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Aesthetic Sensations of Mary: The Miraculous Icon of Meryem Ana and the Dynamics of Interreligious Relations in Antakya¹

Jens Kreinath

Introduction

Antakya – formerly Antioch – is the southernmost city of Turkey, known for its religious and ethnic diversity, with its people belonging to different Christian and Muslim denominations. It is situated with the Mediterranean to the west and borders Syria to the east and south (see Figure 8.1). In 1939, Hatay was the last province to officially become part of the Republic of Turkey (Shields 2011: 17–47, 143–75, 232–49). Now, the ethnically diverse population of about 1.5 million is primarily composed of people of Turkish and Arab descent. With its unique blend of different languages and cultures, Hatay became known for its religious tourism industry. In the early 2000s, the inception of the Meeting of Civilizations (Turk.: *Medeniyetler Buluşması*) and the interreligious Antakya Civilizations Choir (Turk.: *Antakya Medeniyetler Korosu*),² both initiated by the Ministry of Tourism and Culture, highlighted the city's religious coexistence. This heritage of mutual religious tolerance is evident in the celebration of annual festivals and life cycle rituals shared among members of Antakya's diverse communities (Doğruel 2009, 2013; Prager 2013; Kreinath 2016, 2017b).

Visits to ancient local sanctuaries for vowing, wishing, and celebrating saints' days have played a significant role in fostering the local culture. Although recent ethnographic research on Hatay has emphasized the continuous existence of interreligious relations and rising tensions due to the Syrian conflict (Can 2017; Dağtaş 2017), the dynamics within these communities constituting the formation of interreligious relations have not been sufficiently studied. As demonstrated in prior publications (Kreinath 2014; 2015, 2016, 2017b), saint veneration rituals at shared sanctuaries, like those dedicated to St. George, are a key factor in organizing interreligious relations. This leads to the question of how similarities in visible forms of religious practice can occur while members of various religious communities maintain different notions of the invisible in their saintly encounters.

Figure 8.1 Map of Hatay. © T.C. Hatay Valiliği: Hatay governorship in Antakya.

This chapter addresses how variations in the veneration of Mary (Arab.: *Maryam*; Turk.: *Meryem*)³ among Orthodox Christians can be explained through differences in aesthetic regimes and bodily sensations among clergy and laity, if compared with those traditions of saint veneration shared among members of the different religious communities in the context of Antakya.⁴ Defined 'by their adherence to a specific

regime of the sensible, which is extricated from its ordinary connection and is inhabited by a heterogeneous power' (Rancière 2004: 22–3), I refer to aesthetic regimes as a means to account for the ways in which aesthetic frameworks of perception, or in this case sensations and configurations of Mary, shape the ways in which sensational forms, such as icons of her, are perceived and experienced according to tacitly accepted perceptual standards of interpretation (Rancière 2010a: 175–6). By taking aesthetics as 'a re-configuration of sensible experience' (Rancière 2010b: 15), I aim to account for the experience of Marian apparitions by Orthodox Christian and Arab Alawite women as reflected in their accounts and take these representations of bodily sensations as empirical evidence for my case study. As Birgit Meyer succinctly put it: 'Attention to the aesthetic dimension of religion enables us above all to grasp the perspective – or should I say perceptions – of insiders' (Meyer 2009b: 719). Thus, the concept of aesthetic regime is suitable for my argument because it calls for a transformation of the sensible in 'the general distribution of bodies, voices, and capacities at work within a given community' (Tanke 2011: 72). This is precisely my argument to account for how the sensation of this interface is configured differently among members of the clergy and laity. Therefore, I employ aesthetic regime in conjunction with bodily sensations to contour the interface of the visible and invisible in the adorations and apparitions of Mary (Rancière 2010a: 138–9).

For bodily sensations, I refer to Meyer's insights in her discussion of aesthetic formations and sensational forms. To clarify my theoretical point, I specify how I utilize these concepts as follows: I agree that sensational forms like aesthetic regimes become useful by conceptualizing them as 'relatively fixed, authorized modes of invoking and organizing access to the transcendental, thereby creating and sustaining links between religious practitioners in the context of particular religious organizations' (Meyer 2009b: 707). However, this only applies to the more rigid forms of organized religious practice as instituted by the clergy, not necessarily to the less tangible forms of individual religious practice of the laity. Hence, it is also suitable to account for the laity by conceptualizing sensational forms as 'transmitted and shared; they involve religious practitioners in particular practices of worship and play a central role in forming religious subjects' (Meyer 2009b: 707). I, therefore, distinguish different aesthetic regimes and sensational forms among clergy and laity, and use bodily sensations as equivalent to aesthetic formations, namely as the part of shared experiences that helps to highlight the convergences *and* divergences of subject formation in the making of internally differentiated communities. Thus, my focus on bodily sensation may help capture 'the formative impact of a shared aesthetics through which subjects are shaped by tuning their senses, inducing experiences, molding their bodies, and making sense, and which materializes in things' (Meyer 2009a: 7).

To identify similarities and differences in these aesthetic regimes of clergy and laity, I analyse Marian veneration rituals in conjunction with official accounts of Orthodox Christian priests and personal experiences of Marian apparitions collected during my fieldwork in Hatay.⁵ Starting with the veneration of Meryem Ana and her Miraculous Icon in Antakya, I argue that the aesthetic regimes and bodily sensations among Orthodox Christian clergy and laity are considerably different in relation to iconic figurations of the unseen, while saint veneration rituals among Orthodox Christian⁶

and Arab Alawite⁷ women share the most commonalities, including vows and wishes. To elaborate on an aesthetics of religion approach grounded in comparative research (Meyer and Verrips 2008; Grieser and Johnston 2017; Kreinath 2018), I argue that a major difference consists between the clergy and lay Christian women. The former emphasizes aesthetic regime while the latter emphasizes bodily sensation. This difference – as I submit – has implications for the organization of social relations within the Orthodox Christian community and for the dynamics of interreligious relations among Christian and Muslim women and their interactions mediated through Marian sanctuaries in Hatay.

Meryem Ana sanctuaries and places of veneration

Several places in Hatay are dedicated to Meryem Ana, most of which are the official churches and chapels of Eastern Orthodox Christian communities. For example, the Armenian Christian Church in Vakıflı and the Eastern Orthodox Church in Tokaçlı, the only Armenian and Orthodox villages in Turkey, respectively, have a documented history traceable to a remote past. By contrast, most Orthodox Christian sanctuaries in Hatay dedicated to Meryem Ana are modern constructions attributed to apparitions of Meryem Ana and known for miracles. Regardless, no interlocutor could specify the exact reasons for the sanctuaries' foundations, or their modern constructions. The Meryem Ana chapel (Arab.: *maqam*; Turk.: *makam*) at the Orthodox St. George Church in İskenderun is an example of a sanctuary allegedly built after an apparition of Meryem Ana. Although the local church authority recognizes the sanctuary, and that it is visited by members of the Christian and Muslim communities, it is unclear who or what initiated the construction of the sanctuary. The church's caretakers believe Meryem Ana appeared to the priest in a dream, and thus the chapel was built. In contrast, the priest, who affirmed that he initiated the construction, denied any association with an apparition of Meryem Ana. He maintained that he built the chapel to comply with the congregation's request for a place to venerate Meryem Ana. Regardless of the chapel's origins, its visitors attribute its existence to an apparition of Meryem.

This Meryem Ana Makamı in İskenderun is significant because of its architectural features and usages, which indicate the site's heritage and its significance for interreligious saint veneration rituals (Kreinath 2015, 2016, 2017b). Contrary to common conventions for Christian chapels, this sanctuary is oriented towards the west with the entrance facing east. Instead of an altar, there is – common to Arab Alawite sanctuaries – a rectangular cenotaph at its centre, with the upper part filled with sand wherein devotees place lit candles. Icons on the interior walls are venerated by Orthodox Christians, while the cenotaph is circled by Arab Alawites who visit the sanctuary for personal prayers (Arab.: *du'ā'*; Turk.: *dua*), vows (Arab.: *nadhr*; Turk.: *adak*) and wishes (Arab.: *raghba*; Turk.: *dilek*). Although the difference between vows and wishes is minimal, it is beneficial to distinguish between the two. The common feature of a vow is the promise of a sacrifice (Arab.: *ḡurbān*; Turk.: *kurban*), whereas a wish is an expression of desire. Vows themselves can be sealed at the presence of a wishing tree (Arab.: *nikkah*; Turk.: *dilek ağacı*), often at the sanctuaries' entrance

Figure 8.2 Wish Tree at the Meryem Ana Makamı in İskenderun. © Jens Kreinath, 2015.

(Figure 8.2). Vows are written on a piece of paper or a strip of cloth, as visible on one of the red stripes in the figure above, and if the devotee's request is fulfilled, an animal sacrifice is made in the Saint's name. According to interlocutors in İskenderun, the church authorities seem to quietly tolerate the practice of vows by turning a blind eye to them, and yet, if asked, they would certainly question the practice's legitimacy.

The Miraculous Icon in Antakya

One sanctuary in Antakya, known for a healing oil that leaks from an icon of Meryem Ana, is drawing both Orthodox Christians and Arab Alawites. The icon is in the living

Figure 8.3 Meryem Ana Evi in Antakya. © Jens Kreinath, 2012.

room of the caretaker's private Old Antakya house, directly accessible through the courtyard (Figure 8.3).

According to the caretaker, the icon is a modern replica from Lebanon or Syria. Locally known as the Miracle of Meryem Ana, this place is also referred to as the House of Meryem Ana (Turk.: *Meryem Ana Evi*). The icon depicts the Mother of God (Gr.: *Theotokos*; Arab.: *Walidat el-Elah*) and represents – in her body posture and hand gestures holding the Child on her left arm – a specific type of Marian icon called 'She shows the way' (Gr.: *Hodegetria*). This type of icon is named after its famous prototype, the *Panagia Hodegetria*, 'allegedly an "original" image painted by St. Luke' (Belting 1990: 115), which was venerated in the Hodegon Monastery of Constantinople, northeast of the Hagia Sophia, for its miraculous healings of the

Figure 8.4 Miraculous Icon of Meryem Ana in Antakya. © Jens Kreinath, 2012.

blind (Belting 1994: 48, 73–5). In 439 CE, the *Panagia Hodegetria* icon was brought to Constantinople as a gift of Empress Eudocia ‘after its fortuitous discovery in Antioch’ (Bacci 2005: 322). It was ‘the most venerated image in all *Graecia*’ (Belting 1994: 77), reportedly destroyed during the siege of Constantinople in 1453 CE (Tradigo 2004: 169), where it was until then considered the protector of the city and venerated for its miraculous powers (Belting 1994: 48). The *Panagia Hodegetria* is the most widely venerated icon in the Eastern Orthodox Church, evident in its multiple replicas such as the Miraculous Icon of Meryem Ana (Figure 8.4). The iconography of this figure is commonly attributed to the so-called Cretan school of iconography, with close ties to Rome and Venice during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (Ferrero 2001: 12–13; Eriksen 2005: 300–3). In the Eastern tradition, it is known as the Theotokos of the Passion, renowned for associations with miracles. In the Western tradition, it

is known as the Virgin of the Passion, or Our Lady of the Passion, venerated ‘all over the world’ (Ferrero 2001: 15; Tradigo 2004: 188–9).⁸

A glass plate protects the icon, and one can see where the image absorbed a thick trace of oil. The surrounding decorations indicate its appeal to visitors from Muslim and Christian communities: to the right is a garland of three Hands of Fatima (Arab.: *khamsa*). Each of the Hands of Fatima is decorated with the same ornaments and patterns: an eye with a blue-shaded glass bead in the centre (Turk.: *nazarlık*), which serves as protection against the evil eye (Figure 8.5).⁹ Both Christian and Muslim prayer beads (Turk.: *tesbih*) hang from either side of the icon. Eye-shaped and crescent-shaped metal panels are stuck into the frame along with a coin. Though these decorations indicate significant cultural and religious overlap, I did not witness Muslim women praying before the icon. Nevertheless, visitors and caretakers of the site confirmed Arab Alawite and Sunni women also come to venerate the Miracle of Meryem Ana.¹⁰ The house is in the eastern part of the Old Town of Antakya, which was formerly inhabited by Armenians until their deportation in 1915, by Jews until their migration to Israel in 1948, and by Eastern Orthodox Christians until they moved into a neighbourhood closer to the Orthodox Church during the 1970s. Located on a cul-de-sac in a currently predominant Muslim neighbourhood, it can only be reached through a network of narrow alleys. This remote location is inaccessible to outsiders and disconnected from Antakya’s traditionally Orthodox Christian neighbourhood.

The sanctuary’s caretaker told me the icon became miraculous in 1979 when it began to leak oil. He remembered this miracle starting after his neighbours, whose

Figure 8.5 Miraculous Icon of Meryem Ana with the Hand of Fatima in Antakya. © Jens Kreinath, 2015.

house was also known to have a miraculous icon, moved away. The caretaker's story of the Miraculous Icon is as follows: The painting (Turk.: *resim*) – as the caretaker called the icon – was sent from Syria or Lebanon and displayed by his father. In 1979, his father saw oil all around the picture and asked his wife if she had put oil there, but she denied it. He asked her to clean it, and so she did. However, the oil returned the following day. His father got quite angry and suspicious of his wife, who denied any involvement but again cleaned the oil. On the third day, he understood the picture was the oil's source. His father, a pious man who worked for the Orthodox Church of Antakya as an Arabic instructor (Turk.: *okutman*), went to his priest to inform him of what happened. The priest came to his house, and after praying, oil immediately poured from the icon. The priest told his father: 'This is a miracle of Meryem Ana [*Bu Meryem Ana'nın bir mucizesi*].'

After news of the icon spread, visitors were so numerous that visitation times were limited to two afternoons during the week. That same year, they were reported to the police on the suspicion that the icon was fake, and that the family was exploiting it for money. Local religious authorities (Turk.: *müftülük*) came to investigate but were unable to identify the oil's source. As a result, they took a sample of the oil and said it would be sent to a lab in Ankara for testing. After the testing was completed, they were notified that the sample had simply disappeared. Since then, Christians and Muslims from all around Turkey have come to venerate the Miraculous Icon. The caretaker and his wife have also witnessed several healings. One such miracle concerned a girl who regained her speech after visiting the Miraculous Icon. Another person was cured of stomach ulcers. The caretakers shared an example of a man, suspicious of the icon, who requested to be locked in the room with it alone. After several hours, they heard loud screaming. The man ran from the room, departing the place without taking leave. He did not return for seven years. Once he finally did, he was unable to approach the icon, as if it prevented him from coming near. The housekeeper's wife shared another miracle, stating that the Meryem Ana icon began to 'cry' on 2 August 2006, with oil streaming from Her eyes. The wife took this as Meryem Ana's response to the Israeli attack on Lebanon, which occurred in late summer that year.

Oil still leaks through the icon's surface and the wooden pillar that separates the living room from the bedroom. It is collected from a niche in the pillar with cotton balls and distributed for visitors once the cotton is saturated. I visited the site several times and attended informal prayer gatherings, usually consisting of a small group of six devotees or less. The rituals of saint veneration consisted of burning incense, lighting candles, and praying in front of the Icon of Meryem Ana. As part of the ritual, Orthodox Christians will touch the icon and rub the oil on their forehead in the shape of a cross (Figure 8.6). Commonly, devotees leave small donations and receive a piece of the oil-soaked cotton; occasionally they are invited to stay for tea or coffee and perhaps cigarettes. The high outer walls surrounding the courtyard, separating the living quarters from the kitchen and toilet, grant the gatherers some privacy. It was not until the Festival of Meryem Ana's Assumption in 2015 that the size and composition of this community of devotees became evident. Unexpectedly, I met two Orthodox Christian priests at the Miracle of Meryem Ana as they were preparing to hold a liturgical prayer service. One priest was similarly surprised to see

Figure 8.6 Orthodox Christian woman venerating the Miraculous Icon in Antakya.
© Jens Kreinath, 2015.

me at the site; however, he welcomed me warmly with a handshake, as he did with other visitors. As I arrived, the courtyard was already full.

Approximately twenty devotees gathered in front of the icon. All except an elderly man were standing in the caretaker's living room – with the two priests leading a Mass. They were not wearing liturgical garments, but street clothes. At first, the caretaker attended the ritual, burning incense and lighting candles, but he soon left to prepare food to be distributed after the Mass. Other than these men and myself, only women were in attendance. None of them wore head-coverings, and some cautiously used a hand fan to relieve the heat. The space was so full, there was little room to move. The caretaker's wife was not among the attendees. After standing in the door, she left for some final preparations of food and drink.

The priests performed a regular Orthodox Mass in Arabic and followed the liturgy by taking turns reciting the special prayers selected for the day's occasion. In their liturgy, they followed standard Orthodox procedure by opening with prayers glorifying God (Arab.: *Allah*). Specific prayers recited for the day were devoted to the Virgin Mary (Arab.: *Adra Maryam*) as the Mother of God (Arab.: *Walidat el-Elah*) or called on her to be a refuge and a mediator to God. After these prayers, one priest read verses from the Bible about Mary visiting Elisabeth (Lk. 1.39-56). Invoking the liturgical formula of the Trinity, the priests recited a prayer requesting God's mercy, and the congregation recited the Lord's Prayer (Lk. 11.2-4) followed by the Sign of the Cross. In saying a prayer dedicated to Mary, the priests beseeched Adra Maryam to keep them out of harm's way. With a Hallelujah, the priests closed the ceremony with a Sign of the Cross. After the Mass's completion, one priest turned to the congregation

exclaiming in Arabic, 'May your prayers be heard!' The service lasted no more than fifteen minutes.

Before leaving the living room, both priests touched the Miraculous Icon with their right hand, followed by the Sign of the Cross while joining their thumb, index and middle finger to symbolize the Trinity in a single ritual gesture. Following the priests' example, attendees formed a line to touch the icon in adoration and devotion. One attendee licked the tips of her fingers after touching the icon and made the Sign of the Cross. One younger woman had no interaction with the icon. Another woman, second to last, inspected the floor for traces of oil. Trying again, she examined the niche more closely and left the room with a suspicious gaze. A buffet of sacrificial food – mainly sweets and snacks – was displayed near the kitchen. The hosts made sure every guest received one of the treats.

Most members of the community sat on benches in the corner of the courtyard or on white plastic folding chairs. One of the priests spoke up, to be heard by all attendees, and complained about the deplorable custom of making vows. Declaring in Turkish, 'There is no need for these folkloric articles [*Bu folklorik eşyaların gereği yok*],' referring to the food served as an offering (*adak*) from a woman who was healed after a vow made at that site. One priest emphasized, 'That has no meaning [*anlamı yok*], we said this last year. Sweets, lokum, these are folkloric articles. We pray here, and then go to our Church.'

The other priest reiterated this in Arabic, citing the parable of Mary and Martha (Lk. 10.38-42), where 'Mary, sat at the Lord's feet, listening to what he taught. But Martha was distracted by the big dinner she was preparing.' He said it does not help to be busy with shallow things, referring to the preparation of the offerings. 'Mary came to listen to Gods words,' he said, and insisted that it is important to follow His will, emphasizing that all we should do is pray. Regarding this festival, he continued 'you think that Virgin Mary has only one feast, but she has four feasts, her Birth, the Annunciation, the Immaculate Conception, and the Assumption'. He criticized the Miraculous Icon's caretakers for their absence at church, even though they were fasting. The priest spoke loudly for all to hear, denouncing vows as pagan and renegade. However, most of the devotees seemed to ignore his speech, to avoid insulting the elderly Orthodox Christian woman who sponsors the meal annually. She was obviously in a bind: she promised to make these offerings after being healed to serve her community and yet her priests criticized her.

After most visitors left and the atmosphere calmed down, the sponsoring woman, who is a very devout and regular churchgoer, on the brink of tears, shared her story. Having been healed from a life-threatening illness after visiting the Miraculous Icon, she vowed to offer a sacrificial meal (Turk.: *adak*) on the Feast of Meryem Ana's Assumption. She felt torn between her vow made in a moment of despair and understanding the priests' command regarding vows. Attempting to explain her situation to me, her body moved back and forth in front of the Miraculous Icon, as if she were directly interacting with it. Later the woman, who hosted the meal, began to prepare for the church service scheduled at the Orthodox Christian Church, after a final solitary prayer at the icon. I remained for a short time before also leaving for the church service, while the caretakers stayed home. During the Mass – performed by

the same two priests, now in full liturgical garment – I recognized numerous devotees sitting in the back rows who had just attended the Mass at the Icon of Meryem Ana.

Aesthetic regimes and the significance of icons in the Eastern Orthodox tradition

Although the priests held Mass at the Miraculous Icon, acknowledging the site's significance for Antakya's Orthodox Christian community, they never officially recognized this site as a sanctuary.¹¹ Interviews with the priests conducted prior to attending Mass provide some local theological context for the observations made at the sanctuary of the Miraculous Icon. This interview was held in their office at the Orthodox Church of Antakya. One of them started by saying that Meryem Ana is a very holy person because she is God's chosen one and gave birth to Jesus through Immaculate Conception. The other priest affirmed that the aureole around Meryem Ana's head indicates her sanctity. Pointing to a Marian icon next to him, he stressed the importance of the colours in which Meryem Ana is depicted. Though he did not specify the colour codes, I could infer his meaning – the bright blue of Meryem Ana's mantle represented the *Theotokos*, with the purple of her dress as the renowned colour of passion in the Eastern Orthodox tradition. Considering this, Meryem Ana's image on the Miraculous Icon differs only slightly, with an orange-red dress and a dark blue mantle (see Figure 8.4).

In contrast to the caretaker's words, one of the priests declared 'an icon is not a painting [*İkona resim değildir*]' . Though icons are often perceived as religious works of art (Belting 1994: 2, 9–11), the priest's statement sums up a major theological point used to justify the veneration of icons in the Eastern Orthodox Church: although icons are handmade, they are imitations of an archetypal image and originate through divine inspiration the iconographer receives in prayers (Barasch 1993: 6–7; Belting 1994: 56). An iconographer¹² I also worked with in Antakya supported this view in an interview. One must pray and meditate for hours before one can make the first stroke. Every stroke, he emphasized, must come through divine inspiration. Particularly among theologically trained Orthodox Christians, icons are interpreted as the visual equivalence of the scripture. As the iconographer insisted, icons are not painted, but written, accompanied by the recitation of a continuous prayer.¹³

One priest mentioned during our interview that the doctrine of the icon's mysterious nature is central to the Orthodox Christian faith as an expression of divine mystery. Thus, icons are objects of meditation, and liturgical prayers are recited before them (Barasch 1993: 36–9). Specific rituals related to an icon's production, or those performed for veneration, indicate that an icon is conceived as a vessel through which the respective saint communicates with the devotees (Luehrmann in this volume). In this regard, the priests perceive the icon as integral to the saint's persona. Icons are 'interactive foci of saintly presence'; they are like persons and therefore act 'as a holy person on earth would act' (Heo 2018: 92). Thus, an icon is an interface between the visible and invisible (Belting 1994: 7–9, 45–7). This view reiterates the doctrine John of Damascus articulated regarding the icon in the Eastern Orthodox tradition

‘revealing the invisible is the purpose of the holy image, and therefore it is the reason for the vindication of the material, visible icon’ (Barasch 1993: 206). This notion even applies to reproductions of icons and is apparent in the veneration and adoration of the Miraculous Icon.

Despite the difference in aesthetic regimes, Orthodox priests share the same traditions of icon veneration, as their spiritual orientation is geared towards the traditions of the Eastern Orthodox Church in Syria and Lebanon.¹⁴ This became clear when asked about the *Meryem Ana Evi* in Ephesus, which was rediscovered and reinvented through the Roman Catholic Church in the late nineteenth century. For the Orthodox priests, *Meryem Ana Evi* in Ephesus is the place where St. John the Apostle brought the Virgin Mary ‘to live until her Assumption’ (Turk.: *göğe çıkışı* or *göğe alınışı*).¹⁵ By contrast, the Convent of Our Lady of Saydnaya is most important to the priests, as it is the place¹⁶ where people are healed through the oil coming from the miraculous icon – as one priest testified. According to Orthodox Christian tradition, as referred to here, this icon was painted by St. Luke and is important for the ongoing veneration of *Meryem Ana*, due to its association with miraculous healings.¹⁷

Although the priests had to recognize that both Christians and Muslims visit miraculous icons, like those in Saydnaya, they would not officially acknowledge the Miraculous Icon in Antakya due to the vows and wishes as practised by members of their own parish. Nevertheless, they noted that the Qur’an mentions *Meryem Ana*, with a surah of her own. However, they clarified, this is the only overlap they recognize between Christian and Muslim adorations of *Meryem Ana*. Theirs is an exclusively theological point of view compared to the caretakers’ more apparent emphasis that Eastern Orthodox Christians and Arab Alawites all come to venerate the Miraculous Icon, with various Muslim ornaments adorning it. Differences in the perception of *Meryem Ana* become evident when the aesthetic regimes of sensual perception are concerned. Though the priests acknowledge healing miracles of the icons of *Meryem Ana* as part of the mysteries of their faith, they do not recognize apparitions of *Meryem Ana* in dreams; as one priest stated, ‘In our culture, we do not recognize dreams [Turk.: *Kültürümüzde, rüyaları tanımıyoruz*].’¹⁸

Apparitions of *Meryem Ana* among Orthodox Christians and Arab Alawites

Apparitions of *Meryem Ana*, like other matters of religious belief, are not generally topics of conversation in Hatay. As one of my interlocutors once said: ‘Religion in Hatay is lived, not talked about [in public].’ The narrative accounts I collected among Orthodox Christian women give intimate accounts of their adorations of *Meryem Ana*. They are directly related to the Miraculous Icon and reveal the intimate correlation between the icon’s adoration, apparitions of *Meryem Ana*, and experiences of vowing and healing. These accounts are contrasted with that of an Arab Alawite woman who witnessed a Marian apparition.

The icon’s caretakers give the first examples of apparitions. Upon inquiring whether they had any experiences, the caretaker immediately declined. His wife, however,

affirmed that Meryem Ana appeared to both her and her son. Her son shared the story of a dream from 2006, around the time the icon began to 'cry'. In his dream, he was sitting at the window when Jesus and Mary came to visit him. The three spoke and Meryem Ana told the boy, 'Your faith will exceed my faith.' I questioned him about Meryem Ana's appearance and he referred to the icon saying, 'like in the paintings [*resimlerdeki gibiydi*]' adding that she was 'like a spirit [*ruh gibiydi*]'. Meryem Ana appeared to the caretaker's wife during an evening prayer in 2010, where she witnessed 'light scattering [*ışık saçıldı*]'. As she saw the light, she began to shake and cry, understanding who had appeared to her. She was given instructions to pray for her sick aunt, who soon recovered. Sometimes during the night, she smelled burning incense. Taking it as a sign from Meryem Ana, she immediately complied and burned incense. Other than these experiences, the Miraculous Icon is more known for healings than for apparitions.

The next account is that of a middle-aged woman who experienced apparitions of Meryem Ana after visiting the Miraculous Icon. Her complex narrative is given here in full: She was concerned about infertility during her first years of marriage. An acquaintance told her about what is called *Meryem Ana Evi*, and they went there. Praying, she made a vow, 'If I would get a child, then I will visit you next year for your feast'. Upon returning home, she informed a friend of her visit, saying, 'If I get a daughter, I will name her Anna Maria.' That night she dreamed of a table full of jars resembling babies in the womb. Then a woman appeared and told her to choose her child.

Upon waking, she repeated her promise. Soon she became pregnant. During that time, Meryem Ana appeared to her in dreams (Turk.: *rüya*), telling her not to be afraid and that the pregnancy would be comfortable. In a dream just before delivery, Meryem Ana appeared to her with a rose in her hand. Meryem Ana told her, 'As I delivered Jesus I had this rose in my hand. Get this flower and put this on your belly.' That morning, her friend came to visit, bringing her a rose. She questioned her friend, who explained that an old woman gave her the rose, so she brought it to her. 'So, it was like a continuation of a dream for me. I just got this flower and put this on my belly,' she said.

After the baby's birth, her name was highly contested. Because they lived in a Muslim country, some relatives believed that a Christian name was inappropriate. This upset the woman because of her promise, and for several weeks the baby had no name. In another dream, four men noisily entered her bedroom, and shook the bed. Meryem Ana sat on a chair in a very disapproving manner, making no contact with the woman. The four men were yelling at her asking why she did not keep her promise. One of the men picked up the baby and loudly spoke her name three times in her ear, like a naming ceremony (Turk.: *isim koyma töreni*) common among Muslims. Then he told her that if she did not keep her promise, what was given would be taken away.

Finally, she named her daughter Anna Maria. In our subsequent conversation, I asked how she knew it was Meryem Ana, and she indicated that she just felt it. She did not remember the face or any specifics other than her white-cream head cover with lashes wrapped around it. Meryem Ana looked like a normal human without any light around her. She also recalled that when Meryem Ana spoke with her she was never close. Only when she was given the rose could she see Meryem Ana's hand was completely white.

As these narratives indicate, not all members of the Orthodox Christian community follow the priests' dismissal of Marian apparitions. It seems that Orthodox Christians who venerate the Miraculous Icon and see Meryem Ana in dreams also emphasize the apparitions' importance and take them very seriously. The tension between the theological command of the clergy and the lived experience of the laity also explains the difficulty of finding Orthodox Christians willing to talk about experiences of apparitions. Dreams – unlike miraculous icons – are not considered part of the authoritative tradition of saint veneration and are not supported by what priests consider divine inspiration. Thus, the aesthetics of bodily sensations as experienced by the laity stands in contrast to the aesthetic regime of saint veneration rituals instituted by the clergy.

The Marian apparitions experienced by both Orthodox Christian and Arab Alawite women share many similarities. One exemplary testimony is engraved on a marble plaque, giving a unique glimpse into the culture of saint veneration among Arab Alawites. It should be noted that this sanctuary is known by locals as Her Holiness Mary Sanctuary (Turk.: *Hz. Meryem Makamı*), while it is otherwise called Hızır Water (Turk.: *Hızır Suyu*).¹⁹ It is located on a remote mountain dome near the Cassian Mountain range, which stretches south of Samandağ along the Orontes River valley. The Hızır Suyu sanctuary is named after the Hızır tomb at its centre – a large five-by-five cement block, about three metres high, with no apparent entrances. Next to the sanctuary is a place for guests to stay overnight for dream incubation. There is no tomb dedicated to Meryem Ana, and without the plaque supported by the iron grating, it would not be possible to identify the site.

Importantly, the site is currently recognized for the story of a woman who was healed after an apparition of Meryem Ana, even though this sanctuary was attributed to Meryem Ana long before her. The story originally in Turkish is translated here in full:

Years ago, I got sick. I had stomach bleeding and did not leave my sick bed for seven months. One day, Hz. Meryem appeared in my dream, and she asked me to come to her Makam and said that I will be well after fifteen days. I came here and made a prayer. I vowed I would make an animal sacrifice [*kurban*] if I got better. Soon I got better but forgot to make the sacrifice. (I encountered a major financial problem.)

Hz. Meryem appeared in my dream again.

She said she wanted me to make the sacrifice, and that my problem would be solved if I would keep my vow [*adak*]. After a few days, I came here to fulfill it. The next day my problem was solved. I also could not get pregnant; I went to a doctor and I am told that I would not have children without treatment.

I came here and wished a daughter from Hz. Meryem. I wished [*dilek*] that if I would have a daughter, I would name her Meryem. I got pregnant that month without treatment. My daughter is now six months old. I named her Meryem.

MY BELIEF IN HZ. MERYEM IS ETERNAL.

The practice of engraving one's testimony on marble is not common, but the account it gives provides distinctive insights into the tradition of saint veneration among Arab

Alawites. Although its specific features are confined to the veneration of Meryem Ana, this example is worth further consideration. It exemplifies the veneration of Meryem Ana at this site, but also highlights the experience of visions and dreams among Arab Alawites more generally (Kreinath 2014, 43–9).

The testimony's narrative is atypical; various elements are omitted while others are merely alluded to. It is unclear what relation the woman had to Meryem Ana before witnessing her in a dream, or how she could be confident that it was Meryem Ana. Praying to a saint is common in preparation for dream incubations among Arab Alawites, but unmentioned here. Also, it remains unclear if she initially performed a sacrifice in Meryem Ana's name when she visited the Hz. Meryem Makamı, or the first time in response to her healing. Such a debt-based sacrifice is a significant reciprocal detail. As she appeared the second time, Meryem Ana promised to fulfil the devotee's wishes only after a sacrifice was made. The woman followed through to help resolve financial problems, which disappeared after her sacrifice.

Though not tied to her prior illness, the testimony also indicates that the woman visited the Hz. Meryem Makamı once again to make a vow because of infertility. It indicates through the indexical 'here [Turk.: *buraya*]' that this pilgrimage site was already known as the Hz. Meryem Makamı prior to her visit. Interestingly, the testimony states she only committed to naming her daughter Meryem if her wish for a daughter was fulfilled. It is quite significant, as it not only entails two apparitions of Meryem Ana but also includes the experience of healing with a clear reference to vows and sacrifices, elements common to saint veneration among Arab Alawites (Kreinath 2014, 49–53). The emphasis here is on Meryem Ana directly communicating via dreams and giving the woman instructions to overcome physical illness and financial distress. The testimony also suggests that Meryem Ana took the initiative in approaching the woman in a dream, without the woman's prayers or vows prior to her apparition. It was only after the woman was healed and had performed her sacrifice that she made the vow to name her daughter Meryem given her wish would be fulfilled. It is a common practice to name the first-born child after the saint to whom a vow was made, as the Orthodox Christian and Arab Alawite examples indicate. Despite its unique features, this testimony demonstrates that dreams, vows, healings and sacrifices are integral to rituals of saint veneration among the Arab Alawites in Hatay, and thus they share common features with apparitions of Meryem Ana experienced among Orthodox Christians, as demonstrated by the case of the Miraculous Icon.

Conclusion

This chapter argues that sensations and figurations of the unseen, exemplified by the aesthetics of Marian apparitions, are highly differentiated within religious traditions as evident in the Orthodox Christian community of Antakya. By giving primary attention to the Miraculous Icon of Meryem Ana, I explicated that the aesthetics of bodily sensations differ considerably among clergy and laity showing that their accounts are anchored in very different aesthetic regimes of Marian adorations and apparitions.

I contrasted the icon veneration practised and interpreted by Orthodox Christian clergy and laity with dreams and healings experienced among women after performing prayers and vows primarily at the Miraculous Icon. In doing so, I showed that the rituals performed in front of the icon by clergy and laity seem similar, but aesthetic regimes and bodily sensations among the Orthodox Christian clergy and the women who experienced Marian apparitions through dreams are markedly different. While the clergy emphasized the intangible presence of the invisible in the icon, the laity insisted on the tangible efficacy of the visible as represented through the icon. Addressing different aesthetic regimes of the visible and invisible, I demonstrated that clergy and laity present a different kind of evidence and speak with varying degrees of authority about Meryem Ana's presence in the Miraculous Icon. Concisely put by Hans Belting, 'It was never easy to control images with words, because, like saints, they engaged deeper levels of experiences and fulfilled desires other than the ones living church authorities were able to address' (Belting 1994: 1).

The difference in the aesthetics of the Miraculous Icon became apparent by considering bodily sensations experienced by Orthodox Christian women through their apparitions of Meryem Ana in dreams, and by contrasting their accounts with aesthetic regimes as expressed in the priests' views. Although the veneration of miraculous icons is instituted as an authoritative practice of worship in Eastern Orthodox Christianity, as the priests' interviews confirmed, the aesthetic regimes the clergy aims to institute diverge from the bodily sensations experienced by the laity, resulting in markedly different aesthetic perceptions of the icon. While the clergy understands the icon's veneration as an interface of human and divine interaction, and thus, presupposes an aesthetic regime of bodily sensation, the laity that experienced apparitions ascribes agency to the Miraculous Icon and take their bodily sensations as empirical evidence for the working of the icon in healing and for the vows sealed there. With this difference in aesthetic regimes, and the relationship between different configurations of the visible and invisible in bodily sensations and apparitions of Meryem Ana, I elaborated on how Orthodox Christian women share local Muslim traditions of saint veneration as practised among Arab Alawites.

Although the Orthodox Christian clergy and laity are unified by their belief in the icon's mystery, they differ in their aesthetic regime and bodily sensation of this mystery. The desire for healing through vows and bodily sensations made through the Miraculous Icon transcend authorized bodily practices and instituted aesthetic regimes. The difference exists in the priests' rejection of Meryem Ana's apparitions as sources of divine inspiration as well as the requests for healing mediated through the Miraculous Icon. When it comes to the appropriation of the local culture of vows, dreams and healings, the Orthodox Christian laity deviates in their bodily sensation from the aesthetics regimes of the clergy and has much more in common with local traditions of saint veneration practised among Arab Alawites. Thus, bodily sensations among the Orthodox Christian women contrast the aesthetic regime of the clergy and organize interreligious relations with Arab Alawite women, with whom they share traditions of Marian adoration manifesting in practices of praying and vowing, and experiences of apparitions, as mediated through aesthetic sensations in dreams and healings.