

# TEMPORAL HORIZONS AND AESTHETIC FORMATIONS OF RELIGIOUS DIFFERENCE IN ANTAKYA

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How is history configured in the formation of urban space in contemporary Turkey? In this paper, I engage with this question by focusing on a specific instance of urban place-making, one that draws our attention to the temporal horizons of religious and national belonging. In particular, I examine how the urban space of Turkey's border town of Antakya aligns multiple temporalities and ideologies of governance in the present. As one significant example of this alignment, I provide an ethnographic reading of the aesthetics of various signs placed on the doors and archways of the city's historical districts.<sup>1</sup> In this reading, I focus less on the historical facts concerning these signs, and more on how people imagine, interpret, and speak about them, and how these exercises shape people's relationships to each other, to the city, and to the nation in general. I argue that the political production of religious difference in Antakya today needs to be addressed as a multi-layered and historically emergent process, which builds on the unifying and fragmenting aspects of nation building, as well as the memories of exodus, exclusion, and minoritization of Turkey's non-Muslim populations.

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For about 16 months between 2010 and 2012, I conducted field research on religious pluralism in Antakya, a town in Turkey's southwest border with Syria and home to bilingual (Arabic-Turkish) Jewish, Orthodox Christian, Sunni and Alawi groups, as well as Turks and Armenians with ties to Gregorian, Protestant, and Catholic churches.<sup>2</sup> My larger project concerned how this ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity was lived, inhabited, and negotiated by city dwellers in everyday realms of sociality against the backdrop of an emergent regime of "tolerance" in

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<sup>1</sup> I draw on Birgit Meyer's conceptualization of "aesthetic formations," as "our total sensory experience of the world and our sensitive knowledge of it" (2009:6) beyond the more commonplace understandings of "aesthetics" as related to art, beauty, and taste. Focusing on aesthetic formations allows us to move beyond a representation stance that privileges the symbolic above other modes of experience, and instead highlights the historically conditioned modes of power through which imaginations of the past materialize, are embodied, emplaced, and experienced as real

<sup>2</sup> At the time of my research, Antakya had a population of approximately 200,000 with the majority being Sunni and Alawi Muslims with an estimated 110 Orthodox Christian and 10 Jewish families, along with relatively recent individual converts to Catholic and Protestant Christian denominations.

Turkey. While moving between my ethnographic sites which ranged from the weekly rehearsals of a multi-religious choral ensemble to the city's historical souk, I came to realize that "walking in the city" became more than an interval spent reaching my research "sites" or meeting points with interlocutors. As I walked, I learned to identify the material borders and thresholds of the city through the movements of my own body and gaze as well as the words of those who accompanied me. Different pedestrian paths presented me with different styles and layers of the old city: the blank walls of townhouses concealing courtyards, the dilapidated Ottoman houses leaning into each other, the newer concrete tenements standing where the old had finally collapsed or been abandoned. On shortcuts, I noticed the "religious markers" painted or carved on the old archways, a few Stars of David on abandoned or neglected houses, and numerous signs of the Crescent announcing Haj Pilgrimages completed.

My daily walks in the city often made me ask: "*Where* is the public here?" Does it start where these doors open to the street, or where such a labyrinth of shady alleys emerges into the orderly streets, wide boulevards and modern apartment buildings in the newer parts of the city? Does the modern public/private divide account for the boundaries between the inner and the outer domains of urban social life? How does religion figure in the construction of such boundaries and their translation into national borders?

Recent scholarship on secularism has noted that the public-private distinction lies at the heart of the modern divide between the sacred and the secular. For many, the emergence of the "public" as a kind of order, reason and representation was central to the transformation of the social imaginary in the "secular age" of the West (Taylor 2007: 186). Some viewed it as a deliberative space of argument, collective decision-making and recognition (Benhabib 2004; Habermas 1989). Others approached it as a normative space for education, mass-communication and recognition (Anderson 1991; Street 1993; Warner 1990). In both cases, the public was envisioned as a common secular space to which all have equal access regardless of where they come from and what they believe in. As it became clear that religion resists being relegated to the interiors of houses and human bodies, new debates emerged on the entry (or return) of the religious to public visibility (Butler et al. 2011; Casanova 1994)

Although most of these debates are concerned with how religious adherents and their voices become part of public opinion in liberal democracies, there are also critical works that expose the institutional and disciplinary practices underlying the idea of the “public” and the “private” as two interdependent sites of regulation (Asad 2003; Foucault 1991; Brown 2006; Warner 2002). It is in the context of this second approach that the affective, material and spatial forms of religion’s public appearance come to the fore (Hirschkind 2006; Tambar 2014). My analysis builds on these scholarly attempts at connecting religious materialities to the institutional recognition of different religious positionalities within secular publics (See also Asad 2006; Bowen 2007; Gole 2002; Oosterbaan 2009; Scott 2007). Yet it also insists that such an endeavour demands a historical analysis, especially in a context like Antakya where material markers of religion such as those on the doors lie at the junction of the past and present forms of sociality that are embedded in, but also transcend, the modern divisions between the public and the private.

In this paper, I explore the spatial, temporal, and communal boundary-making processes within the urban space of Antakya through an ethnographic reading of these markers. It is my argument that the visibility and invisibility of these markers to their observers depends less on their presence within a public realm than on how religious boundaries have historically been created, reinforced and shifted around them. Examining these boundaries in Antakya as a “representational” space that is “directly lived through its associated images and symbols” by its users (Lefebvre 1974:39), necessitates a look also at the representations of the city by different actors who have held institutional power over its inhabitants.

### **Antakya: An Islamic or a Turkish City?**

Most of the early academic texts on the urban life of Antakya were produced in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as part of “Islamic urban studies” by the French School of Damascus. Antakya then constituted the northwest border of the French mandated Syria with the newly founded Turkish Republic. These texts, in alignment with the Orientalist concept of the “Islamic” or “Muslim” city, glorified the antique town planning and regarded the Arabic/Islamic period as a period of decline, interval or disorder (Sauvaget 1951; Weulersse 1934). As critiques of this

scholarship indicate (i.e. Hourani 1970, Abu-Lughod 1987, and Raymond 1994), the “Islamic city” was in fact a colonial invention oriented towards a particular form of governance and characterized by the tendency to see the city space in the Arab world as a totality of autonomous and religious based quarters, the organization of which was determined solely and essentially by Islam. They depicted the residential areas as compartmentalized along ethnic and religious lines with minimum contact, mobility and movement between neighbourhoods.

The Ottoman *millet* system, closely linked to Sharia rules concerning the treatment of non-Muslim minorities, indeed classified communities on the basis of their religious affiliation.<sup>3</sup> Yet such divisions did not mean the absence of social mixing between these groups even at the legal level (Peirce 2003). There were communities who pragmatically switched their religious affiliation or practiced more than one religion, for example (Barkey 2008; Birtek 2007; Braude 1982). Although ethnic and religious mixing had its social and spatial limits (Raymond 1994:15), the residential quarters of Antakya were by no means homogeneous units of religious groups. The desire to live close to members of one’s religious group affected the choice of neighbourhood, but not necessarily more than the practical needs of affordability and proximity to one’s place of work (Eldem 1999, see also Bahloul 1992). Sometimes, it was not the neighbourhoods but the number of windows, the kind of doors and the quality and size of the houses that marked the difference between the people who lived in the same quarters (Altug 2002). Sometimes, it was simply the signs on doors.

The institutional attempts to remedy the gap between conceived and lived space of religious cohabitation treated the old Antakya neighbourhoods as antithetical to the modern city to be developed across the river. The open areas, squares, parks and wide boulevards became the material effects of the mandate policies for regulating the “society” as an “ensemble of self-sustained and enclosed ethnic/religious groups” (Altug 2002:96). Such policies invested in the post WWI language of “minority”, “majority” and “self-determination” which led to the

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<sup>3</sup> According to the millet system, Ottoman subjects were legally divided into communities of Muslims, Greek-Orthodox, Armenians and Jews. While the millet system afforded the people of the book, Jews and Christians, a relatively persecution-free existence and autonomy in internal affairs (issues of marriage, family, and worship) in return for higher taxes, it tended to persecute those who did not easily fit its organization scheme, such as heterodox Islamic movements within the Sufi and Shi’a sects (Barkey 2004:163).

reification of ethnic and religious identities in nation building processes on both sides of the border (Shields 2011).

When Hatay was annexed to Turkey in 1939 after France's retreat from the Syrian territories, the Turkish state invested in the same categorizations of "minority" and "majority" as it imagined its new nation in an ideological opposition to the Ottoman regime of diversity. The result was the exodus, deportation and diminishment of the communities in the region who could not conform to the singular identity of the new nation.<sup>4</sup> During the Republican era, Antakya's city space extended further on the west bank of the Orontes River, leading to the construction of a public square called *Cumhuriyet* [the Republic].

Hosting a statue of the "founder" Ataturk in military uniform on his horse and a tall Turkish flag like many city squares in Turkey, this public square became a medium for the creation of a "secular public", that is, a society that "transcends particular and differentiating practices of the self that are articulated through class, gender and religion" (Asad 2002:5). As a normative public space facing the disorderly streets of Antakya, the *Cumhuriyet* Square today constitutes the center of Antakya and symbolizes the national desire to materialize the transformation of mixed communities into a single society composed of "individual subject-citizens" whose loyalty lies first and foremost with the nation-state.

## **The Doors**

The reach of the Republican conceptualizations of city-space and citizenship is best manifested in the abandoned or neglected houses in the old Antakya neighbourhoods as well as their socio-economic value in the eyes of the city's inhabitants. Resonating with the empty or ruined houses on the same streets, the old Antakya doors with the signs of the Star of David or Christian decoration embody the silenced stories of displacement and exodus that took place in the making of national borders.

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<sup>4</sup> Although the numbers are contested on the basis of the reliability of the institutional sources of information, it is estimated that about 22,000 Armenians emigrated to Syria and Lebanon in the first 10 days after the annexation, to be followed by 10,000 Alawites, 5000 Orthodox Christians and 12000 Sunni Arabs (Pekesen 2006:63). The exodus involved also some Turks who were in conflict with the ideals of the new Republic. For the details of the process of annexation and the related population debates See Shields (2011).

“They were afraid, left and lost every property they had here. We stayed and nothing happened to us,” says Nedim, an old Orthodox Christian man from Antakya, as an answer to my question about why the family of his coreligionist Syrian wife migrated to Aleppo during the annexation. Nedim’s family stayed in Antakya but in the 1960s they all left the old city to move into a new and more modern apartment building walking distance away from his previous house. Immigrants from a nearby Sunni village live there as his tenants now, while the house of his family-in-law, like those of the thousands who left Turkey with them, was confiscated by the state and eventually destroyed. “These houses are old, not suitable to modern times,” he explains. “It makes more sense that people who are not *sehirli* [from the city] live in them now.”

Besides those who left their houses behind with the raising of the Turkish flag in Antakya, there are those who began to frame their religious journeys as an integral aspect of their nationality. Accordingly, what was a simple crescent and star on a green background on the old hajji doors not turns into a red Turkish flag on the new plaques with the addition of Islamic calligraphy depicting *surahs* from the Koran. The individual performances of national identity through such images diverge from the institutional ones in their open acknowledgement of the element of religiosity. To the extent that the secular power of the Turkish nation-state relies on the disguise of the nature of its relationship to Islam, these signs challenge Turkish secularism not because they emphasize religion but because they expose what is disguised.<sup>5</sup>

Somewhere in between these two groups lie people like Nedim, those who stayed although their religious identifications did not match the new Republic’s self-representation. As potential transgressors, this third group encountered suspicions about their role in the delay of Hatay’s union with Turkey, and felt themselves to be second-class citizens always in need of proving their loyalty to the Turkish state (Micallef 2006). For Nedim, this necessity took the form of an investment in the modern conceptualizations of the city and his *sehirli* status, which allowed him to place himself above the immigrants from the village in the hierarchy of citizenship. For others, silence was the strategy through which the private and public domains of self-representation

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<sup>5</sup> Although Islam’s political presence has troubled the secular modernist sensibilities of Turkey’s ruling elites leading to a power struggle between groups identified as “Islamists” and “secularists” in the 1990s, Sunni Islam as the religion of the majority has always been a de-facto determinant of who is, and who is not, a Turk since the early years of the Republic (Baer 2004; Neyzi 2002; Özyürek 2009)

were constituted and guarded. Many of these people I met in Antakya emphasized their unconditional love for Turkey in our first conversations, and communicated their resentments only after they knew me better. “Every time I see an old door with a sign of a Star of David”, said one of them to me, “I remember my ancestors who lived in this city long before anybody else was here. I then become sad thinking that it is only the thirty of us here who are left of them.”<sup>6</sup> Judaism in Antakya has turned into something that we practice only in our memories.”

It was thanks to such intimate interactions that I could look beyond the other “visible” signs on the doors such as the plaques of the Turkish flag celebrating the anniversary of the Turkish Republic. Attached carefully at the entrance of the synagogue and the Orthodox Church of Antakya, these plaques become more visible in the context of their absence at the entrance of the mosques, the minarets of which predominantly shape the skyline of the city. The absence and presence of these public messages speak to the need felt on the part of particular groups and institutions to make such declarations; for the minoritized communities they signify acknowledgement of Turkish and Muslim hegemony. What the necessity engenders, however, is not an empty show of nationalism but an emotional investment in the very ideals and aspirations of nationhood. It characterizes the path through which people like my Jewish interlocutor belong to the nation, a path that registers a communal melancholy and a religion the survival of which depends on its practitioners’ memories.

The signs on doors then are not passive objects that simply represent people’s relationships to religion or nation. They take active roles in cultivating these relationships. They tie people’s public declarations of nationalism to their personal and religious feelings of loss. They also enter a complex set of arrangements with particular religious practices and place-making, aligned with the shared understandings of what the doors as thresholds signify for these diverse communities. This is not to suggest that the different religious markers on Antakya’s doorways register the same kind of loyalties, moral obligations, or practices. On the contrary, it is the nuances of their

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<sup>6</sup> The population of Jews in Antakya fluctuated with migrations to and from Syria under the Ottoman rule. After the first and second waves of migration to Israel, Istanbul and Europe in 1948 and in late 70s, the population dropped to 150. At the time of my research there were 35 Jews living in the city, most of whom were textile merchants. One significant reason behind their mass migration was their economic suffering due to the wealth tax in the 1940s. Some also mentioned the negative effect on their businesses of the legalization of Saturdays as workdays by the government and the rising conflict between the leftist and rightist groups in the city in the 1970s. Today, remaining Jewish families send their children to Istanbul or Israel for high school and university education.

social, spatial and religious work and their incommensurabilities that characterize what religious co-existence might mean on the ground as lived on the national peripheries of Turkey. It is also these nuances that allow us to understand the temporal horizons of religious difference under new regimes of tolerance.

### **Antakya as the city of peace and tolerance**

I have suggested so far that Antakya's ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversity has historically been a challenge to the Turkish and Sunni identity of the "secular" Republic of Turkey. In the context of the re-articulation of older political forms under the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP), however, this diversity has brought Antakya back to the center of Turkey's attention in the new millennium; this time, through the label of "the city of peace and tolerance."

As a political concept and a mode of governance, the regime of tolerance in Turkey concerns the legal and political recognition of the nation's "minorities" and promises to give more space for expressions of cultural difference than was possible under Turkey's Republican regime. It emerged in the context of Turkey's negotiations towards accession to the EU (Potuoglu-Cook 2010; Mills 2010), the Kurdish conflict (Yeğen 2007), and the Islamic neoliberalism of the government and Turkey's attempts to assert itself in the "Muslim Middle East" as a regional power and a model of democracy. The aesthetic formations through which tolerance is historicized, materialized, and refigured invoke the Ottoman past as a time of cosmopolitanism and a model for an Islamic pluralism.

The materialization of this cosmopolitan memory in Antakya's urban space, then, serves a particular political function in the context of national and global politics. It is, however, also produced in a local context where cosmopolitanism is believed to have a real meaning and existence as a lived, embodied, and historical reality. At the time of my fieldwork, the people of Antakya were invited to represent themselves as tolerant and tolerated citizens of Turkey through inter-faith dialogue events and projects that were sponsored, supported or directly implemented



by state bodies.<sup>7</sup> Yet they also actively participated in producing the images of tolerance by aligning these events and performances with their memories and experiences of what religious co-existence entailed. For those who embraced the institutional discourse of tolerance, for instance, the old signs on archways provided a tangible historical precedent to the designed illustrations and monuments of the entwined cross, crescent and Star of David that widely circulated in the city's public realms. As the old city of Antakya became attractive to global capital for heritage and faith tourism and the old ruined townhouses awaited transformation into boutique hotels, the long forgotten signs on their doors gained a new public visibility in their totality, as one concrete marker of the harmonious coexistence between Christian, Jewish and Muslim residents of the city. The entanglement of these old signs in people's minds and narratives means the creation of new communal boundaries as well as the reification of existing ones. Decontextualized, objectified, and at times commoditized, they are part of a new political imaginary that strives to transform hierarchical yet intrinsically relational differences of religious life into separate but equally representable elements of the nation.

### **Dis/placement or coexistence**

While the recent discourses of tolerance in Turkey treat the old doors as the observable boundary between autonomous and discrete religious communities, the spatial and communal boundaries of religion are transcended by the daily conduct of the city's inhabitants. Such conduct includes the walking in and out of the archways numerous times for neighbourly or religious visits, exchange of gifts and goods, mundane quarrels, and marriage arrangements. As legacies of the Ottoman organization of communal space, the gates to the courtyards in old Antakya continue to function as places of transition and interfaces of accessibility for the inhabitants of the city to other people, activities, supplies, places, information and city life in general. Situated within what Web Keane (1997:8) calls, "the unstable boundary at which the 'symbolic' and the 'material' meet", the signs on their surface are structured by and evoke various affects, memories

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<sup>7</sup> In 2002, Antakya's mayor visited the Vatican to discuss with Pope Jean-Paul II the harmonious coexistence of the city's Muslim and Christian communities. The First International Meeting of Civilizations took place in Antakya in 2004 with much government support, and brought together the national and international representatives of the "world" religions such as the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate from Istanbul, the Directorate of religious Affairs of Turkey, the cardinals from the Vatican and so on. The Antakya Choir of Civilizations, a multi-religious choral ensemble, was also founded in 2007 to represent Turkey's religious diversity in national and international concerts and was nominated for the 2012 Nobel Peace Prize.

and sensibilities that circulate in both public and private realms of the modern city life. As the sources of authority and modes of governance in the region shift over time, so do the publicity of the religious markers and their position within the secular imaginations of the nation.

The multiple readings of these signs then are shaped less by their inherent and fixed qualities than by the dynamism of the movements and interactions taking place in these localities, which are “deeply implicated in powers, identities and sources of authority that lie far beyond the concrete here and now” (Keane 1997:xiii). De Certeau (1984) gives the example of walking to such dynamism, and views it as a temporal movement that transforms places like the streets, parks or squares into “spaces”. In Antakya, it also involves the past journeys of immigration and pilgrimage by different religious communities.

I would like to conclude with an anecdote that connects my walking in the city and a short encounter with one of its residents to the lost memory of these past journeys. In one of my daily walks in the city, I accidentally entered a dead-end street and found myself in front of an archway of a typically neglected Antakya house. As I came closer, I noticed the archway had been painted green, with a crescent, a star and the word Allah in Arabic painted in grey. However, beneath the flaking paint of the hajji sign was hidden a carved sign of the Star of David. I knocked on the open door to see if the residents of the house had a story to tell about this overlap. The woman who came out told me that she had been a tenant there for 10 years and did not know who and when the signs belonged to. We are Muslim, Alhamdulillah [Many thanks to God]” she said “but nobody in my family had the means to go to the Hajj”. Unwilling to let me go without a story, she speculated that the house was previously home to both Jewish and Muslim residents, who maybe even lived at the same time in different houses that surround the same courtyard.

I can only speculate about how influential the recent discourses of “tolerance” were on the normalcy attributed by this woman to the cohabitation between the Jews and Muslims in the past. Her eagerness to declare herself as “*Alhamdulillah Musلمان*” nevertheless revealed the limits and conditions of possibility for such cohabitation. No matter whether they met each other in person or not, the Jewish and Muslim families who lived in that house were connected to one another and to the current resident of the house through a multi-layered history which is

materialized in the door-signs, and activated in the present through the claims of different actors on contemporary politics.

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