myself have often been caught by the city's imposing landscape of Islamic architecture, the soft presence of calligraphy chiseled into street corner fountains or the melodious call to prayer.

But the first time the connection between environment and my field community's religious practice in Istanbul became apparent to me, was when Sophie took me and a group of young women on a walk from Üsküdar to Taksim Square. While sequencing our walk in my field diary I noted how we passed multiple Islamic spaces in a row and how we thereby became enmeshed in the city's dense sensory fabric. We passed the türbe of Aziz Mahmud Hüdayi, hurrying downstairs against the throng of visitors on a busy Friday afternoon. A few meters on, we took a shortcut through a narrow alley, where houses pressed against each other and a vintage bookstore beacons to curious visitors. As we walked on, we suddenly found ourselves walking under an arched stone gate into the outer court of the Yeni Valide Mosque. Thereafter we took a ferryboat across the Bosphorus strait and while we were sitting on the upper deck, the afternoon adhan rang out, its sonority

amplified as it echoed above the waters.

It seemed to me that the transitions on our route across several spaces were seamlessly connected and I was struck by how effortlessly Sophie picked shortcuts and weaved together a mobile experience that not only took us swiftly to our destination but brimmed with environmental beauty, Islamic architecture and sensorial richness. When I asked Sophie, why she chose to take this particular route she poignantly replied: “it is quicker, it is less crowded, and it is more beautiful”. Sophie’s walk became instructive for me in many ways.

On the one hand it is a prime example of religious experience as connected to the urban environment through sensorial engagement. It clearly demonstrates how fleeting interactions between Sophie and her surroundings are both vested in religious sensibilities and anchored in “unexpected expressions of devotional sentiment” (Hancock and Srinivas 2008: 624). Such insertions into the circuits of daily activity bespeak the productive engagement of the environment by my research participants for the purpose of “creat[ing] an Islamic awareness” (Mahmood 2005: 48).

On the other hand, her active decision to pass through multiple Islamic architectural markers highlights how my research participants often sought out places they associated with Islamic history, importance and spirituality. Sophie’s creative selection of our itinerary and improvisation troubles the “linearity of city movement” (Edensor 2008: 128) and orders city space according to a logic of pious preferences. In this sense, her “modalities of pedestrian enunciation” articulate “epistemological”, “ethical” (De Certeau 1984: 99) and aesthetic valorizations. The intentionality behind surrounding oneself with religious spatial markers highlights walking as a deliberate practice. Walking is no less of a sensorial practice in eventful Istanbul than listening, looking, tasting or touching and Sophie’s walk proved that such practices are agentic and willful.

In the following three subchapters I seek to analyze similarly agentic sensory practices that are employed by my interlocutors to enrich their religious experience in the city, hone embodied ethical dispositions and generate religious awareness. In their own words and deeds, the sensory landscape of the city is a central pillar of everyday life that informs their religious sensibilities and likewise their attraction to the metropolis and therefore it merits closer examination. As can be already gleaned from the above vignette, these subchapters are based on scattered moments throughout fieldwork. Simultaneously,

this perspective is supplied with notes taken from informal conversations and interviews with research participants.

4.2 Acoustic Reminders. Listening to the Muslim Word

I met Farah, a woman in her early thirties, who relocated to Istanbul in 2019 wishing to craft a different, more spiritual life in the city, early on during fieldwork. Her company and perspective have often productively co-informed my research direction and as I was trying to distill some cohesion from my research participants' ambivalence towards the city, I put the question to her bluntly: "what makes it worth staying here?" "You have the faith aspect, you can hear the adhan", she replied, "you can be comfortable here, you can preserve your Muslim identity, and you can be yourself". Farah's viewpoint about the primacy of the adhan is probably one of the most commonly recurring ones in the field. Her comments mark an important link between religious experience, auditory habits, and a sense of comfort derived from the ease with which Muslim identity is articulated in the everyday.

With that, Istanbul stands in stark contrast to most Euro-American contexts where my research participants come from. On both continents adhan broadcasting remains a contentious issue met with overwhelming resistance by the majority of people, often due to the politization of the call to prayer or its perception as noise and nuisance (Green 2010: 632-633, Weiner 2014: 1050). The disparity is obvious to Western Muslims in Istanbul, and for some, the acoustic difference seems to be the hallmark of their attachment to the city. One participant in a public Telegram group for expatriates in Istanbul expressed his sentiment, using the Turkish wording for adhan, as followed: "of course there isn't any room for comparison between Istanbul or any other Muslim city with the West. The fact that you hear *ezan* five times a day is more than enough."

As noted in chapter three, there is a strong, almost visceral bond between the acoustic event and its Muslim auditors, which Farah located within the idiom of faith identity. Likewise, the Turkish Department of Religious Affairs (tr. *Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*, short: *Diyanet*) issued a statement in the early 2000s where it made the same connection:

"The adhan is an unchangeable symbol of Islam. It is the sign of a Muslim existence and identity wherever in the world. (...) Since the main purpose of the adhan is to inform the time of prayer and call to prayer,

communicating this invitation to all Muslims speaking different languages is only possible and plausible through communicating to their collective conscious“ (translated and quoted in Aydar and Atalay 2006: 62).

This faith identity will be the subject of this section. I aim to show that its preservation is active and built on awareness-making practices. I interpret Farah’s comment on faith identity in light of what Muslims, as seen in *Diyanet*’s communiqué, take for granted, namely as religious consciousness. While its details rest on the variety of Islamic practice and an individual’s particular tradition, generally this consciousness is dependent on virtuous messaging, which contains religious content. The primary concern of virtuous messaging is meaning, such as the indication to pray or the tenets of faith. These premises structure the way I view the effects of agentive sensory practices.

Above the “compacted sonic strata generated” (Arquette 2004: 161) by Istanbul’s daily urban buzz, the adhan rises five times a day, calling the community of the faithful to prayer. Traditionally sounded from the top of a minaret, today it possesses an enhanced spatial reach through loudspeakers. Several authors explain the unique significance of the adhan to Muslims by pointing out its ability to garner their attention, which is stemming from its sacredness and regulatory qualities of social and religious life (Lee 1999: 86-87, Weiner 2014: 1055).

The calling of the adhan generates a sacred time-context, which “distinguish[es] sacred from profane and holy from mundane (Weiner 2014: 1055). This daily ritual is centered around the spoken word and its audition, which are distinctive markers of Islamic ritual at large (Frishkopf 2008: 480, Frishkopf 2013: 8, Burckhardt Qureshi 1996: 48) and can be dubbed “language performance” (Frishkopf 2013: 11). The text of the adhan is a sequence of statements that affirm God’s greatness and oneness, the testimony of faith and the exhortation to come to prayer. Similarly to how “auditory environment constitute[s] a semiotic system” (Garrioch 2003: 5) the adhan as language performance represents a meaningful, semiotic practice, instructive in a person’s relation to God, their daily rhythm and communal worship. It conveys monotheistic and devotional meanings, hence acts as virtuous messaging. With the following illustration I want to depict more concrete ways in which the adhan can organize social and religious life and how its virtuous messaging affects people.

On a Friday afternoon I left a religious class together with Fareed. We went to a newly opened, minimalistic, multi-story café for an interview and chose to sit on the sunlit semi-open rooftop patio. Small groups of young adults were leisurely sipping their coffee and puffing an occasional cigarette. Well-audible background music and lively conversations animated the terrace. Everything seemingly unaware of the fact that we were in the middle of the month of Ramadan. For pious Muslims it is a time of devotion and contemplation whilst abstaining from food, drink and smoking from dawn to dusk. People's consumption choices made the place stand out to me as a secular refuge for a stratum of Turkish society unconvinced by religion. But the café was nevertheless a comfortable choice for us given its public character that could still afford a sense of privacy at a coffee table.

We were absorbed in our conversation when we suddenly became engulfed by the adhan from the minaret almost right next to us. To my surprise, café staff quickly switched off the music for the duration of the call to prayer. Given how I perceived the café as a decidedly secular microcosm, I would not have expected the staff to make this respectful gesture towards the sacredness of the adhan. Meanwhile Fareed quickly murmured its words while he gently swung back and forth listening to it. The scene reminded me of the multiple fieldwork occasions, where people either purposefully turned off music during the adhan, or enjoined me or my friends to repeat its words.

When the adhan finished, the rooftop terrace went back to normal, and we intended to resume our interview. I had to slightly rouse myself from the silence, and, if I remember correctly, as I turned towards Fareed, he wondered out loud: "so, where was I?" Looking up from my notes, I reminded him, and we continued where he left off. This situation serves as a striking example of how virtuous messaging and specifically the adhan affected our surroundings and reaction in numerous ways.

What primarily demands our attention is the reconstitution of the time-space context. The call to prayer powerfully realigned our attention, to the extent that Fareed forgot our conversation topic and I needed a moment to come out of my silent mode of audition. Through this "speech event" (Bowen 1993: 83), a felicitous expression suggesting the outstanding character of the adhan, a unique, and in this case sacred, "domain of space-time [was] thus brought into active awareness" (Frishkopf 2013: 12), displacing a more profane inattention to religion, such as within the context of the interview or non-religious socializing in the café. However, practically speaking, the recasting of time-space comes

about through corporeal practices, which can render space sacred (Gökarıksel 2009: 659, Rodman 2003: 207). Public gestures of respect that contribute to such rendering, like turning off music or toning down a conversation, can be attributed to “the acoustic construction of public space and the affective intensities that such an architecture mobilizes” (Hirschkind 2006: 124).

There is no sure way of saying whether everyone does so out of a visceral respect for the proclamation of faith, rather than, say, mere practicality, but what needs to be noted here, is the sense of seamlessness in which people in the public sphere enfold respectful practices toward the adhan into their everyday labor and sociability. The result is a spontaneous sacralization of space-time engendered by reflexive public attunement to pious meanings.

It is in this context that I want to consider Fareed’s reactivity and corporeal response to the adhan, a practice I observed across a variety of instances. This occurrence was indicative of Fareed’s sustained awareness towards the call to prayer, gleaned from his “verbal, and body-kinetic” (Frishkopf 2008: 479) response to the calling of the adhan. Departing from Marleen de Witte’s insight into sound as sonic material property that becomes distilled in the human body (2008: 692), I understand Fareed’s reaction as one that brings together corporeal and meaningful properties of the adhan. This correlates to the interconnection between the hearing body and the cognitive faculty responsible for internalizing virtuous messaging and cultivating a religious consciousness.

How is it cultivated and what is happening there concretely? Repeated listening to the adhan closely reminds me of Charles Hirschkind’s work on modes of audition and ethical self-cultivation. Hirschkind describes the process of repeated listening to religious sermons as “sedimentation” and “accumulation” (2006: 26) of knowledge that is more than mere information, insofar that information is distinguished by lack of “gradual sedimentation and embodiment” (2006: 27). However, it requires a specific kind of attunement. Reception of Islamic language performance needs to be willful and self-directed towards sounded meanings to enable the sedimentation of these virtuous messages (Hirschkind 2006: 71). I refer to this attunement as attentive, agentive listening, as part of the repertoire of agentive sensory practices that are mobilized by my research participants.

Agentive listening in fact involves a series of bodily responses from the listener,

as demonstrated by Fareed. The daily ritual of the adhan, is a ritual of words, “appropriately uttered and received”, whose “purpose is to remind the Muslim to *utter* these words by reading or reciting them” (Burckhardt Qureshi 1996: 48, *emph. orig.*). Reception through listening is inextricably entwined with utterance of the received meanings. Hence listening requires a responsiveness on the side of the listener, one being reverent attention, the other an oral response. Reiterating meanings through speech or agentive enunciation like Fareed’s re-reciting the contents of the adhan is geared towards a specific purpose of ‘appropriately’ hosting the contents of the adhan and “orienting the senses to a divinely ordered world” (Hirschkind 2006: 37).

Being done five times a day it mimics oral rehearsing, therefore crafting sensory habits of both cognitive and corporeal memory. Furthermore, Fareed’s subtle bodily movements remind of mnemonic bodily techniques of memorizing the Qur’an, infusing his action with a degree of embodied memorization of the adhan’s contents. This is not to say that Fareed is unaware of how to recite the adhan. Rather, what I mean, is that comparable to Hirschkind’s above formulation, Fareed engages in an active sedimentation of the tenets of faith not as neutral information but as transformative knowledge imprinting on his interior. By mobilizing his body in a set of attuning practices he makes his “body and heart into an instrument capable of resonating (re-sounding) the words [h]e submits to” (Hirschkind 2006: 81), thereby creating the bedrock of an aesthetically informed religious consciousness and pious subjectivity, which jointly corresponds to Farah’s expression of “you can be yourself”.

The sedimentation of virtuous and spiritual meanings into the substrate of embodied memory is reminiscent of a corporeal knowledge set, that the human being is able to draw on. As scholars of religion argue, religious knowledge is situated inside the whole of a human body (McGuire 2008: 99), making the case for the possibility that “a range of Islamic virtues could be sedimented in one’s character, enabling one to live more piously and avoid moral transgressions” (Hirschkind 2006: 71). Therefore, listening to Islamic language performance is “part of a larger complex of pious dispositions, bodily habits, and carefully cultivated orientations that many Muslims consider a foundation for ethical life” (Eisenlohr 2018: 6). Thus, mobilizing remembrance of virtuous meanings leads to the honing of ethical dispositions. I want to expand on the meaning of ‘ethical life’, which

emerges from agentive sensory practices and virtuous messaging, in more detail in the next subchapter.

4.3 Visual Messages and Pious Practice

Mahya is a traditional Ottoman art, exclusively practiced during the month of Ramadan, which artistically displays messages high above the pedestrian level of the human gaze. By suspending a chain of lights between two minarets, mahya artists produce a short textual message (Daily Sabah with IHA, Daily Sabah 2022), usually a religious formula. Despite most people being accustomed to the unceasing visual messaging in today's world, through billboards, electronic advertising, or street art, mahya has managed to retain something of its spectacularity. During and after my fieldwork I was following Muz's blog, who recently moved to Türkiye and goes by this handle. In his writing he voiced his deep impression by the traditional art:

"In huge gigantic letters, I saw "ALLAHUAKBAR" shimmering in bright lights on top of the Cami. I realized that never in my life had I seen the name of Allah so big, so illustrious and so bright. It filled my body and soul with joy and I was so proud to be a Muslim" (Muz @yabanci, 2024 b).

When I read this excerpt, I could imagine Muz, on those very first trips he undertook to Istanbul before finally settling in the city, stunned and awestruck by the sheer size of the installation. His commentary demonstrates the intense sensory experience at the sight of mahya. It also shows, that to a practicing Muslim, this decoration felt like a celebration of God's name in public, literally holding it up high. This is one instance where visual culture engendered by the urban environment helps mediate religion (Morgan 2005: 8-9), contributing to wider remembering practices devised by religious communities. Then, some weeks into fieldwork, I also got the chance to experience this sight for myself.

The month of Ramadan was a visual feast of sorts. Walking through the courtyard of the Süleymaniye Mosque in the last week of the month, I saw it decorated with balloons, and tilting my head, high up over the main dome, a big mahya emblazoned the night sky, surrounded by brightly lit minarets. In some way, the festive atmosphere emerging from the decorated mosque, celebrated Muslim religious devotion with a force rarely encountered among those who have spent their lives living as a religious minority. Those who did, told me of their newly found self-confidence in their religious being after experiencing this commonplace celebration of Islamic culture throughout the cityscape.

But besides the fascination there is another aspect to such visual impressions.

One night I was out with my friend Loujain and as we were riding the tramway, I told her to look at the mosque that began to emerge from behind the promenade in front of us. There, another shiny mahya stretched wide above the rooftops, proclaiming “AHİRETİNE UNUTMA” and I believe I read it aloud. Responding to my cues, Loujain replied: “yeah, this one means: don’t forget your afterlife.” She paused and then added: “You never know, maybe somebody reads this and it’ll completely transform their lives.”

Loujain’s comment on the mahya reflected something else than enjoying the visual spectacle for its own sake, or a purely lexical understanding of the phrase. To her, the art was more than just an array of candles. She pointed out that the meaning of a statement entails a consequence, intended for the reader to see. To not forget the afterlife means to act for it. In Loujain’s terms, the statement made by the art installation meant to transform one’s life from being heedless of the afterlife and its consequences to a life attuned to its ever-present promises and warnings. This means to live a devout life in accordance with Islamic teachings. Her comment clarified what she saw in the big writing: that the message may remind a person of what is important in a Muslim’s life and live up to it.

This is only one instance of how field participants in Istanbul take in virtuous messaging produced by the urban environment, making them participants in a pious urban aesthetic. Not only does it support their religious identity but furthermore contributes to the transmission of practical ethical knowledge in the everyday. This knowledge is accessed and internalized through moments of agentic seeing, as Loujain experienced.

The mahya’s message literally instructs not to forget, but to remember religious truths and act on one’s knowledge of them. Like the aural honing of ethical inclinations, (Hirschkind 2006: 39) repeated moments of textual virtuous messaging produce a sedimentation of pious thinking and attitudes in one’s character. Given this particular relationship between sensory practice and ethical dispositions, the dearth of literature focusing specifically on the interaction between visual culture and popular Islamic piety strikes me as perplexing. It results in a perspective overdetermined by questions of artistic style, historical developments and political power. What is certain, though, is that visual elements in the Istanbulite cityscape have remained effective in drawing the attention of onlookers and fostering a religious consciousness.

Next to mahya, calligraphy represents an additional textual signifier in the city. Despite the assumption by scholars of Islamic epigraphy that calligraphy found on Islamic architecture, at least historically, was not meant to be read (Tabbaa 2021: 311-312, Ghari-pour 2013: 2, Ergin 2013: 144), my research participants routinely engaged with calligraphic inscriptions as media for “pietistic messages” (Tabbaa 2021: 259) that incline to religious sensibilities. Interestingly, there is scholarship on Ottoman calligraphic adornment making a similar argument about the ethical affordances of public calligraphy. As in the case with mahya, anyone

“could be reminded of their duties towards God and society through the inscription of appropriate verses. In an era when society lacked mass media such as radio, television, the Internet, newspapers, magazines and even books, placing inscriptions upon buildings was an immensely important and effective practice. By this means, places of worship, fountains, palaces, libraries and schools, not to mention countless portable objects, all acted as broadcasting tools” (Sülün 2013: 177).

Concomitantly, this observation holds not only true for the past, but also for the present. It highlights the critical role textual media plays in the circuits of a religious consciousness, engendered by visual experience, remembrance and dutiful action. Although text is important, it isn’t the sole medium subject to agentive seeing. Closely related to it is the built environment and its symbolism. I will illustrate one such instance with a scene from a city walk that I participated in, more on which there will be in chapter five. Our guide, Abu Ahmad, gave us a tour of one of the city’s graveyards and explained the symbolism found primarily on their headstones. We were in a group, and I edged closer to where he stood to better make out his explanation. “The rose bush”, he spoke slowly, making sure that we all heard, “signifies love of the Prophet, *salla Allahu ‘aleyhi wa sallam* [thereafter ‘saws’], so that this person either did a lot of *salawat* or followed the *sunnah* meticulously or was known for sitting in the *halaqas* of praise on the Prophet.” He then looked out for another motive on the stone slabs:

“The grape vine means someone was known for giving *sadaqa*. Can you see? We may not know who they are or how to read the Ottoman script, but how many here are inspired now to have roses on their graves? These engravings carry a special meaning, and they’re supposed to inspire us to do good, so, often on these headstones, you see fruits of jannah like figs, dates, grapes.”

After he finished his presentation, he said: “now next time you go by a grave you know the signs and the stories”.

Abu Ahmad’s narrative is particularly useful to illustrate the relationship between visual cues and my interlocutors’ relating to them. Ottoman headstones are known to be

rich in symbolism, with different styles of headgear, mostly turbans, placed on their top, symbolizing an array of social positions within the Ottoman state (Lacqueur 1993: 121), and often connected to political, religious or professional standing (Lacqueur 1993: 127). Acting as subtle reminders, the symbols on Ottoman graves are perceived to be meaningful messages left behind for communities of the living. Our guide offers an interpretation of their meaning with a religious tilt, referred to by some as “semiotic ideology” (Lindebæk Lyngsøe and Stjernholm 2022: 175), teaching visitors to take in cues from the architectural language of the city that might no longer be commonly known. Eventually this exercise renders gravestones yet another medium for religious consciousness.

As to the vegetal motives adorning the outer margins of the gravestones, orientalist writers viewed them as deriving significance, if any, from pre-Islamic or popular Turkish culture, yet no conclusive interpretation on them is given (Lacqueur 1993: 112). Conversely, Abu Ahmad offers a more nuanced explanation for motives as varying as the fig, rose, date palm and other plants. While their origins are arguably not the most pertinent issue in the discussion on agentive seeing, what matters here is the “recognition and cultural elaboration of perceived properties of environments in mutually constituting ways through narratives and praxis” (Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003: 14), which shapes the relationship between my field participants and their surroundings.

Abu Ahmad, by using a religious-historical narrative to elaborate on the correct understanding of grave symbols, attuned the group toward a pious urban sensorium. His explanations brought to the fore that symbolically laden headstones, too, can be seen as signifiers with consequences that are enacted by individuals who encounter them in the city. Knowledge of such “invisible features of the urban environment” (Kusenbach 2003: 467), where physical properties do not indicate neutral signs, but are imbued with meaning by onlookers, is understood to inspire people to do the pious acts deciphered from the headstones. Being reminded of virtuous self-transformation by the urban environment and acting on it, indicates an embodied relationship with the city’s sensorial properties, fusing human bodies with ephemeral meanings (De Witte 2008: 692). By “bodying forth” (Hirschkind 2006: 81) religious meanings perceived in and received from graveyard architecture, religious consciousness is cultivated through action and embodiment of aesthetic knowledge. This provides evidence of how agentive sensory practices tied to the urban environment help accrue virtuous dispositions and religious consciousness.

ness. In the next section I want to further explore such practices as they relate specifically to architecture.

4.4 Ethical Architecture. Tradition, Proximity and Atmosphere

Islamic architecture enjoys a special status among my interlocutors, who frequent its sites, situate their activities therein, and use them for ethical self-cultivation and to learn more about history. Therefore, to extend the analysis on the relationship between my field community and the urban environment, I will investigate architecture as another sensory stimulant that contributes to ethical dispositions and religious consciousness.

Unlike in the past, many field participants strongly incline to identify their religious belonging with Islamic architecture (Metcalf 1996: 3), which is not restricted to mosques but comprises madrasas, domed graves, fountains, fortresses, and former Sufi convents. The position of mosques however, given their utility, stands out from the other categories. Mosques, by virtue of providing space to offer one's five daily prayers, have become firmly integrated into the everyday life of the field community. Simultaneously, mosque space is also where the mundane meets the sacred.

Often, when visiting public gardens affixed to mosques, I could observe young men and women going about quiet pastime activities, children riding bikes, families preparing for an iftar-picknick, and elderly people conversing and contemplating. It is highly unlikely that their Ottoman founders were designing mosque compounds with contemporary modes of mobility or public sociability in mind. But the perspective most pertinent to my investigation can be located precisely in those practices. They demand an attention towards "dynamic relations between the architectural object and the religious subject" (Verkaaik 2013: 12), which better explains the role of architecture in giving rise to mechanisms of shaping religious consciousness and ethical dispositions.

Given that mosque space provides a background for daily activities, whether profane or religious, I choose to propose one possible understanding of Islamic architecture as open to the construction of a variety of subjectivities (Kavuri-Bauer 2011: 8, Verkaaik 2013: 16) aligned with religious sensibilities. In many ways, people expressed this in conversations with me. In one instance, I was leaving an old madrasa together with Umm Rayyan, a US-American woman whom I met several times during fieldwork, when she said, "it's amazing to be here, they just have this *waqf*." I probed her on why she found it to be amazing. In the quotation below I try to approximate her exact words:

“I think it is this idea for someone who is coming from the West, that you just go out, and there are all these mosques and madrasas and you just go and be Muslim. It has a special place in my awareness. In the US, people sacrifice a ton of money to build a community *masjid* and so on, and here you just have it, and it’s a completely different feeling.”

As previously seen with the call to prayer and visual culture, architectural forms are supportive features for religious identity. The question I want to turn to is how the ubiquitous presence of Islamic architecture feeds back into the crafting of pious selves. For this purpose, I heavily lean on a study Oskar Verkaaik dedicates on the community of Morabitun in the Albaicin district of the southern Spanish city of Granada. I have found his interactionalist perspective uniquely useful, in that it mirrors my case study and theoretical approach in manifold ways.

The Albaicin neighborhood has seen in recent decades continued immigration of Western Muslims, who prefer to live in the former heartland of Muslim Europe known for its beauty and grandeur, as part of their cultural identity, which they couple with adherence to religious tradition (Verkaaik 2013: 149). By practicing crafts and hobbies associated with the ancient lifestyle of Islamic Andaluz, he argues, they “develop their Islam into an entire way of life, (...) connected to former aesthetic traditions” (Verkaaik 2013: 150), which bear on their “bodily habits” (ibid.). He explains his field community’s giving importance to flocking to al-Andaluz and surrounding themselves with natural and architectural splendor, “with the discrepancy they might experience between contemporary religious doctrine and certain aesthetic traditions” (Verkaaik 2013: 153) back home. By becoming close to the heritage which they seek to embody, they render tradition a lived experience. In other words: “Al-Andaluz for the Morabitun also stands for a past and a way of life that one seeks to revive by physical proximity and imitation. Al-Andaluz is therefore more than mere beauty or heritage. It is, as we shall see, an Islamic ethics concealed in beauty and sensory pleasure” (Verkaaik 2013: 154).

Verkaaik’s perspective is a fresh draft of air in the scholarship on built environment, because it takes the claims to commitment to a tradition by its adherents seriously, as well as their desire to live it continuously. Contrary to the representational perspective, and that of many historians and Islamicists, it does not reduce people’s interactions with religious buildings to a purely functional capacity within ‘religion-as-a-system-of’ something, nor does it disregard people’s pious aspirations.

His study highlights two important aspects. The first is that connection to religious

tradition has the capacity to shape pious subjectivity and spirituality (Verkaaik 2013: 166, Pinto 2010: 464). The second one needs to be understood in conjunction with a lack of periodization that would sunder linkages between past and present. Even within modern contexts, despite the silencing of traditional life forms, some degree of sustenance of tradition, including traditional modes of perceiving, has been upheld by creative adaptation (Hirschkind 2006: 104). Through preservation of architectural forms, the transmission of “timeless” meanings (Verkaaik 2013: 164) continues. Once again, sensory materiality and its aesthetic totality are indicative of meanings geared toward pious contemplation (Verkaaik 2013: 153). They anchor people’s sense of “immutable cosmic order” (Classen 2012: 179, Hammond 2023: 2) and convey the stability of religious and traditional values.

Accordingly, my research participants often engaged in deciphering written and unwritten meanings of Islamic architecture, ranging from calligraphy to monument design. Once, Farah pointed out a particular feature of one of the famous mosques that inspired her every time she passed by it. I cannot remember having seen it and because of its subtlety, I doubt it could have caught my attention. She informed me that on a stretch of the mosque’s outer walls there were small carved-in holes that served the purpose of collecting water for thirsty animals:

“the architects who built the mosque cut them out so that on rainy days water could collect there, so the birds could drink from it. Their hope was that they would earn reward for this action during and beyond their lifetime. It shows you how Islamic architecture was mindful of the smallest details and incorporated features that were also directed at the birds”.

Farah’s commentary underscores her ability to see and associate meanings of ethical living and virtue with Islamic architecture. To her, and other research participants, architecture conveys beauty, ethical messaging and points to sublime values, in this case, taking care of animals for the sake of God by strategic architectural design, all which stands in high contrast to modern functionalist city planning and building design. Despite my reservations about the representational perspective, for those who see these ethical meanings, they become a message “cast in stone” (Verkaaik 2013: 151).

For many individuals the grasping of and pondering on these meanings involves a complex bodily process that is worth our attention. Similarly to how ‘bodily habits’ play a role in the embodied revival of heritage in Verkaaik’s study, the body among my research community acts as a key site for mediating architectural experience and self-

transformation. This is because individuals first need to devise requisite means to understand tradition through sensory avenues when accessing architecture.

Exploring the discourse surrounding Islamic architecture in Istanbul I came across an article which praises Türkiye as a suitable destination for those seeking to engage with the *ummah*'s legacy. Therein it reads: "learning about something is different from actually experiencing it. Türkiye allowed our children to truly experience the concept of Ummah and witness the achievements of the Muslims of the past in 3D" (Usman 2023). This statement should not be dismissed as golden age nostalgia, even if in its tone it can be easily mistaken for it. Rather, what can be gleaned from the views expressed in the article, is a rich repository of practices and reasoning that pervade my field and reveal plenty about the human nodes of architecture and tradition.

The article's description evokes the phenomenon of 'being there' as a viable way of knowing. It implies that proximity to architecture leads to intuitive, experiential knowing (see Colla 2007: 151-156) about its past history, while the body becomes an epistemological site for tradition. The experiential element plays a central role in understanding tradition and in this case preponderates over the element of mere oral transmission (Ingold and Kurttila 2000: 188-191). What is striking about this reasoning is that the best way to learn something about history is to experience the vicinity of its material indices. Here the epistemological medium is actual corporeal presence. This becomes even more evident when the author describes visiting Ottoman architectural sites: "While visiting their monuments, mosques, and museums, our children were able to connect the dots between Islamic faith, Islamic practice and a dedication to excellence in all areas, including education, engineering, hygiene and architecture" (Usman 2023).

Likewise, this family could glimpse ethical meanings from monuments, which reflected the ideal of Muslim excellence back onto them. Surrounding themselves with heritage helped them internalize the lived meanings of faith and practice and revive a visceral embodied understanding of the Islamic tradition. According to Santhi Kavuri-Bauer, "our presence at the monument says something about, if not who we are, then who we aspire to be" (2011: 8). It insinuates that proximity to architecture yields wholistic cognizance of the way of life it represents. Close interaction with the built environment and its enmeshment in a range of bodily practices might tell us something about how tradition is not only grasped through exterior meanings, but also through sensory avenues,

together making up the epistemological bundle of traditional knowledge.

Corporeal engagement with monuments can kindle such knowledge in various ways. One such instance is a worshipful approach to architecture, which sees Islamic faith and practice as ethical ramifications of attending to architecturally stored meanings. The best example of this approach is *wudhu* and *salah*. Fouzia Usman, the article's author, notes that: "[w]hen it was time for *salah* (...) we made *wudhu* with the locals and stood in line to pray, all of us uttering the same verses, praying to the same lord (...), when we prayed, we came together as one and became one body, one Ummah united by one faith" (2023). Her observations echo a common experience during fieldwork, where many research participants made use of the infrastructure that mosques notably provided for prayer. They regularly went to the mosque, both to increase their reward by joining communal prayers, and due to high degrees of mobility that required research participants to pray outside of their homes. Moreover, often during outings and city tours, people would enter mosques to not only look at their beauty, but to pray a short prayer, called *tahiyyatul-masjid*. The perception of beauty in heritage and moral concern, coalesced in a single event suggestive of a holistic and committed way of life.

Also, *wudhu* and prayer are instructive in ethical self-formation and cultivation of virtue associated with the Islamic tradition. Ways in which dispositions are cultivated during those acts can on the one hand be ascribed to remembering the Divine. Yet, on the other hand it is the compound choreography of humbling oneself, bowing and prostrating, that instructs the praying person in the spiritual act of submission, and acts to transform the self by displacing modern and secular notions of subjectivity through "embodied form of surrender" (Baldacchino 2019: 364). Hence, in the words of Saba Mahmood, worship, "bodily aptitudes, virtues, habits, (...) serve to ground Islamic principles within the practices of every day living" (2005: 45), making them productive of moral selfhood and ethical conduct. From this perspective, *wudhu* and prayer are understood as habituating techniques aiming to root and sustain Islamic tradition in the form of pious dispositions of submission, humility and remembrance (Mahmood 2005: 128-131).

This points to the unique way in which the city's materiality is conducive to the sustenance of virtuous dispositions. *Wudhu* and prayer as devotional, kinesthetic practices adjacent to and inside the mosque, bear on the body and senses and induce behavior and sensations that correspond with the Islamic tradition. In this way mosques and monu-

ments “do not simply express already existing religious identities but may be constitutive of certain religious sensations and experiences that impact upon a religious sense of self” (Verkaaik 2013: 9). A devotional approach of corporeal habituation to the meanings encoded in architectural form, effects embodied knowledge of Islamic tradition and heritage. This practical knowledge helps inculcate and sustain an ethical commitment and religious consciousness.

Having experienced this rhythm countless times myself, I want to draw on my personal observations to add another dimension of kindling traditional knowledge. This time it is hidden in more fleeting sensations during mosque visitation and prayer. When visiting mosques and praying one immerses into a multi-sensory spatial experience (Ruggles 2018, Ergin 2018, Frishkopf and Spinetti 2018: 2, Arkette 2004: 167), at the heart of which lie acoustic, visual and proximal sensations, such as Qur’an recitation, dampened sound of knees falling to the ground in prostration, panels bearing calligraphic inscriptions, ornamentation, high vaults and bodily squeezes during prayer. These elements, like prior sensory phenomena, can also be viewed as conveyors of ethical meanings, such as the recited or written Qur’anic text, the equalizing of social differences in prayer and the witnessing of the congregation humbling itself before the Divine.

But next to it, other more ephemeral sensations accompany mosque visitors. To enter the mosques, one must lift heavy, door-like planes at the entrance. Depending on the season, one is either greeted by a comfortably heated space or freshly cool interior contrasting to the outside weather. Making one’s way through the spacious hall, one walks over to the stairs leading up to the elevated female prayer lodge. Lifting oneself up the narrow spiral staircase, one squeezes against the stone walls, while grasping the cold metal handles before exiting at the lodge overlooking the first floor, and stepping out onto the rug-covered balcony.

The dense evocative description of mosque visitation serves to highlight an overlooked aspect of architecture inside the mosque itself, which, too, is closely linked to bodily proximity as epistemological means to comprehend tradition. Our interaction with monuments is grounded in bodily sensations. The familiar “ineffable ‘feel’ of a building” (Paterson 2007: 97), characteristic for visiting Ottoman mosques, is derived from habituated sensorial interaction, also called “tactile appropriation” (ibid.), in which “buildings, through their use, apprehension and appropriation, touch us” (ibid.). Tactility plays

a central role in the sensorial interaction with ancient Ottoman mosques and other monuments representative of traditional architecture. As traditional buildings, Ottoman mosques are rich in texture, variegating materiality and palpable spatial sensations, which offer their spaces a haptic quality (Paterson 2007: 98-99). Such “haptic architecture” (Paterson 2007: 97) is associated with intimate closeness between the feeling individual body, the materiality of space (ibid.) and a mutuality in which individuals remain ‘touched’ by architecture.

On the basis of this mutuality and undoing of perceptive distance, it is possible to think of “spatial seepage between material object and perceiving subject” (Paterson 2007: 102), as a sensation commonly called aura or atmosphere. Both are primarily linked to the body-as-receptacle of visceral sensations (Griffero 2020: 99-102, Böhme 2013: 128). The corporeal penetration of haptic architecture “allows this atmosphere to permeate the self” (Böhme: 1993: 117). Hence, the argument could be made for an additional, haptic and atmospheric epistemology of tradition, that explains the force of proximity in grasping tradition from another sensorial angle. As such, tradition has a haptic feel to it, which sutures the gap between religious knowledge and its “aesthetic traditions” (Verkaaik 2013: 153) and is recognizable to its adherents. The body mediates tradition through ‘seepage’ between architecture and individuals. This allows the faithful to actively get in touch with the tradition these monuments represent. As was made clear by Usman’s article, the deliberate visitation of mosques and surrounding oneself with Islamic monuments contributes to an agentive feeling of the tradition. While its ethical meanings are elaborated by acoustic and visual signification, its embodied tactile appropriation occurs precisely through tangible vicinity.

A closer look at the interactions with and discourses around Islamic monuments has shown that architecture, particularly mosques, help shape a pious subjectivity among my field participants. They experience Islamic architecture as a signifier of religious identity, ethics and tradition, replete in virtuous meanings, which they take in through corporeal proximity. Therefore, I suggest that traditionalist practitioners seek to become cognizant of Islam’s ethical tradition and learn to embody its spiritual and ethical dimension, through multisensory, devotional and atmospheric engagement with architecture.

Thus, understanding Islamic tradition and its attending form of ethical self-cultivation is mediated by interactions with and perceptions of an environment (Itzhak

2015: 290, Marchand 2010: 2) conducive to the revival of tradition through practice. Additionally, the subtle materiality of the mosque's interior enables individuals' agentic sensing of the tradition engendered by haptic appropriation. Combined, proximity and embodied tradition, especially in the form of devotional practice, unite impact on one's sense of self and habituation of virtue. Embodiment of tradition is the result of inhabiting an environment which reminds of ethical, spiritual and pious meanings that my interlocutors seek to cultivate in their quest to realize themselves as pious Muslims. Such volitional practices are productive of pious dispositions and a religious consciousness. This makes clear that the presence of mosques and other monuments facilitates the actualization of piety and expression of virtuous in the urban environment.

The connection between architecture, sensation and perception of ethical meanings within it, explains why research participants have the ability to see the abstract concept of history in the urban environment. It is the 'feel' of history, the aesthetic tones lingering in sensational interactions that make history perceptible on the one hand. Yet on the other hand, it is the capacity to see ethical meanings associated with historical primacy of Islam on Turkish soil. Thus, what interlocutors mean by history is a historical perspective that centers around the potentiality of pious practice and presence of spiritual infrastructure. It is a historical view that is articulated from the standpoint of piety, religious tradition and ethical self-cultivation. Notably, it is not the genre of history which originates from the nexus between secularism and historicist colonial epistemology, both of which strictly limit the validity and perceptibility of subaltern and premodern life worlds that it seeks to express in historical writing (Hollywood 2003: 520-521).

Finally, the importance of the built environment in its contribution to ethical self-cultivation and Islamic consciousness, likely explains the phenomena of city hikes and heritage walks offered by MIM and practiced individually with friends and family. I have chosen one such walk as the subject of the next chapter, for its rich repository in cultural elaboration on both tangible and intangible properties of the cityscape. Tours as these represent yet another iteration of this chapter's recurring theme, which argues that research participants and the city's materiality mutually engage each other in a way that bolsters the cultivation of pious dispositions and Islamic consciousness and provides individuals with conditions for their sustenance over time.

Before I turn to the next chapter, I want to briefly take stock and conclude this

section by emphasizing this thesis' distinct approach to sensorial religion and ethical self-cultivation. One way of answering the question why Istanbul's sensorial phenomena are important to research participants could be in following the lead of Charles Hirschkind and Patrick Eisenlohr, whose arguments, despite considerable difference, can be read as intersecting in some key ways. They both point to how sensorial phenomena, particularly language performance, carry affective power and effect a somatic and emotional response in the individual, which becomes registered within the body. The somatic and emotional pull produces a desired affective quality of religious experience, making it therefore appear as real to the individual (Hirschkind 2006, Eisenlohr 2018, Eisenlohr 2023).

But this line of reasoning reduces the body and its affective bearing to mechanics that generate a viscerally felt 'spiritual' experience. One of the flaws of this argument is that affective quality of a material object does not determine what it is that a person feels and how this feeling will be interpreted. That stands in contrast to referential virtuous messaging. Another issue is that this argument displaces religion to the realm of the affective, hence unconscious, felt or emotive. Notice, however, from the discussions on the various sensory experiences that neither a purely mental nor purely bodily engagement with the sonic environment is in the foreground. The agentive self-direction of my research participants rather suggests a unified mental and bodily response that involves the "entire moral person as a unity of body and soul" (Hirschkind 2006: 76). Precisely because this perspective eschews the binary of religion as either mental construct or somatic sensation I opted for the idiom of 'consciousness'. What if we were to place religion within its domain, without foregoing the body as sensuous link to the material world and "the heart, the organ of moral knowledge and practice" (Hirschkind 2006: 97), one which is central to Muslim subjectivity? In the next chapter, I want to explore this question and offer a more nuanced view of the faculties involved in forming a religious consciousness and ethical dispositions.

5. (In)Visible Landscapes

In this chapter I want to address the nuanced formation of ethical selves and pious consciousness, by further uncovering the productive relationship between the urban environment and religious self-formation. Whereas the last section examined the materiality of the built environment, this chapter will focus on its invisible properties and spiritual

meaning-making. The invisible landscape and its constituents featuring in this chapter are tied to concrete and visible objects yet extend into the realm of the unseen. While sensorial faculties continue to play a role in accessing them, as the narrative slowly wades into the domain of the unseen, a shift occurs in anthropological theory, whereby it makes it more difficult to employ the idiom of the senses in a linear way. The unseen and its relationships, in addressing the believers' capacity of spiritual discernment, often become a flashpoint for anthropologists to abandon conventional modes of understanding, whose ossified presumptions become coterminous with "positivist denial" (Willerslev and Suhr 2018: 71). The indeterminacy of religious experience and its impact on ethnographic publications, signals a shift in my writing for this chapter.

In its first subchapter I want to set scene for what Lili di Puppò calls "heart ethnography" (2024: 61), by introducing readers to the practice of *ziyara* to the burial place of the prophetic companion Abu Ayyub al-Ansari (short: Abu Ayyub). From the instance of performing *ziyara*, I want to explore and illuminate storying practices that unveil ways in which meanings of a "hidden religious topography" (Burchardt and Becci 2013: 12) are perceived by my field community and come to constitute their subjectivities.

5.1 Stories of Spiritual Ancestors

On a gloomy rainy morning I found myself, huddled together in a circle with other people, standing on a small square beside the Eyüp Sultan Mosque. The square was lined by old Ottoman buildings and patches of what is left of the ancient cemetery field extending from the city walls to the Eyüp Sultan district (Lacqueur 1993: 6). In the biting cold, we shifted in our place, eyes coveting the steam-filled *salep* stalls punctuating the square. At its end, the Mihmandar 1505 restaurant gently alluded to the real target of most visitors in the area, Abu Ayyub al-Ansari, himself a "*mihmandar*, the person who hosted the Prophet Muhammad in Medina" (Hammond 2023: 149, *emph. orig.*). Believed to have passed away close to the walls of former Constantinople during an attempted conquest in the early period of Islam, Sultan Mehmed II "ordered the construction of a tomb and mosque complex on the site where the grave had been discovered. The complex became the first mosque built by the Ottomans in the conquered city" (Hammond 2023: 18) and the district's history has since been closely interwoven with religious significance (Hammond: 2023: 18-19).

We were participating in the *ziyara* as part of a guided walking tour with Abu

Ahmad, who first appeared in chapter four, and as we were waiting for it to start, Abu Ahmad introduced himself as someone who has lived close to a decade in the city and as a freelance historian of the Islamic tradition committed to a spiritual perspective. He spoke slowly, his oral presentation judiciously permeated with calm gestures, while he maintained eye contact with his audience, whom he involved in his storytelling. Below, I will reproduce selected parts from the tour's narration, to give a sense of his storytelling before I delve into its implications. Some quotations are approximated and edited for clarity; others are direct quotes. This is how Abu Ahmad began to introduce us to the day's event:

"Today we will connect to incredible history. We are going to visit somebody who touched the Prophet saws with his hands and spoke to him with his tongue. This is not something to rush, I want you to experience it with your hearts. This place is the spiritual heart of the city, arguably even the single most important spiritual place in this land. When you come here as a Muslim, you come home; as a Muslim this is you *wiratha*. That's why today, you're not going to learn many dates and facts. (...) In a hadith, the Prophet saws mentioned the army that would conquer this city. He described it as *ni'ma al-jaysh*, the best of armies! Those words entered the hearts of Abu Ayyub and generations after him. Our aim is to learn about the person we are about to visit. Who knows his original name? His name is Khalid bin Zayd."

Then Abu Ahmad told us about Abu Ayyub al-Ansari's lineage, the story of the prophetic migration to Medina and the friendship between the Prophet Muhammad and Abu Ayyub, describing it as "a beautiful relationship between a host and his honorable guest", which conveyed the love that Abu Ayyub had for the Prophet. He then continued:

"Forty years later, during the caliphate of Mu'awiya, the caliph organized an army to go to Istanbul, by that time Abu Ayyub was in his eighties or nineties and he joined the army. (...) When the Muslim army came here, they found it's no easy task to break through the city walls. (...) For eight months they were here, and after eight months Abu Ayyub died, because of the wounds he sustained, and the sickness from it and the difficulty of the battle. They buried him outside of the walls, it was as close as they could get to the city walls. The Muslim army went back, and they were unsuccessful. Can you think of a better army than the army that has Abu Ayyub in it? But Allah 'azza wa jall, knew better. We need to extract spiritual lessons from here. Because this withholding has a spiritual lesson. How many people plan and then have to cancel their plans? How many times did we want to have something – yet we are meant to wait? How long did Muslims have to wait to open the city? What is your guess?"

People guessed, somebody in the crowd mentioned 700 years. "Just shy of 800 years. The Master of time will be the One allocating things for us", he responded, and proceeded to

narrate the story of the conquest of Constantinople by Mehmed II, before continuing with our agenda for the day:

“Today we will make ziyara to Abu Ayyub. (...) What is the purpose of ziyara? – To remember death, right, but whose death? Our own! After resurrection, we will present our deeds to Allah, and every reflective person thinks that they don’t want to leave without adding more good deeds that they can present. What are good deeds that we can present? Reciting the Qur’an, giving in charity, praying. Also, it’s being kind to your neighbors, or your spouse, or serving your local community. Death gives us life, that *himma*, the drive to be better. When visiting the graves, one gives *salam* to people in their graves. When you give *salam* to the Muslims in their grave they will respond to you. So, all people here will respond back to us. One greets them by using their titles, one makes *du’a* for them, such as for their ease in the grave, that Allah gives their graves fragrance, that they are raised with *Rasulullah* saws. (...) That is what we will be doing.”

Abu Ahmad’s storytelling exhibited “an embodied, affective” view of Islamic history and practice (Hammond 2023: 42), which was most evident from his instructing the audience to do ziyara with the heart. He wanted the group to feel his words and the importance of the place, enlivened and distinguished by the presence of spiritual ancestors. Thereby Abu Ahmad’s storytelling became an important medium in the process of shaping religious experience.

Storytelling recasts the cityscape into webs of meaning and allows for the material environment to become places of significance which believers can craft meaningful relationships with. Such places act as means for understanding spiritual cues (Hammond 2023: 3), comparable to virtuous messaging of the urban sensorium. Writing about indigenous practices of walking and narrating ancestral stories, Alice Legat shows how storied places represent “indices to access stories, histories and knowledge” (2008: 36) transmitted across generations in the ‘footsteps’ of ancestors (Legat 2008: 38). Accordingly, Abu Ahmad’s narration helps tour participants to decipher spiritual meanings within the cityscape and retrieve stories of spiritual ancestors, to which, through sensory overlappings of movement and narration, they form a corporeal relation and thereby “strengthen their ability to see beyond the visible” (Mittermaier 2012: 253).

The ability to see enchanted landscapes, or “worlds of vision” (Viveiros de Castro 2011: 133), that are not readily accessible to outsiders, is brought closer to the tour participants by Abu Ahmad’s skillful didactic. He helps participants to learn to see beyond the material forms of things, to reorient oneself and see anew what is already visible. The deliberate training of their memories, eyes, and ears, can be conceived of as adopting a

“faith frame” (Luhrman 2020: 21), a guiding perspective with regards to the world and one’s relation to it. This frame carries a number of implications.

Initially what stands out is the idea of spiritual lessons. Interestingly Abu Ahmad’s narration of Abu Ayyub’s life culminates with a lack of success and failure to actualize the prophetic hadith. The meaning of failure however is inverted by his drawing attention to spiritual lessons from this example, whereby Abu Ahmad reinvigorates lived religion (Kloos and Beekers 2017, De Koning 2017, Sunier 2017). The lesson according to Abu Ahmad is orbiting around Allah acting in accordance with ordained decree and wisdom. Consequently, Abu Ahmad emphasizes that from stories of the past inscribed into architectural features, believers can understand meanings that are unfolding in the present, such as having one’s plans cancelled and the necessity to learn to trust Divine decree.

This discursive emphasis is important, because it forges alternative “temporal frameworks” (Deeb 2009: 243) that reflect the ability of tour participants to see meanings in present time, both through identifying the city environment with spiritual ancestors and seeing the manifestation of their biographies within their own lives. This upsets linear temporality (Hollywood 2004: 522, Rytter 2016: 230, Cannell 2005: 351) by blending past and present and produces a historical consciousness (Bendixsen 2013: 104) attuned to spiritual meanings and generative of pious dispositions.

But beyond present time, ziyara’s honing of historical sensibilities is supposed to evoke an understanding of the finality of life and its ephemerality. For pious Muslims death is a constant reminder of the necessity for self-improvement and, as Abu Ahmad reminds his audience, good deeds that can be presented in the hereafter. Remembering death through visitations of graves and shrines, according to Emrah Yıldız, is thus not representative of “an already formed religious conviction about virtue; they provide the conditions of possibility for such religious convictions to emerge from the improvised practice” (2023: 178). Kindling pious dispositions in visitors is reinforced by the act of narrating and inclining people to do good deeds, both devotional and social.

In this fashion, ziyara implicates the visitor into a dense web of earthly and unseen relationships, extending to entities such as the ‘local community’, the dead spiritual ancestors and God, something that could be already gleaned from the section on the visual culture of Ottoman graves. This view is further aided by Abu Ahmad’s instructions to say salam and make du’a for the deceased, convinced that they will reply. Courteous acts like

these, aimed at the well-being of the dead, are social acts within invisible relationships of care, that are part of the project of ethical self-cultivation (Cannell 2005: 345-347, Stiles 2023: 499-500, Louw and Mortensen 2021) and outside of conventional temporality. With chains of care stretching into the unseen realm of the “*barzakh*” (Bubandt, Rytter and Suhr 2019: 1), the dead and living, continue to be bound up even beyond mortality’s rupture (Bowen 1993: 251, Louw 2024: 38, Astuti and Bloch 2013, Schmoller 2020: 1046) through ethical conduct.

Abu Ahmad’s narrative demonstrates that the Eyüp Sultan district, the ‘spiritual heart of the city’, is intimately enmeshed in an alternative temporality and sociality that further define a sense of virtuous conduct and spiritual modes of appraisal for my research participants. In such instances piety is born out of the relation to and experience of place. More than just a backdrop to religious practice, place is constitutive of the endeavor of ethical self-cultivation (Hammond 2014, 2023, Fernandez 2003). The storying of such places together with its material objects and modes of perception that are expressive of a “poetic geography on top of the geography of the literal” (De Certeau 1984: 105), involve the self in “a process of continual new formation, which takes place through the self’s ongoing engagement with – or its embodied experience in – its social and natural environment, that is, within a living world” (Ivanov 2017: 376-377). Accordingly, such interactions habituate virtuous dispositions, spiritual perception and therefore pious selfhood. In the next part, I want to present another vignette from Abu Ahmad’s guided tour that sheds light on the more profound dynamics of reconfiguring subjectivity and its connection to epistemic questions of doubt and knowledge.

5.2 Doubt, Subjectivity, and Heart Correction

To begin to explore the experience of instilling pious subjectivity and its entanglement with epistemic possibilities and spiritual faculties, I want to come back to one of the very first instructions of Abu Ahmad, namely doing ziyara with the heart, to which I referred to as embodied and affective mode of doing religion and relating to its visible and invisible properties. Later, Abu Ahmad narrated to us an instance from when he came for the first time to the grave site of Abu Ayyub. When relating the story to us, he made a significant addition, revealing to us that the building also housed *atharat*; relics ascribed to the Prophet Muhammad, such as his hair. Relics are a contentious subject within the Islamic tradition, enjoying both a high status but also being subject to skepticism and critique

(Rytter 2017: 55). Abu Ahmad recounted his initial ambivalence towards such relics and why he subsequently experienced a change of heart. This instance and its connection to the heart is a significant detail in Abu Ahmad's and other research participants' understanding of piety, perception and volition:

“You don't find atharat much elsewhere in the Muslim world. I'll tell you something. First time I came here my heart was filled with doubt: are these objects authentic or not authentic, how do I deal with that? And I was here with a teacher who (...) recognized that. (...) So, this person tells me: 'you know, if you fell in love with someone, and somebody told you they were in the street, you would go and see them, and if they passed, you'd pick up something they left, or smell the air so you could take their fragrance in'. So, what about the fragrance of Rasulullah saws?”

The experience of doubt at shrines of saints or other loci of mystical experience are not restricted to Abu Ahmad or the Muslim community. Jean-Paul Baldacchino, recounts an attempt at Christian mysticism at the shrine of a saint, when he ran up against epistemological barriers of perception and doubt:

“I thought I should try to let the saint speak to me but the saint remains dumb. I couldn't help but think to myself, 'Would I feel any different if the coffin was actually empty? Am I speaking to a lump of stone? Does it matter?' Engrained in an ethic of suspicion I found myself doubting some of the most mundane things” (2019: 363).

Suspicion toward mysticism and affective power of religious experience in liberal thought is emerging from a deep-seated weariness against abuse of power and epistemological deception (Agrama 2010: 6). It assumes “that suspicion is a natural, default condition, the obverse of authority as a constructed one” (Agrama 2010: 7). On the other hand, it is connected to secular, rationalist understandings of causality. While Abu Ahmad did not doubt the inherent possibility of sacredness of objects, his doubt referred to the sacredness' authenticity, concluding that only if it is real then it can be worthy of veneration. This line of thinking places its focus on conditions for intersubjective verifiability of the objects' origins. Although he later reiterated that Ottoman objects possess chains of transmission linking them to prophetic companions who first attained unto them, this was not crucial to changing his opinion at first.

It needs to be noted that Abu Ahmad's approach to religion was initially entangled in secular epistemology and subjectivity. While it sounds like a contradiction, it is not, since secularism often operates within the domain of crafting sensibilities and affective dispositions of selfhood (Feuchter und Knecht 2008: 15), rather than overtly opposing

religion as such. Religion and secularity within the interiority of an individual, are not mutually exclusive entities or modes of perception (Hirschkind 2006: 104). This is perhaps why the viability of the relics' verification through chains of transmission did not gain much currency with Abu Ahmad at first. Straddling between two domains of appraisal, the ethic of suspicion appears to have had greater weight in Abu Ahmad approach to the relics.

Instead, what became the pivotal factor in altering his conviction was his teacher, who addressed his doubt with the idiom of love, thereby implicitly teaching him the importance of loving inner attachment toward the relics' symbolism. Notably, the question of authenticity was thus abandoned altogether, and this demands closer attention. For Abu Ahmad to learn to redirect himself toward the object of his yearning unconditionally with its attending dispositions of love and submission was respectively a "leap of faith" (Willerslev and Suhr 2018: 69) requiring him to distance himself from concerns about the relics' epistemic continuity.

Abu Ahmad's change of heart hence arguably builds upon the authority of "elsewhere" (Mittermaier 2012: 249), contingent upon the entanglement of his quest for piety with others. His epistemological rewiring shifted his perspective from the "I" to what is other than "I". The idea of cogito ergo sum, the contained autonomous self who can know, becomes dislodged in the moment when he is unable to know neither himself, nor through the available secular means, both which challenge intrinsically secular and liberal epistemes.

But it also came as a revelation to Abu Ayyub, that his teacher had a profound insight into his condition of doubt, seemingly understanding Abu Ahmad better than he himself did (Di Puppo 2024: 62), which enabled him to care for his spiritual condition (McKearney 2021: 9). Together with the abandonment of secular and liberal selfhood at the grave of Abu Ayyub, this experience highlights the "ethics of passion" (Mittermaier 2012: 249, Lienhardt 1961: 151) and dependency on ethical pedagogy (Larson 2023: 484), calling for an understanding of ethical self-cultivation as an ethics of "being-together-with" (Larson 2023: 490). This paradigm envisions human beings as interconnected and relational (Louw and Mortensen 2021: 123, Rytter 2016: 236, Larson 2023: 485, al-Mohammad 2010: 440-441), dependent in knowing and becoming. It also unsettles the 'self' from self-cultivation, therefore ably mounting an even more radical

critique of liberal, secular subjecthood, that first troubled the intellectual positions of anthropologists who promulgated the paradigmatic shift towards self-cultivation. Abu Ahmad's own narrative about the reconfiguration of his subjectivity further demonstrates the intricate relationship between my research participants, their surroundings, and religious practices that rewire perception and habituate pious dispositions, and therefore contribute to piety and religious consciousness.

5.3 A Theory of the Heart

That said, I want to dwell on the idea of consciousness and the heart, its role in doing ziyara and in changing Abu Ahmad's conviction. The heart is an emic concept entertained by my field community. What can be generally observed is that it finds mention in research on Islamic piety, often citing research participants' own language and experience, but it is rarely conceptually explored. That is because it is not immediately accessible as a constituent of a person's interiority. Its presence is thus either bracketed out or taken for granted, given that 'the heart' is part of both a Christian and even non-religious anthropology, used as a parlance to indicate feelings, intuition, or desire.

It goes without saying that there is a challenge to exploring the heart as "organ of perception" (Di Puppò 2024: 66) given its elusive character and the often highly subjective assessments of it. But this shouldn't prevent anthropologists from asking a set of questions germane to understanding Muslim conceptions of cognition in the wider sense. Leaning on Lili di Puppò's ethnographic suggestion to open up to other modes of "seeing and knowing" (2024: 62), and inquiring into what the heart is, its role in the formation of moral selves and approach to the materiality of the city, I hope to theorize the functional dynamics of acquiring a religious consciousness and close the interstice between my research participants' experience of perception and lacunae of anthropological writing.

Abu Ahmad's instructions to his audience during the guided tour provide the right direction to start thinking about these thematics. In his introductory words, he primed us for the experience by proposing we conduct ziyara with our 'hearts', contrasting it with 'rush' and learning dry 'dates and facts'. This points out firstly, that the connection to the whole of the Eyüp Sultan district, its history and spiritual ancestors, is not supposed to happen through the mind, synonymous with dates and facts, but through the heart. Secondly, the process of connection through the heart is intended to be slow, and its pace resembles the characterization of gradual sedimentation of knowledge, which Abu Ahmad

contrasts with formal historical data. It implies that knowledge of the heart, imprinted on a person's interior, is more than 'just' "information" (Hirschkind 2006: 26), insofar that information is distinguished by lack of "gradual sedimentation and embodiment" (Hirschkind 2006: 27). Slow movement through the material and spiritual landscape suffuses believers with embodied, spiritual knowledge.

What can be established from the preceding paragraph is that the heart is situated in the body. This understanding resonates with Islamic anthropology, which supports the entwinement of body and heart. An example of it being a famous report quoted in al-Nawawi's widely read collection of forty hadiths: "Verily and truly there is in each body a morsel. If it is sound, the whole body is sound. But if it is corrupted, then the whole body is corrupted. And verily this morsel is the heart" (2006 [1270]: 64). The theorization of Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, a classical 10th century Islamic scholar, too, points to this connection and presents body and heart as outward and inward entities respectively. In his exposition on the topic the heart is described as "the real essence of the human (...) however not the piece of flesh seated in the left side of your chest" (al-Ghazali 2017 [1105]: 32-33). Given that the heart should not be taken in its literal expression, it can be conceived as spiritual faculty.

Furthermore, following Abu Ahmad's story on doubt, a crucial third point can be added here. Because he located doubt not within his mind, but his heart, he located therein epistemic potential and capacity for critical appraisal, making the heart explicitly the seat of consciousness and cognition. This understanding also has precedent within the Islamic tradition, wherein the heart is granted the ability of knowledge and gnosis (al-Ghazali 2017 [1105]: 36, al-Daghistani 2016: 197). What strikes me as particularly insightful is al-Ghazali's formulation on the difference between knowing the Divine and knowing its material signifiers, but also significantly, the modality of acquiring knowledge of the heart. Al-Ghazali expresses that "[t]he heart reaches gnosis through the recognition of God's works. These belong to the sensory world, and therefore the heart reaches the recognition of the wonders of the world through the senses, however, to persist, these in turn require the body" (al-Ghazali 2017 [1105]: 36).

From this one understands several points. The first is that the heart has the inherent capacity of cognition, discernment and volition (Poya 2023: 125). The second is that heart knowledge of material signifiers requires sensory input via the body, through which heart

and senses are linked. Connecting these dots allows me to advance a theory on the functional dynamics of acquiring a religious consciousness and ethical selfhood in connection to the material environment. Going back to the role of the body and embodiment, I propose to view it as the vehicle that allows the intake of sensorial cues from the world. These cues in turn percolate into the heart and inform it of religious meanings, which it is able to evaluate, know and remember. Hence, the sensory intake of cues gives rise to a pious consciousness that affects one's ethical dispositions. Concomitantly, the intake of these sensory cues – elsewhere called seepage, fusion and distillment – necessitates relative physical proximity, which explains the regular engagement with material sites and practices wherein these cues manifest. The body, thus, is a vessel conducting the heart to physical proximity with humans, architecture, sites of the unseen, and the urban sensorium and it is in this physical proximity that the heart can exhaust its epistemic and perceptual capacities of discerning virtuous messaging in the urban environment.

What can be added further is that ethical selfhood is engendered through heart conviction, therefore highlighting the heart as a locus of identity and pious subjectivity. This can be inferred from Abu Ahmad's transition from a particular mode of appraisal and selfhood to another, which followed the adopting of loving affection toward the "absent beloved" (Rytter 2017: 49). His new mode of being contrasted with and displaced the notion of doubt within his heart. Hence the transformation of subjectivity stands in connection to his change of heart and its perception, which implicates the spiritual faculty in our understanding of Muslim subjectivity and self-awareness.

At this point I would like to push back against the body of anthropological work that tends to characterize corporeal intertwinement of the heart in terms of somatic, affected states (Pinto 2010: 467, Hirschkind 2006: 97). Explicating the phenomenon through affect and physical responsiveness means flattening the concept of the heart within a purely mechanistic worldview and reducing it to the unconscious (Hirschkind 2006: 9). While affect may possibly be one way of explaining heart experience, or even play a role in it, it does not align well with Abu Ahmad's awareness of knowledge and doubt as accrued within the heart, which makes it difficult to relegate the heart to the realm of the unconscious. This is also undergirded by the paucity of somatic sensations in my findings from chapter four. While functional dynamics of the heart are undoubtedly more complex, I want to foreground the relevance of consciousness, which probes much

of our received assumptions about the anthropology of religion. I intend to build further on this idea in the next chapter, where I will finally turn to the other side of my interlocutors' ambivalent relationship with the city, that of aversion, and examine how social friction can impact spiritual progress and pious habits.

6. With or Against the City?

In this chapter I seek to chart an explanation of how ethical self-cultivation and religious consciousness account for the formation of virtuous dispositions. In chapter four I limned the sensory intake of meanings, their embodied sedimentation, remembrance and practice. Chapter five extended this domain into the unseen. It brought together various facets of the invisible in the religious experience of my field participants by retracing a guided city tour that came to inform my thought on ethical dispositions and religious consciousness. There, I argued that the sedimentation of meanings constitutive of ethical selfhood and pious awareness occurs within the hearts of my field participants, which are the seats of religious consciousness.

While in the preceding sections I focused on the city's materiality and invisible properties conducive to the remembrance of religious meanings, I now want to examine how under these conditions pious habits are formed in the life of my interlocutors. To this end I ask how challenges and adverse facets of life in Istanbul open a pathway to the effacement of the ego through regular spiritual exercises. Eventually I seek to bring together the arguments of the preceding chapters and to propose an alternative understanding of how Muslims cultivate a relationship with God, in a manner that gives preference to the perspective of my research participants and emphasizes conscious choices and the role of spiritual faculties therein.

6.1 Integrity in Contentious Cityscapes

To approach the theme of pious habits I first want to start by going back to my initial puzzlement over how tangible frustration toward the city coexisted with fascination for Istanbul in the lives of my research participants. While some aspects of urban life, such as those highlighted in the previous chapters, sustain the substrate for ethical living and play a key role in their satisfaction with life in the city, my field participants' relationship to Istanbul is far from linear. Frequently, the metropolis becomes a source of tensions that pull people in the opposite direction of religious values and pious conduct. In this context

I decided to scrutinize how these contradictory dynamics relate to each other, and whether they can be reconciled, given that they visibly complicate the narrative on ethical self-cultivation and pious urban sensorium. Specifically, if my research participants invited the sensorial, material, and social influence of urban surroundings into their lives, to which degree would this embrace of influence be punctuated by resistance to the city's dynamics of unethical conduct? And can social frictions be integrated into the quest of living a pious life?

Meanwhile, Western Muslim migrants were grappling with the same dilemma. Muz, whom I've introduced in the beginning of this thesis, voiced similar concerns in his blog: "I grapple with the struggle of preserving my own moral integrity amid cultural disparities and societal norms" (Muz @yabanci, 2024 a). He explained how provocations and display of uncouth behavior made him want to respond in kind, despite such reaction contravening his understanding of good character. In another paragraph he reflected on this problematic:

"Well, your interactions with people, both of good and bad character, will leave your mark on them. The good becomes bad, and well, the bad becomes worse. The stink of poor character clings on to all that it encounters. So how do we stay above it all? How do we keep the good we have in us, without allowing it to be exposed and torn away from the evil in this world?" (Muz @yabanci, 2024 a)

Similarly to Ilma's comments that troubled the idea of a smooth homecoming, Muz's candid reflections make clear that my research participants are cognizant of their environment's contradiction to their understanding of Islamic norms and morality. Yet to them, and many others I talked to, life in Istanbul seemed fulfilling and the city constituted a space where they could thrive in their religious identity.

In a subsequent conversation with Farah, she explained that she also struggled with the same issue pertaining to life in the metropolis. However, after many years she spent living in Istanbul, she could draw a definitive conclusion: "there are constant challenges in the city, but with the challenge comes the sweetness. If you get things easily, then it's not the same". She mentioned by way of example the many times she had to renew her residence permit and it being representative of one of the many quotidian struggles in the city, and added:

"It trains your *nafs*, because nobody is catering here for you, it's not like in America where we live like in a giant corporation, where everything is turned into customer service. (...) At some

point it makes you feel like ‘I don’t want to be here anymore’, but a couple days later you are happy and fine. It all depends on your attitude, you aren’t gonna’ get far here if you have the expectation that everything has to happen the way you need to have it. You only know what is inside of you, when you go through trials, then you can see how you react towards certain things: are you patient or not (...), because what matters is that you respond to those things in a way that pleases Allah (...). You grow through challenges.”

Farah’s viewpoint resolves the dilemma expatriates find themselves in, in Istanbul. She sees in the challenging city environment a testing ground for the strength of her character. In times when circumstances do not accommodate her desires, she recognizes an element of self-discipline, which she embraces. To her, a change of attitude is crucial to life in Istanbul, which she links to the virtue of patience. Only from a standpoint of virtuous inner state, life in the city can unfold in full. Her explanation shows that the explicit confrontation with the difficult city environment helps her reveal the degree to which she is able to respond in a manner congruent with religious values and Divine acceptance. Further it also helps her to hone the skill of virtuous response over time. Overall, she raises multiple important points worth our attention, that help make sense of how virtuous habits are formed with and against the contentious urban environment and how they undergird one’s relationship with the Divine.

6.2 Virtuous Habits, Spiritual Exercises and Disciplining the Self

Farah begins and ends with accentuating the repetition of challenges in Istanbul. Her comment indicates that going through trials is a recurring phenomenon, highlighting the continuity of both challenges and seeking to cultivate a virtuous response, of which patience is just one example. She continues to describe a learning process in which acting virtuously in moments of friction and difficulty enables her to learn good character and grow spiritually. Her view is distinct from that of Muz, who is questioning the ways in which one can preserve ethical dispositions, which he calls ‘the good’, while Farah holds that virtue can only be maintained if practiced regularly. Unlike Muz, Farah sees trials as revealing whether she possesses this ethical substrate to begin with. Instead of employing a language of preservation, she understands ethical conduct and good character as needing cultivation throughout everyday disruptions, which become a training ground for good character and virtuous habits.

It can be said that Farah’s connection between cultivating good character and resisting the city, is located within a process of spiritual refinement, requiring her to react

to things in a manner that harmonizes with Divine commands. This reaction, as she points out, is contrary to the impulses of her ego, which she uses the Arabic cognate *nafs* for. By going against her *nafs*, she tries to discipline the ego, an exercise known as *tarbiyat al-nafs*. This joint struggle, both against the city and against the self, is further indicative of piety's non-linearity, which has recently captured the attention of anthropologists. They question the portrayal of Muslims as coherent in their pursuit of piety, as they encounter challenges that throw them off their linear course and destabilize their spiritual strivings (Moumtaz 2015: 137). But Farah's comment presumes that these strivings are non-linear by nature and can only be actualized through encountering difficulties and embracing them as part of spiritual pedagogy. Farah thus integrates the dynamic of resisting the city's frictions, disruptive behavior and disregard for social norms back into the circuit of pious logic (Mittermaier 2019: 133-4).

Farah's exposition on recurring trials and habituating virtue and good character through practical training and application is tied to a long history of virtue ethics, which traces its roots back to antiquity. Beginning with Aristotle, he distinguished between two kinds of virtue, one being rational and the other ethical. The former is adopted through learning and education and the latter through habituation. He postulated that virtue is neither reflective of a natural human state, nor is it inimical to it, but rather the human being is endowed with the capacity to habituate virtuous dispositions. Comparable to the arts, virtue needs to be practically acquired through repeated action (Aristotle 2020: 23). This can be actualized when confronted with situations, including social ones, that challenge an individual in their virtuous response. It is only after recurring practice that a human can be said to have become virtuous (Aristotle 2020: 24).

Habituation of virtue was termed by Aristotle to acquire a '*habitus*', a term which is distinct to its modern correspondent. Its acquisition is understood as a gradual process, at the end of which, real *habitus* manifests itself when virtuous acts occur spontaneously without deliberation or thought (Nickl 2001: 22). This key part of Aristotle's argument is picked up by Saba Mahmood, by which she supports her ethnographic emphasis on the unconscious formation of pious sensibilities, and which finds analogous support in Charles Hirschkind's formulation on the visceral substrate of ethical knowledge. While it constitutes a central part of Aristotle's argument about *habitus*, I see the need to modify this understanding within the ethnography on Muslim religiosity, which is why I will

complicate the above anthropologists' reliance on the notion of the unconscious and the role it plays in shaping virtue later on.

Furthermore, Aristotle's usage of the term 'affect' designates emotion to which humans incline. The concept of disposition concurrently indicates the manner of relating to various emotions and can be, in other words, correlated to what Farah termed an 'attitude' to instances that produce emotional states. It can be judged from whether somebody is overcome by these emotions and reacts heftily, or whether one responds with balance, how soundly somebody is disposed to virtue (Aristotle 2020: 28).

In the subsequent period of Christian scholastic scholarship, Thomas Aquinas incorporated Aristotle's habitus concept, likely through the transmission of Arab sources, into his work (Krais and Gebauer 2014: 27). Thus, the notion of habitus found entrance into the Christian tradition (Nickl 2001: 36), and habituating virtue has henceforth famously been prescribed in the form of "exercitia spiritualia" (Hadot 1991: 48), or spiritual exercises, often associated with the clerical work of Ignatius of Loyola (Hadot 1991: 48). Akin to the ancient Greek tradition, spiritual exercises were conceptualized as an array of dietary and corporeal regimes, as well as self-control and accounting, with the goal of bringing about a profound transformation of one's being in the world (Hadot 1991: 15-18).

The ideal of virtuous self-transformation through attentiveness to bodily practices and other requisite means has been of shared concern for both the Christian and Islamic tradition. But while a stringent regime of transformational practices was often linked to and encouraged in monastic communities in Christianity, it was not the case in the Islamic tradition, where such practices were available to any devout Muslim. The ideal of self-transformation and its attendant devotional and spiritual regime was moreover encouraged within a social setting comprising extensively ramified relationships (Brown 1984: 30-32).

The prototypical idea of Aristotelian habitus was largely considered commensurate with the textual tradition of revelation and was acknowledged within the Sunni Islamic scholarship. One finds for example, that the image of a good Muslim in the Qur'an encompasses piety, mindfulness of boundaries set by God, as well as virtues like humility, moderation, and patience, by which an individual exemplifies slavehood to God (Lapidus 1984: 41). Accordingly, Ira Lapidus traces a rich corpus of Islamic tradition that

lays out the means by which this vision can be practically realized in a process that is called “acquisition of good character” (1984: 45). What can be observed across the different works and thinkers is a conceptual coherence that perhaps only differs in terminology and context of writing.

The probably most direct rendition of ‘habitus’ into Arabic thought is found in Ibn Khaldun’s use of “*malaka*”, which denotes “the meaning of the Latin *habitus* – an acquired faculty, rooted in the soul” (Lapidus 1984: 53). With a heavy leaning on Aristotle and emphasis on repeated practice and acquisition of virtuous habits, Ibn Khaldun schematizes a process of an individual’s change towards good character, which is anchored in “antiinstinctual control of emotion and impulse” (Lapidus 1984: 57). As such, good character is “a cultivated way of living in the world, without being absorbed by the world or fleeing from it” (Lapidus 1984: 60).

Another alignment with the tradition of spiritual exercises is represented in the works of Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, who was primarily concerned with the triad of “deeds, virtues, and knowledge” (Lapidus 1984: 46). Al-Ghazali held that performing good deeds, “self-training (*riyada*), and habituation (*I’tiyad*)” (Lapidus 1984: 49) were at the core of heart purification and formed the practical guidelines by which an individual could hone virtuous dispositions. He concluded that, through continuous action, they became heart attributes, which, after thorough sedimentation, began to “govern the actions of the limbs” (Lapidus 1984: 47).

In the context of spiritual exercises and heart training, concepts such as purification of the heart, purification of the soul, acquiring good character or disciplining the nafs are closely connected (Lapidus 1984: 47, al-Daghistani 2017: 23), because of their inter-related dynamic of strengthening the heart, weakening of the ego, and enlivening the soul. The same terms are also part of the language of Sufism, which Farah echoes when conveying her relationship to the city. Her experience with the city environment corresponds to Sufism’s core practice of replacing vices with virtues and taming the ego and one’s desires (al-Daghistani 2017: 24, Pinto 2010: 466-467, Pinto 2017: 92).

What is interesting in many ways is how the pre-modern tradition of virtue cultivation and self-limitation, one that grows directly out of involuntary connections to other people and their behavior, becomes a guiding principle for Farah’s self-direction, self-realization and a source of agency in a contentious cityscape. Without this, in her own

words, one would not come far in Istanbul, which is perhaps an allusion to the many disgruntled Western Muslim migrants who end up leaving the city, for lack of correspondence between its realities and the life they wished for.

In his last blog post, where Muz paints a vivid picture of the hardships of living in the metropolis, he alerts his readers to the false impression people might create about life in Istanbul:

“anyone who tells you that it’s easy, or that you’ll have no problem making the transition isn’t being fully honest with you. (...) This city is extremely tough to live in, and if you have found a way to still be patient, caring, kind, forgiving, and honest in a city full of people who are the exact opposite, your level of character is uncanny”. (Muz @yabanci, 2024 c)

Once more, Muz’s commentary highlights the challenge in maintaining good character and cultivating integrity alongside disparities between expectations and reality. His expression indicates that at the time of writing, he had not been able to discover the requisite strategies to actualize virtuous traits such as kindness and forgiveness against the contentious cityscape.

Eventually his blog posts dissipated, and he deleted his public social media accounts, where he was documenting and sharing snippets from his expat life. There is no sure way of telling what happened, whether he simply lost inspiration, chose to focus on his private life or perhaps, too, left the city for good, disappointed by the demands the city environment makes on an individual seeking to sustain a pious character. However, to those who chose to stay, some spaces within the larger communal network of Western Muslims offered advice on how to do precisely that.

While staying in Istanbul I came to attend different programs organized by a local scholar, whom I’ll call Sheikh Muhsin and who was part of the wider network within which I was conducting research. As someone who himself moved with his family to the Turkish city and has been residing there for several years, he had an active presence in the community and could be seen giving talks at events organized by MIM. He also engaged in public teaching, and his programs were regularly attended by field participants. His lectures stood out by his ability to simplify complex ideas and bring past traditions to life through imaginative narration. Both his friends and students spoke fondly of him, and he won the appreciation of others by his diplomatic style, quiet humor and humble demeanor.

During the month of Ramadan, I decided to take part in his lecture series that

focused on practical steps to help strengthen one's spiritual and virtuous capacities. Coincidentally these lectures were further representative of the tradition of virtue habituation. Sheikh Muhsin's teaching resonated with individuals who were learning to navigate difficult and emotionally charged circumstances and it shed light on what the practice of spiritual exercises and disciplining the self might look like in a structured framework where individuals take lessons from a religious figure. I want to reproduce some extracts from one of those lectures, to detail the nuances of learning to become well-disposed to virtue and provide a glimpse into the character of the discourse on practices that belong to the fold of spiritual exercises.

Lesson four was conducted with the intention of offering tools that help to deal with adverse situations in light of what constitutes good character. To prime his listeners for that, Sheikh Muhsin began his lecture with a reminder from the Qur'an:

"Allah *subhanahu wa ta'ala* says, that: 'We shall surely try you in this life with loss of wealth and loss of life' – and loss of other things that we have. It's part of our experience in this life, that we will experience difficulties. And then Allah *subhanahu wa ta'ala* says: '*wa bashir al-sabirin*' – and give good news to those who are patient. Who are the *sabirin*? He says in the next verse: '*alladhina idha asabathum musibatun qalu inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji'un*' – those who, when an affliction befalls them, say *inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji'un*⁵. (...) I might feel terrible, but if Allah wants me to do something, I still do it. That is *sabr*."

This exposition resembles Farah's understanding of trials in the context of urban life and the necessity of responding to them with patience. The Sheikh reminds listeners that afflictions are an unavoidable part of life. They might cause negative feelings in a person, not dissimilar to Muz's observations or Farah's realization of her fleeting impulse of wanting to leave the city. And while Sheikh Muhsin acknowledges the emotional force of difficulties, he notes that the real goal beyond the emotion, as reflected in Aristotle's understanding of 'affect', is a virtuous disposition, like patience. He points out that acting with patience and persistence in conducting oneself in accordance with religious values entails reward from Allah. To this end, believers need to remind themselves of it and hold themselves to patience by saying 'verily we belong to Allah, and verily to Him we shall return'.

⁵ Verily we belong to Allah, and verily to Him we shall return.

Uttering these words serves as an important step in the beginning of habituating the virtue of patience, which the Sheikh further details in the lecture:

“But sometimes something will happen (...) and you’ll have a feeling, and it will push you down or push you to lash out. So, what do you need to do? The first thing is: pause. Don’t let the feelings move you. That means don’t do what your feelings are pulling you to do. So, if your feelings are moving you to withdraw, you pause, you don’t withdraw. And if your feelings are moving you to lash out, you pause, you hold your tongue. (...) Then you say ‘inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji’un’. I bring this to mind, then what do I do? I do a good deed, that is the opposite of what my feelings are telling me to do. (...) You should smile, you should say something nice. (...) Do a good deed despite how you feel, for the sake of Allah subhanahu wa ta’ala.”

Here again, Sheikh Muhsin analyzes the emotional dynamics when somebody is negatively affected by another’s action and acknowledges the force of emotions. He then gives practical advice, that incorporates mindfulness, remembrance of God and self-discipline by overcoming one’s primary impulses. After pausing and becoming mindful of the situation and one’s emotional state, he instructs listeners to utter the above-mentioned formula. Here the act of remembering God that is associated with patience, is enacted to habituate this very virtue in the face of adversity, as it is supposed to remind the individual of virtuous conduct and its eternal reward. This is then followed by learning good character, and reacting with kindness, instead of despair or anger.

Beyond Sheikh Muhsin’s lectures, there were other settings in which I came across this understanding of habitus and piety, even when it was formulated less explicitly. Often, discussions that touched upon this subject occurred in the context of resisting the frictions in the city, whose particularities would vary according to the positionality of my interlocutors. The common theme, however, was the principle that outward actions are generative of virtuous states, which runs like a red thread through anthropological work on Muslims of different varieties of Islamic practice (Mahmood 2005, Hirschkind 2006, Lindebæk Lyngsøe and Stjernholm 2022: 180, Hamdy 2009: 176). What precedes such outward actions, however, is remembering religious meanings and God.

6.3 Closeness to God

After having introduced examples illustrative of how habits are formed among my research community in Istanbul, I want to hark back to this chapter’s outline and delineate the impact of the urban environment on the cultivation of piety, ethical living and virtuous dispositions. Despite having observed the interplay between environment and piety

countless times among research participants, it was Farah who explicitly made the connection between the two and pointed me to this line of thinking. Her previous comments resolve the initial puzzlement about the nature of the relationship my interlocutors forge with the metropolis and highlight the productivity of the contentious cityscape for higher spiritual purposes. At the same time, Farah further explains that Istanbul supercharged the process of ethical self-cultivation, virtue-habitation and disciplining the self in a statement that densely summarizes and joins between the thematic threads of this thesis. Here is an extract of that conversation:

Anna: “What is special about Istanbul?”

Farah: “I have found Istanbul livable, because many people are practicing Muslims here. I have never seen anyone who has as much love of the Prophet saws as Turks. (...) You find what you seek. When I came here, I was vulnerable and living in this city allowed me to heal.”

Anna: “Can you talk a bit more about healing?”

Farah: “Healing is cyclical journey, it is a process and for many practicing Muslims that means to connect with Allah subhanahu wa ta’ala. I was also able to connect with Allah, through hearing the adhan, reading Qur’an, praying. Istanbul facilitates that, because you have mosques here that you can go to, and when you are there, you can just look at the walls and read the *ayat* written on them. It connects you to yourself and to a deeper history of Islam. Here you can connect to your spiritual ancestors. For example, Abu Ayyub: he wanted to actualize the hadith of the Prophet saws, but he didn’t make it, he came here when he was old, around 80 years old. But it wasn’t a failure; Allah wrote it this way. Your failures are sometimes your victories. It’s not like placing an order and then expecting to get everything the way you want it to get. Because what if you don’t get something you want, because it’s better for you than if you had gotten it? What if that was their success?”

What stands out from this conversation is that Farah makes her connection to God contingent upon the sensory phenomenon of the adhan and devotional acts such as prayer, which she ascribes to the facilitative urban environment of Istanbul and the way it feeds the intake of pious meanings, such as those found within the calligraphic elements of Islamic architecture. In this regard, her explanation is dense with interlinkages between the role of a sensory city environment, intake of ethical meanings, connection to history, the unseen, spiritual ancestors, as well as pious practice and accepting limits to one’s desires, all of which shape closeness to God. Brought together with her commitment to spiritual exercises and purification of the heart, her explication allows us to perceive these interconnected elements within the bigger picture of religious experience of my interlocutors.

I began the main part of this thesis by introducing the practice of remembering religious meanings, which appear throughout the city and outlined how their sensory impact fuses the individual with pious messages. It produces a religious consciousness in an individual who embodies the messages through sensorial fine-tuning, understanding and acting upon the received meanings within the frame of a wholistic ethical-aesthetic commitment. This process, to which I first referred to as ethical self-cultivation, relates to both visible and invisible dimensions of virtuous messaging. Farah's narrative also picks up on the importance of virtuous messaging in what she terms connection to oneself. Becoming oneself here echoes living purposefully, attuned to a divinely ordered life, resonating with our understanding of ethical selfhood and religious consciousness. The theme of cultivating piety, which draws through the present work and includes practices that belong to the fold of spiritual exercises, highlights that virtues are established through outward practice.

Yet the case in point for this thesis is that the environment's capacity to remind of religious meanings stands out as a condition to outward practice. Remembering religious meanings conditions the establishment of pious habits, as remembrance carries the formative role of reminding individuals of the death, afterlife, eternal rewards and God. It is *the act that precedes bodily practices* geared towards rooting habitus. This has become specifically clear from Sheikh Muhsin's instruction to engage in remembrance of God, before doing pious actions, but it is also encoded into the practices of agentive listening, reading mahya, grave visitations and ziyarat.

This dual interplay between remembering and acting is experienced by Farah as coming closer to Allah, but how so? This can be traced to the heart that acts as a conceptual nod between remembrance, action, embodiment, and knowing. In chapter five, I further contended that pious meanings are sedimented as consciousness within the spiritual faculty of the heart. By retracing a guided city tour, the chapter gradually revealed the spiritual faculty of the heart as locus of pious subjectivity, with the capacity for perception, appraisal, consciousness, and knowledge. Thus, heart theory complements our understanding of habitus and aims to show that pious action, one that either spontaneously arises from mutual engagement with the urban environment or one which is sought through spiritual exercises with the goal of adopting virtue, imprint on the heart, thereby becoming its traits. And "since the heart is the seat of knowledge" the acquisition

of these traits “through good deeds and virtues leads to the mystical knowledge and love of God” (Lapidus 1984: 51), which is how interlocutors, in their own terms, come to experience a connection to the Divine. As seen previously and explained by Farah, both sensory intake of religious meanings and outward action, eventually serve to cultivate and hone the heart’s capacity for gnosis. This clarifies the interplay between urban environment, habitus, and closeness to God as experienced by research participants.

Nevertheless, one last point arises from the discussion around honing heart-consciousness and seeking nearness to the Divine. Pious action, remembrance of God, heart-knowledge and its consciousness, is experienced by devout Muslims as the ability to ‘connect’ with Allah. This description follows anthropological work that places emphasis on the way practicing Muslims journey toward or try to practice God-consciousness (Di Puccio 2024: 69-70, Bowen 1993: 293). Some suggest that consciousness both implies doing pious deeds and cultivating nearness to God, which is pursued by ethical self-cultivation and seeking to be continually conscious of Allah (Lindebæk Lyngsøe and Stjernholm 2022). Locating nearness in awareness and consciousness may sometimes be associated with less theoretical rigor and greater propensity for description within ethnographies. However, this writing pushes back against two prominent ideas within the anthropology of Islam, for reasons I want to explore below.

The first pushback comes against works that postulate Muslims’ literal nearness to the Divine, an argument which runs against several problems. An example of this is Oskar Verkaaik’s work, which, despite its usefulness in understanding traditionalist sensibilities and religious commitment grounded in aesthetic forms, argues that his research participants become near to God through sensorial experiences and complex affective habits, therefore experience the Divine in material forms (2013: 167). He himself admits that his explanation is inimical to his research participants’ view of the absolute transcendence of the Divine, and eventually he fails to resolve the tension between his academic standpoint and his interlocutors’ opposition to it (2013: 167). While perhaps written in good faith, this tension is oddly reminiscent of the impregnable gap between anthropologists’ aim of friendly representation and a practice of roughshodding over indigenous voices by superimposing an understanding of the world which is contrary to their foundational ontology.

Yet scholarship which either embraces descriptive tendencies, as suggested above,

or considerations of ontological or theological sensibility (Lemons 2021), successfully avoids this dilemma, by maintaining a close relationship between ethnography and the representational autonomy of self-articulating cultures. At the same time, formulating a theory of the heart has become an alternative way to set theoretical foundations in which exploring Muslim spirituality could be grounded. This theoretical move focuses on the functional dynamics of the hearts' acquisition of pious consciousness. Therefore, while sensorial phenomena occupy an important role in this process, it is not the same as transposing God into material conditions for piety and virtuous self-formation.

The second pushback is aimed against the notion of the unconscious of virtuous dispositions, a notion that is reiterated by Saba Mahmood, who writes that “self-discipline therefore draws attention to the role self-directed action plays in the learning of an embodied disposition and its relationship to “unconscious” ways of being” (2005: 139). Despite her formulation corresponding directly with the Aristotelian understanding of *habitus*, I hesitate to relegate this phenomenon to the unconscious. That is because pious dispositions merely assume the outward form of the unconscious, given that a state is sought, in which these dispositions become so firmly engrained, that no process of deliberation is required to virtuously react to a situation. That doesn't necessarily equal the absence of consciousness.

Conversely, the argument for consciousness is stronger on the grounds that remembering God precedes pious dispositions, whose cultivation embeds virtues within the heart, the seat of consciousness. A careful reading of Mahmood's work furthermore reveals how this line of reasoning is substantially articulated by her own research participants, who attempt to cultivate an “Islamic awareness” (2005:48). Mahmood cites Mona, who diagnoses the condition of *ghafla* on the part of a young woman, who is occupied with mundane activities that cause her to leave the remembrance of God. Mahmood translates *ghafla* as “carelessness” and “negligence” (2005: 124). But another suitable translation is heedlessness; a state where one is distracted from awareness and remembrance.

Hence, I believe that despite the scholarly richness of Mahmood's ethnography there is an analytical blunder in overlooking this formulation and sundering the link between God-consciousness and cultivation of pious dispositions. The mosque participants' disciplinary techniques that seek to bring all actions, including mundane ones, in line with Islamic norms (Mahmood 2005: 45-46) are conditional on consciousness of the

Divine at every single moment, for intention and active choice regarding mundane matters not normally associated with religion can only occur through remembering religious meanings and the Divine. This is why ghafla is criticized as preventing the rewiring of intentionality of action and its alignment with religious values. God-consciousness precedes the habituation of virtue.

In conclusion, this work aimed to show the primacy of Istanbul's urban environment in shaping pious dispositions, ethical selfhood and virtuous habits, making the metropolis a central part of research participants' religious experience. I have limned how sensory virtuous messaging and reminders contribute to the accumulation of religious meanings within the heart and shapes its religious consciousness. It in turn helps my interlocutors to counter tensions and difficulties within the city, while using such instances of irritation to cultivate virtuous habits that efface the nafs. By becoming integrated into the circuits of remembering and action, and its mutual reinforcement, field participants strengthen ethical dispositions, hone their hearts and experience nearness to God. The various techniques for ethical self-transformation in the lives of my research participants transfigure the city with its sensory, invisible and contentious landscapes into a source for the sustenance of piety, virtue and gnosis.

7. Conclusion

In February 2025, almost a year later, I went back to Istanbul for a visit. I caught a week when no events were happening, and I only managed to reconnect with a few people, although the reason for that was not necessarily the eventless week. Since I left in April 2024, three of my former research participants moved back to their countries of origin. They were sad to leave Istanbul, they've told me before, but open to returning, and since, some came back to visit. A number of spaces and projects that I was familiar with were flourishing, but some of the prominent events that used to take place, where people would pour in from across the whole network of Istanbulite Western Muslims, have been discontinued. Meanwhile, preparations were underway for another busy summer season with plenty of seminars, summer schools and community programs.

And while I was gone for a year, history caught up with the city, and a seismic change shifted the terrain in Istanbul: on December 8th, 2024, after 14 years of a fierce and by then protracted civil war, Syrian armed forces toppled the long-standing regime

of Bashar al-Assad and formed a new, transitional government. The effects rippled across Istanbul. Not long after, uncertainties and plannings were underway among many Syrian families. At present, barely a year after the ouster, many Syrians are intending to or have already left the city, among them scholars and *munshids*.

On that February week, I came to visit Ustadha Umm Ayman, a Syrian female scholar whom I have gotten to know during fieldwork and asked her about the current situation, specifically about the atmosphere among Syrian scholars in Fatih and whether anyone was contemplating going back. She summarized the situation as follows:

“There are mixed feelings about it here, some are going, some are staying, some have already left. Our students have approached us, they said, will you leave now? And we told them, no, we won’t leave you and what we’ve started here. So, we’re thinking about dividing our lives part-time here and part-time in Syria”.

My friend Loujain, who had held on to the belief that Syrians would reap the successes of the revolution within her lifetime, was intending to visit the country. Success, of course, is an ongoing process that needs to be sustained, and today remains undoubtedly as complicated as ever. But among my former research participants the discussion was already underway about travelling to the newly opened country. Ustadh Taher, whom I met during fieldwork and whose online classes I kept attending back home, recounted a conversation he had with his family, where he brought up the topic of going to Damascus next ‘*Eid*. His excitement was palpable.

One might ask at this point, what does the Syrian revolution’s final act have to do with a work about the religious experience of Western Muslims in Istanbul. I think, in the bigger picture, that connection is clear. For years Istanbul and Syria were not worlds apart, and the fate of Syrian scholarship has been closely intertwined with that of Istanbul as a new home for Western Muslims. Before the revolution, Syria has held a central place in the geographical imagery of many Western Muslims and especially students of knowledge, who made the country their home in the decades prior to 2011. It was only a major migration event that brought Levantine scholarship to Istanbul and thus popularized the city in the eyes of many Western Muslims. But seeing those recent changes take place, I couldn’t help but wonder, where are we going from here? Will things return to what they have been? While Syria may still not be an option for the majority of Western Muslims, from Istanbul or elsewhere, it remains to be seen whether seminal transformations will

follow.

If they do, they will perhaps tell yet another story about the social component of space, not unlike my interlocutors' experience in Istanbul. When my fieldwork was coming to a close, Ilma told me to return: "now you have every reason to come back, because you know people here, you have a community". While the idea of community often seems unstable in a place like Istanbul, her choice of words reveals something about how we come to relate to places through their social dimension. It reminds us that the cultural topographies we come to inhabit are dependent on their social constituents, just as the projects of ethical self-cultivation. Ilma's words are testimony to a life appreciative of 'being-with', entangled in the affective power of social formations, which reflects in heart theory. It affirms a kind of connectivity of humans with their social and material surroundings, who seem to occupy an intersubjective horizon that stores the dependencies of pious becoming and interconnected existence. My interlocutors, Farah, Sophie, Fareed, all valued the ethical pedagogy of their favorite teachers, Syrian or otherwise, and did not flourish in isolation, but by being nurtured with caring relationality. They pursued a virtuous life in a socially, sensorially and spiritually interconnected environment.

With some of them set out into a future elsewhere, having taken with them something of a city where people and fortunes come and go, they have contributed to its fluid social geography, transformational tides, and poetic quality that has defined the city for centuries. Through the processuality of change we come to reckon the limited frame that anthropological work and representation pursue, a snapshot of a formation ever re-assembling in the flow of history. It is with this one snapshot, that I aimed to capture the religious experience of Western Muslim migrants in the city.

This thesis, with its focus on religious experience, portrayed traditionalism in one of its many iterations and experimented with ethnography sensitive to questions of ontology and theology. It was punctuated by questions and conceptions of complementary and competing ethics and addressed the ethical (Agrama 2010: 2) or moral turn (Louw and Mor-tensen 2021: 125), overarched by the theme of the "anthropology of the good" (Robbins 2013: 457). This current is animated by questions of "how people living in different societies strive to create the good in their lives" (ibid.) and "ways people organize their personal and collective lives in order to foster what they think of as good" (ibid.). Given that the future viability of liberal ethics is currently in question (Deneen

2018), making a foray into the study of how traditionalists navigate a blended and contentious environment opens a window into alternative ways of being in this world. This direction of research is not only gaining track among anthropologists but has, in my view, plenty to offer for understanding both the current and future human condition caught up in the far-reaching transformations of our age.

This work's introductory discussions, and chapters one, two and three, served to prime the readership of this thesis contextually and describe in detail the manner in which representation of and approach to my field and topic came about. Because my research has been participative, embodied and infused with shared religious sensibilities between me and my interlocutors, I have found it necessary to explain how anthropologists can make sense of religion in fieldwork and that shared religious commitments create epistemologically constructive subject positions informed by social embeddedness. Furthermore, I described the social formation on the ground and why I opted to frame this study with the paradigm of ethical self-cultivation.

Chapter four further presented theoretical grounding of researching urban religion, linking religion and the urban through the senses. Although different interlocutors may hold themselves to different levels of commitment to virtuous self-transformation, I have shown that the city accommodates this process, conditioned upon the sustenance of religious consciousness in the everyday. Acoustic, visual and atmospheric phenomena such as the adhan, mahya, gravestones, and architecture, all of which are part of virtuous messaging, cater to its sustenance, while its meanings are taken in, remembered, embodied and practiced. The steady trickling of these meanings into one's interiority forms the substrate of virtuous dispositions and moral selves.

The inquiry into the formation of this substrate was expanded in chapter five, which hinged the material environment to invisible landscapes. Thus, I described that by cultivating a faith frame, storied ziyarats also help form pious dispositions. Because cultivating receptivity to this faithful perspective can be accompanied by doubt, I departed from one such story of suspicion to explore processes of adopting pious subjectivity through relationality. In this transition, correcting the heart emerged as key factor in adopting an alternative subjectivity and the heart crystalized as the main site for theorizing consciousness, volition and appraisal, without which neither ethical selfhood nor virtuous dispositions can be established.

After gaining insight into deeper dynamics of faith, theorizing the heart and introducing the unseen to the discussion on religious experience, I sought to show in chapter six, how virtuous habits are cultivated in this context and proposed an alternative understanding of nearness to God, as experienced by my interlocutors. To this end, I investigated how resisting dynamics of urban friction by way of regular spiritual exercises aimed at disciplining the ego is formative of pious habits. Bringing the different threads of the thesis together for a final summary, I concluded, that the everyday richness in religiously stimulating meanings, which is registered by my interlocutors and accrued within their hearts, provides them with the means to remember God and a source to draw on when resisting negative facets of city life. The engaged act of continuous remembrance precedes interlocutors' capacities for conscious cultivation of ethical habits through spiritual exercises and enables them experience closeness to God.

Although the thesis follows the tradition of widespread scholarship on sensorial religion, materiality, and pious habits, it takes a distinctly different approach to explaining the emergence and formation of subjectivity, by linking it to religious consciousness which is situated in the heart. To explain how moral selves and pious habits are formed and how they bring people closer to God, I sought to dispel with the notion of the unconscious and link the senses to materiality and meanings, which provides an alternative explanation for my research participants' pious strivings. In doing so, I take my interlocutors seriously in a way that accommodates their ontological claims. Thereby I hope to remain committed to decolonial anthropology, in the full sense of the term, which includes commoning the historically, religiously, and ontologically divergent 'other'.

Likewise, by highlighting the vital reclaiming of aesthetic and "sensational forms" (Meyer 2009: 11), the unseen, and the art of spiritual exercises, all belonging to an Islamic tradition field participants were actively seeking to reinhabit, I found a possibility to portray ways in which research participants counter the unsolicited influences of visceral modes of persuasion associated with liberalism⁶. This was most thoroughly explored through the prism of virtue cultivation and self-limitation, which grows directly out of

⁶ Surprisingly, while visceral modes of persuasion and appraisal, as well as sensual reasoning, all have been ascribed to the Islamic Revival (Hirschkind 2006), they have not yet been foregrounded within the ideologies where they are most powerfully at work, namely liberalism and secularism. This can likely be attributed to the fact, that after the proverbial end of history, many academics remain blind to the ascendancy (and gradual unraveling) of liberalism (Deneen 2018: 4-5).

involuntary connections to other people and their behavior. It provides a glimpse into how non-liberal practices of self-formation and commitment become guiding principles for self-direction, self-realization and a source of agency in a contentious cityscape, thereby rigorously interrogating modernity's anthropological first principles.

The present work adds to a growing list of experimental ethnographies that conceive of research participants as agentive individuals, whose discourses on the values they seek to embody and commit to direct scholarly attention to the conscious crafting of social, cultural, and religious formations (Graeber and Wengrow 2021: 207, Graeber 2004: 10, Mittermaier 2019). By adopting this perspective, and by bringing the particular practices associated with my interlocutors' life world to the fore, I allow myself to leverage the power of representation, with the hope of contributing to an anthropology appreciative of alternative ways of being in this world.

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Appendix

Translations

adhan	– call to prayer
Allahu akbar	– God is greater
atharat	– relics
aya, pl. ayat	– verses of the Qur'an
'azza wa jall	– to Whom belongs might and majesty
barzakh	– life in the grave
cami (tr.)	– mosque
davulcu (tr.)	– drummer who wakes people up for the pre-dawn meal
du'a	– verbal prayer
'Eid	– fest, usually either 'Eid al-Fitr or 'Eid al-Adha
ezan (tr.)	– call to prayer
ghafla	– heedlessness
hadith	– report of the Prophet Muhammad
halal	– lawful
halaqa	– circle i.e. gathering
himma	– determination
iftar	– breaking fast
ikamet (tr.)	– residence permit
isnad	– chain of transmission
jannah	– paradise
madhhab	– school of jurisprudence
madrassa	– religious school
mahya (tr.)	– Ottoman art of suspending a chain of lights between two minarets with a short textual message
malaka	– habitus
masjid	– mosque
mihmandar (tr.)	– host
munshid	– singer of religious poetry
nafs	– ego
ni'ma al-jaysh	– the best of armies
Rasulullah	– Allah's prophet, i.e. the Prophet Muhammad
sabr	– patience
sadaqa	– charity
salah	– ritual prayer
salam	– greeting of peace or lit. peace
salawat	– sending blessings
salep (tr.)	– a milky hot drink
salla Allahu 'aleyhi	

wa sallam	– peace and blessings be upon him, formula of veneration for the Prophet Muhammad
simit (tr.)	– Turkish baked bread ring
subhanahu wa ta’ala	– glory be to Him
sunnah	– prophetic tradition
tahiyyatul-masjid	– prayer upon entering a mosque, lit. greeting of the mosque
taqlid	– practice of adherence to the precedent
tarbiyat al-nafs	– disciplining the ego
tasawwuf	– Sufism
türbe (tr.)	– domed grave
ummah	– global Muslim community
waqf	– endowment
wiratha	– heritage
wudhu	– ritual ablution
ziyara, pl. ziyarat	– religious visitation