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## EXPERIENCING A MOSQUE THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHY: ISLAM AS AN ORDINARY RELIGION

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### ABSTRACT

In this article, the author reflects on using photography for an ethno-sociological study which interrogates the spatial configuration of a mosque in Switzerland. After defining the concept of spatial configuration and presenting his field, the author considers several difficulties pertaining to the photography of concrete situations. It is shown that photography enables the researcher to take a critical distance from their own ethnographic activity and the way it can influence the behaviour of actors in the field. Through analyzing spatial configurations as enabled by photography, the author advances two social logics pertaining to the constitution of social space: discretion and conviviality. These logics, as well as the photographic method used in their elaboration, are shown to be pertinent for the study of Islam as an ordinary religion.

### KEYWORDS

Islam in Switzerland – Photography in a Muslim associational context – built environment – spatial configuration – ordinary religion.

### BIO

Guillaume Chatagny is a doctoral student in sociology at the University of Fribourg (Switzerland), as well as in ethnology at the University Paris-Nanterre. In parallel to his thesis, he works as a graduate assistant at the Swiss Centre for Islam and Society (CSIS) at the University of Fribourg. Focusing on the spatial configuration of a Muslim association in Switzerland, his research explores a number of microsociological concepts, applying them to the sociology of religion.

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## Introduction

In this article I wish to present my experience of using photography in an ongoing doctoral project in ethno-sociology<sup>1</sup>. The particular object of this study is the spatial configuration of a mosque<sup>2</sup> run by a Muslim association in Swiss Romandy. The article will also provide some general reflections concerning the use of photography in such a context.

In an age such as ours in which the visual dimension largely predominates public life (Mirzoeff 2000; Spencer 2011), information on producing and processing photography is widely accessible, whether in schools and universities or on the internet. While the use of photography, as well as of visual data more generally, is a part of the curriculum in many social science programs, I must confess that it did not form part of my own studies. Photography was instead somewhat imposed on me because, once I had decided to focus my research on material culture, the literature I consulted remarked on the pertinence of visual methods for this line of questioning (Daniels 2011; Delsaut 2020<sup>3</sup>; Pauwels 2020).

The basic assumption of this article is that any and all analyses of photography must begin by reflecting on the social and technical dispositives allowing for the capture of images (Maresca 1996: 16). For such a reflection, it is more than important to consider the researcher's position with regards to the spatial configuration he is investigating. In doing so, I argue that the use of photography in ethno-sociological research invites the scholar to reflect critically upon their experience of the field and its conceptual elaboration. I further affirm that photography is an occasion to "take a step back" (Olivier de Sardan 2008) during the different phases of the research. This allows the researcher to avoid, on the one hand, a poorly established construction of their object of study and, on the other hand, the kind of cumbersome over-interpretation that can occur during analysis. In order to account for these difficulties, this article, using my current research as an example, will be structured in three sections.

The first section will discuss the theoretical framework and the field of my research. I will first define the main notion of my research project, which, as it is centred around 'spatial configuration', is strongly linked to the visual dimension. Next, I will present the association and some methodological issues related to my fieldwork – such as the way in which the researcher is part of the situation he analyses and his influence on the conducts he observes.

The difficulties inherent to taking photographs in a Muslim associational context will be thematized in the second section. The photographs taken during my first encounters with the association attest to two aspects: firstly, to my unease in producing images and secondly, to my particular mode of situating myself in the environment. Consequently, I will advance two logics of the spatial configuration of the association – those of discretion and conviviality – and give an example of critical feedback on the fieldwork from my photographs.

In the third section, I will come back to the relevance of photography for approaching Islam as an 'ordinary religion', using the expression coined by Piette (2003). Photography, to the extent that it allows one to notice details, encourages a microsociological approach to religion, beginning with the analysis of the environment in which the activities of the group take place. While Islam and Muslims are all too often thematized in connection with 'extraordinary' phenomena such as radicalization and terrorism, the use of photography in the study of a local association serves as a reminder that the day to day life of such an association includes social forms which are very ordinary indeed.

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank James Fisher for his valuable assistance in developing the English version of this article and for our rich exchanges on sociology, philosophy, and psychoanalysis.

<sup>2</sup> Brekke et al. (2019) give a minimal definition of 'mosque' as both a place of collective religious expression, especially prayer, as well as, depending on the context, a place of Islamic education, services and other religious and non-religious socializing. I will talk about a place rented by a Muslim association that is used for religious (prayer, Islamic education) and non-religious purposes. By using this definition, I refrain from entering into debates that seek to give a normative definition of what a mosque ought to be. This usage is justified by the fact that a number of practitioners themselves designate their centre as a mosque. To give two examples, upon entering the place, one can read a notice on the door stating that "[...] after many meetings of *the mosque's board*, [...]" they had come to the decision to close the place after the prayer of '*Isha*'. The word 'mosque' appears twice on this notice. I also read this word in conversations on a WhatsApp group created by a young man in order to organize activities that could bring Muslims together. To provide another perspective on the issue, a young man stated during an interview that he would not refer to the place rented by the association as a mosque, because it is too small for this designation.

<sup>3</sup> See in particular the first chapter about the economy of popular language.

## 1. Taking photographs in a mosque of 100 m<sup>2</sup> in Switzerland

### *The conceptual framework: a study in spatial configuration*

My PhD project in ethnology and sociology began with the idea of exploring the material culture of a Muslim association. The expression ‘material culture’ is subject to debate (Bonnot 2014; Latour 2012), but my original understanding of the term was that it studied the artefacts produced and used by the actors of a given social group<sup>4</sup>. As a result of my experiences in the field, the theme of my research crystallized around the configuration of associational space. The term ‘configuration’ echoes Simmel’s (1992: 687) assertion that sociology is concerned, not with space itself, but with the way things are configured within it. At the same time, it also refers to post-modern conceptions such as space as relational category (Löv 2016). The scholar of spatial configuration observes, describes and analyses the forms which characterise associational space in close proximity. In so doing, their first objective is to distinguish the forms of the built environment from those emerging in the course of human action – thereby respecting the distinction between “place” and “space” (see Knott 2005 on this topic). In my opinion, it is the merit of spatial configuration that it reflects on the passage from place to space and back again as human activity develops reciprocal relations between the two. In so doing, my aim was to analyse the forms engendered by the relations between built environment (a setting of physical objects) and human behaviour; a theme which evidently remains closely linked to that of material culture in general (Schlereth 1985: 3).

The behaviours of the actors participating in the emergence of the associational space cannot be studied if they are not brought into relation with their environment and their concrete situations (Douglas 1980: 3). Goffman (1964: 134) also advises that “you cannot describe a gesture fully without reference to the extra-bodily environment in which it occurs.” When using a microsociological perspective, the researcher studies social situations in their details. Following Goffman’s (1964: 135) definition, a social situation is

An environment of mutual monitoring possibilities, anywhere within which an individual will find himself accessible to the naked senses of all others who are ‘present’, and similarly find them accessible to him. According to this definition, a social situation arises whenever two or more individuals find themselves in one another’s immediate presence, and it lasts until the next-to-last person leaves.

The notion of spatial configuration invites the researcher to direct their attention not so much to the ‘interaction order’ (Goffman 1982) as to its formal expression.

The practices occurring in a Muslim association, just like the practices occurring in any other social context, are ‘situated activities’ (Barwise 1989; de Fornel and Quéré 1999). Because they make use of certain material resources, humans depend on their environment and its regularities, delineate the specific regions of this environment and exhibit particular orientations towards it in the course of their actions. As is implied in Goffman’s definition of the situation, built environment and situation are mutually constitutive of one another: the environment does not acquire its full meaning except through the perception the actors have of it in the course of their actions; each social situation is founded upon an environment whose forms are transformed on the whims of the actors. In conclusion, one can affirm that a formal approach of this type encourages one to apprehend the built environment as a partner in human behaviour (Quéré 2006) and to approach space as the result of a social construction of complex registers (Lefebvre 1992; Remy 2015).

Up until now, I have not considered the researcher’s presence in the space whose forms they wish to study. Nonetheless, one cannot begin to analyse a spatial configuration without taking into account the fact that, by taking photographs, the researcher transforms the situation he observes (Sontag 1977: 10–11). Furthermore, the researcher’s positioning in the environment, the movements and orientations qualifying his behaviour all participate, just as much as those of the other actors in co-presence, to the emergence of a spatial configuration. These considerations are complemented by the fact that I was able to reconstruct the spatial configurations of the association in certain concrete situations only by using and describing photographs. The notion of spatial configuration is thus indissociable from the photographic act and the analysis of the data thereby produced. My next task will be to return to the

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<sup>4</sup> For a more extensive definition of ‘material culture’ which includes time and space, see Carp (2014).

relation between the presence of the researcher in the field, his photographic practice and the analysis of visual data.

For simplicity's sake, one may begin analysing the built environment using photographs. Photography materializes the visible forms of a situation under observation. Barthes (1980) considers the photographic image as a trace of the spatio-temporal presence of a real thing that was in one way or another observable by a human being<sup>5</sup>. In glancing at a photograph, one understands that the objects therein depicted maintain relations between them. More than objects or entities, the visual dispositive of photography shows us configurations or assemblages<sup>6</sup> (Emmison and Smith 2000: 150).

If the photograph shows configurations, it is also characterized by an out-of-frame, which recalls the existence of its producer, that is the researcher who produces the image. If the photographer places himself at a distance to better observe, to better see, like a voyeur (Sontag 1977: 10)<sup>7</sup>, he is nonetheless part of the situation (Arborio 2007: 26). Thus the environmental and situational forms, such as they have been crystalized in the photograph, depend on the presence of the researcher and the way his orientation therein constitutes the shot. As a result, when analysing visual data, the researcher cannot close his eyes to the reasons which contributed to his situation in this or that portion of the environment at the moment the photograph was taken, or even of those which lead them to direct his view in a certain direction rather than another. Such questions can be examined using field notes which document the conditions of direct observation, but also by strategically using a specific point of view while 'reading' a photograph.

In describing and analysing photography, one approach is to direct one's attention not so much towards the activities unfolding before them, the situation *in actu*, but toward other possible activities which could just as well be supported by the same environment. Examining the spatial configuration in this sense requires one to adopt the point of view of an actor who could be considered as the "implied reader" (Hausendorf and Schmitt 2013:12), capable of identifying and 'reading' the characteristics of the environment, understood as "usability cues" (Hausendorf 2013: 295)<sup>8</sup>. This act of abstraction which considers actions other than those actually underway then forms a framework to return to the situation under observation and the forms of actual experience. Now, can this point of view be the same as that adopted by the actors engaged in the course of an action, which the photographic support has captured in a certain form? On the contrary, I insist that it is impossible to describe the mosque without extrapolating on the specific perspective of the researcher. The questions: "Who sees what from which vantage point in the environment and by means of which datum? What point of view is used in describing the situation?" become primordial and cannot be ignored.

### ***A visual ethnography of an Albanian Islamic cultural centre***

In the Sixties, economic reasons led to the growth of the Balkan population in Switzerland. In the case of the Albanians, many young men left their homes to work in Switzerland as seasonal workers (von Aarburg 2002), aiming to make enough money to return to their country of origin. This first wave of immigration was followed by two others: a second wave that emerged for family reunification in the 1990s and which diversified the Albanian population in Switzerland, and then a third wave initiated by the outbreak of war in Yugoslavia (on the subject of Albanian presence in Switzerland, see Iseni 2009). The women and men who have come to Switzerland can be qualified as 'transmigrants' (Glick Schiller, Basch and Szanton Blanc 1995)<sup>9</sup> as they have established themselves in the country and plan to spend their futures there, while at the same time remained closely attached to their countries of origin. Over time, it became necessary to establish places of prayer for the population of faithful and practicing Muslims.

<sup>5</sup> See Peccatte (2012) for some critical remarks on Barthes' perspective.

<sup>6</sup> The concept of 'assemblage' was forged by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. For the pertinence of this concept for the material turn in the study of religions, see Bräunlein (2016).

<sup>7</sup> Sontag goes so far as to say, commenting ironically on an advertising image, that the photographer masters the situation.

<sup>8</sup> Describing the photograph in this way allows for a break from the fixity of the photographic image, a necessary step given that the production of space is about movement, actor orientations, and object displacements among other things. Another advantage is that this process encourages the researcher to consider the presence or absence of even the most ordinary objects (Hausendorf and Schmitt 2013: 28), which facilitates a detailed account of the spatial configuration. For more on this subject, see the third section of this article.

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion on the concept of 'transmigration' with reference to Albanians, see Dahinten (2005).

Founded in the early 2000s, the Muslim association in which I conducted my ethnographic fieldwork<sup>10</sup> is an example of an Albanian cultural centre<sup>11</sup>, that is to say an associational place destined for other community activities just as much as it is for prayer. On this subject, one should underline that, as creating places of prayer is one of the principle objectives in establishing such centres, their cultural character concerned objectives such as

speaking the same language, experiencing Islam as it was appropriated and experienced in one's country of origin, transmitting this part of one's identity to children born in Switzerland, forging and maintaining social bonds which are imbued with memories, destinies and horizons which are more or less shared (Bennani-Chraïbi 2010: 4).<sup>12</sup>

The Albanian cultural centre here in question rents a building which was in no way constructed to serve as a place of prayer. In fact, at the moment of writing, the association I study rents a room in a building one could qualify as 'administrative and commercial'<sup>13</sup> situated at the periphery of the city, but not far from the downtown. The organisations sharing the building are diverse: in the same building one can find for example a toy store, a school for pole-dancing and a physiotherapist. The room rented by the association, of approximately 100 m<sup>2</sup>, is divided into various sections, of which the most important are the entrance with infrastructure for ablutions, the coffee-break or convivial zone with a table, chairs and coffee machine, the bookshelves and the prayer zone<sup>14</sup>.

I now come to some aspects pertaining to my use of photography in the centre. In contrast to other visual researches – such as Richter's (2015) study of the arrangement of vestries and activities that occur there or Mustafa's (2014) research about religious identity and identification in Islam – I did not ask the Muslim actors of the association to take photographs of their environment with the idea of photo elicitation (on using photographs in interviews, see Collier and Collier 1986; Harper 2002; Pink 2013). Instead, I myself took the essential photographs of the interior of the association, both while it was unoccupied as well as in the course of activities such as Friday prayers, working sessions, communal meals, individual prayers, etc.

Collier and Collier (1986: 133) and, more recently, Richter (2015: 105) have pointed out some difficulties and problems associated with the researcher-photographer's presence in their field: firstly, when starting to photograph the inner workings of social structure, one leaves the public domain and enters the confines of more private beliefs and behaviours and, secondly, taking photographs in small places like a vestry or a 100 m<sup>2</sup> prayer room could be seen as intrusive or distracting by the informants themselves. In order to reduce the above-mentioned risks, I followed a single Muslim association and did so for an extended duration (about three years)<sup>15</sup>. During this time, I only visited the mosque randomly or, sometimes, for specific occasions and I only participated in 'open' activities of the association, that is to say those in which any Muslim person, whether or not he was a member of the association, could also participate. With the exception of Friday prayers, daily prayers and special occasions, the place mostly remains empty.

The history of anthropology has shown the stakes that were at play in the emergence of ethnographic fieldwork (Stocking 1983), notably in terms of the influence they had on the sayings and doings of informants (see also Adler 1987; Arborio 2007; Olivier de Sardan 2008). In my case, my presence as

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<sup>10</sup> During my fieldwork, I interacted almost exclusively with men. I conducted a single interview with representatives from a group of women attached to the Albanian Islamic cultural centre that I had approached in the context of my research. On the criteria of gender in studies pertaining to Muslim contexts or individuals, see in particular Ahmed (2016: 71) and Quraishi (2008).

<sup>11</sup> There are approximately 500,000 Muslims in Switzerland (5.5% of the total population), of which the largest denomination is Sunni (85%) and the largest ethnic subgroup is Balkan (34.8%), see Schneuwly Purdie and Tunger-Zanetti (2020: 656).

<sup>12</sup> Translated by the author.

<sup>13</sup> Here, we refer to the qualifiers used in a local press article on the opening of the Albanian Islamic cultural centre in the 2000s.

<sup>14</sup> Such a division of the environment shows the extent to which the centre is designed as much for 'religious' as for 'non-religious' practices. Furthermore, the fact that these zones can, in certain situations, be used in tandem shows the subtle border between these two kinds of practice and the way they can be put in relation to one another. On several occasions, I had discussions at the table while, some metres away, several men prayed in the zone reserved for this activity. It can also happen that the practitioners use the Albanian Islamic cultural centre as a meeting point before departing on other excursions, such as sporting activities.

<sup>15</sup> On the duration of time that is spent on the field and its advantages, see Bernard (2011: 277ff) and Schwartz (2012: 357ff).

well as the fact of my taking photographs both participate in the object of my study: the emergence of specific spatial configurations. I would now like to give some examples of the influence I had on the behaviour of the group who hosted me during my research

I observed the Friday prayers on several occasions. There is usually a moment when the men suddenly change position and come forward in the direction of the *mihrab* – some walking and some even crawling on the floor – and, oriented by the motifs decorating the carpet, seek to align themselves correctly for the prayer. When they saw that I was staying behind, some would save a place for me and look towards me with questioning eyes to determine whether I would join them. I then needed to make them understand that I would not be praying, whether by a gesture or by saying “I’m just an observer.” While committee members of the association and some other visitors to whom I had explained the reason for my presence knew in advance that I was not there to pray, there were others who did not know me and thought, on the contrary, that it was I was there for that reason. While my influence in such an instance is clear, observing it did allow me to ascertain the process by which the men, before praying, consider their surroundings. They check to see if other individuals are looking for a place to pray. I observed this behaviour on many occasions: the lack of space is readily manifest during Friday’s collective prayer as it attracts a great number of practitioners<sup>16</sup>.

The very possibility of observing certain activities is explained by the fact that several members of the association knew precisely what interested me. I was thus invited, by telephone and in an impromptu fashion, to participate in the renovation of the place. While the workers took a break, I was invited to partake in a meal and, together, we ate pizzas in the midst of a room in a state of upheaval. After this episode, the informant who invited me sent me a great number of photographs of the different stages of the renovations. The practitioner’s photographic practice and above all the fact that he sent them to the researcher can certainly be seen as proof of the latter’s influence. These emic photographs, along with other clarifications that I subsequently obtained while exchanging with and observing group members, nonetheless show the extent to which the renovations represented a genuine event in the life of the group.

The final example of my influence on the behaviour of actors in the group concerns the utility of the researcher for the group. While in most cases, the ethnographer produces images for the purposes of his research, it has also come to pass that I was placed in the position of photographer in order to produce images serving the group itself. I was thus invited by a member of the association to take photographs during the farewell of an imam who was officiating among the group for the last time. Thanks to this example, and to countless others that I cannot mention here<sup>17</sup>, one may conclude that the use of photography can be qualified, under certain circumstances, as a legitimate practice within the group itself.

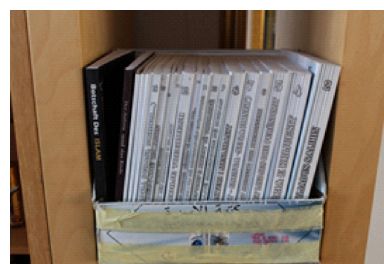
## 2. Reflections on producing photographic data



**PHOTO 1:** View of the building in which the association rents a room of 100m<sup>2</sup>.



**PHOTO 2:** Lectern with inscriptions and a Quran.



**PHOTO 3:** Showcase of booklets placed at the disposition of the users of the mosque.

<sup>16</sup> The surface area of the centre is not always sufficient to contain all the practitioners and, on these occasions, the entrance way can come to serve as a waiting area.

<sup>17</sup> I should mention at this point that the association’s previous president kept an archive containing a great number of photographs taken on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the Albanian cultural centre.

### Photography as a threat to the logic of discretion in the association?

Practicing photography in the midst of a Muslim association poses questions when one remembers that Muslim groups inscribe themselves in a continuum of visibility and invisibility in the public space (Salzbrunn 2019). My research involves writing about the Albanian Islamic cultural centre where I conducted my research, and even reproducing photos of their activities – as I do in this article – thus exposing the inner workings of the group to an outside eye. My task is thus at odds with one of the principle logics of the association, that of “discretion”<sup>18</sup> (Bennani-Chraïbi 2010: 1).

This concern for discretion, guarantee of a certain intimacy, is already apparent from the association’s built environment<sup>19</sup>. While intimacy between religious brothers is not exclusive to Islam<sup>20</sup>, the Islamic cultural centre nonetheless guides and controls impressions (see Goffman 1959: xi) of potential exterior observers. The very existence of the centre, while not hidden, remains discrete. As is shown in photograph 1, few indicators attract the attention of passers-by on the go in public space towards the centre. It is only in advancing in close proximity to the building that one can decode, among other inscriptions, the panels indicating the presence of the centre. Furthermore, the motifs depicting minarets and affixed to the windows of the centre are so discreet that one needs previous knowledge of their existence and to make a deliberate effort if one is to perceive them from the exterior. To paraphrase Ravelli and McMurtrie (2017: 57), the centre has no point of contact with the outside world, such as an easily legible sign designating the centre and indicating “You can make contact with us here.”

This discretion may be a strategy adopted in a tense social climate. In Switzerland, Islam and the presence of Muslims are construed as a “social problem” (Gianni, Giugni and Michel 2015: 9; Schneuwly Purdie and Tunger-Zanetti 2020). In addition, the portrayal of Muslims tends to reproduce a homogenized image emerging from mainstream society, thus exhibiting the reductive and stereotyped terminology of a “total discourse” (Behloul 2009). To this one may add that Swiss media tends to transmit a negative image of Islam<sup>21</sup> (Gianni, Guigni and Michel 2015: 15; Ettinger 2018). Given these circumstances, the group in question has every interest in making a good impression and in taking care not to upset the other occupants of the building, for instance by avoiding noise disturbances and respecting the designated places in the parking lot. In a sense, it is simply about presenting themselves as good neighbours and citizens by not disturbing the peace of the neighbourhood, let alone that of the region. This discretion can again be explained by the association’s ties to a specific region and culture. It thus has little interest in seeking to attract new members: the centre already has its regulars, it is concerned above all with the part of the region’s Albanian population which is faithful and practicing. What’s more, any advertising for events organized by the centre is undertaken principally using posters within the locale, or else simply by word of mouth.

The association is thus greatly concerned with discretion. This implicit concern already informed the way that I conducted my field work, and particularly my use of photography, even before discretion as such became a specific theme of my research. After having approached the association with the idea of conducting a study of its material culture, I began taking photographs during my first visits to the centre. In this early phase, I brought a semi-professional camera, but quickly exchanged this for a smartphone, partly for practical reasons, but also to facilitate blending in with the occupants of the place. To gradually familiarize my hosts to my presence in their association, I at first visited the centre during times when it was empty or scarcely inhabited. When I encountered other men, I introduced myself and my research. It was only much later that I photographed communal activities in the centre.

In accordance with this photographic evolution, the photographs taken during the first months of the study were primarily concerned with the association’s interior design. Yet I perceived this design in a mode that one could describe as an ‘objectification’ of the material agents “in a way that mimics the

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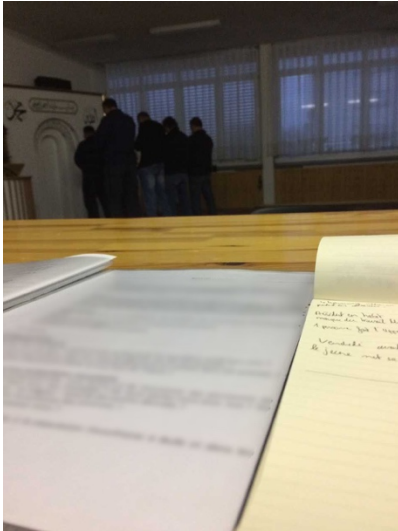
<sup>18</sup> *Entre-soi* in French.

<sup>19</sup> Hence the importance in a visual ethnography of giving time to the analysis of the material environment which, as in my case, makes it possible to bring to light the important logics which generate the conduct of the actors, see Pink (2013: 80ff) et Maresca (1996: 31).

<sup>20</sup> In his PhD, Best (2010) studied the bonding intimacy of Quaker adolescents and notes that the issue of faith alone remains marginal.

<sup>21</sup> This dimension was mentioned many times during my visits to the association. Some contacts told me they appreciated my undertaking because I did not stop at what the media said about Islam but came to visit a mosque to see for myself what this religion was.

objectification of human ‘others’ in conventional ethnographic monographs” (Pink 2006: 66). Rather than wide shots of the different elements in the room, I primarily took close-ups of certain objects (see photos 2 and 3). Such photographs seek to document the artefacts distributed and used in the room rather than account for the interior design in the sense of an environment that is organised and structured by social logics. They are also, even if they are related to legends or explanatory texts, too weak a form of data to study the spatial configuration of the association such as defined in the previous chapter, and thus ultimately to account for the life of the association<sup>22</sup>.



**PHOTO 4:** A photograph ‘stolen’ during prayers?



**PHOTO 5:** The practitioners wait for the Jumu'ah to begin: The imam gives an introductory speech and the men listen more or less attentively.

Though I was comfortable taking photographs of the interior design of the centre when it was empty or little occupied, it was more difficult to photograph activities in which a large number of people participated – especially the Friday prayers. The photographs I produced during such activities are often similar to one another (compare photos 4 and 5): In most cases, I took the photos at the greatest possible distance from the main action, the framing of the images is maladroit and seeks to avoid showing the faces of the actors (photo 4) and it is worth noting that I often found myself installed in the same portion of the environment (photos 4 and 5 are taken from the same side of the room). The analysis of the image, on returning from the field, participates in a critical exercise concerning the status of observer within the group. It reveals my initial difficulty to face the group, to assume my role in the situation; difficulty redoubled because of the restricted surface of the place.

### **The researcher’s reticence to take photographs and the production and circulation of emic images**

The formal characteristics of photography from the early stages of my fieldwork recall the ‘savage’ and ‘profane’ use of the photographic image, as termed by Bajard (2016). If one did not know that the researcher’s presence had been authorized by the committee of the Islamic centre, one could easily imagine that these photographs were ‘stolen’ images. One can identify an operator who is ill at ease with the photographic act and inept in documenting a moment in the life of the association he frequents.

As mentioned above, Richter (2015) notices that the risk of upsetting and intruding on activities is elevated when the space in question is limited. One may extend this observation by attaching it to Goffman’s definition of the situation (mentioned in the first section of this article). In particular,

<sup>22</sup> One solution I’ve adopted is to create photo spreads. They have the advantage of re-assembling photographs of objects to account for certain logics.



Goffman's situation involves each of the actors who co-exist in the same environmental region mutually monitoring the other. This monitoring makes particular use of visual perception.

The space rented by the association is characterized less by 'regions', in Goffman's sense of the term, than by 'portions'. For Goffman (1959: 106), a region of the environment is defined by the fact that a material dispositive obstructs the perception of the actor. In the case of the room rented by the association, it is true that one may speak of regions when one finds oneself in the narrow entryway because one is unable to see and observe what is happening in the rest of the room (and vice versa). Yet once they arrive in the room, each actor's behaviour is evaluated by the other actors co-present in the space, and does so on the basis of the visual register. While I was taking photographs in the main room of the association, I knew that my actions could, at any moment, be observed and evaluated by those who were co-present with me. To be completely frank, I was anxious about being found at fault – but what kind of fault could I be guilty of?

The work of reflection allows the researcher to refrain from projecting his own malaise concerning the photographic act: it is I myself who am ill at ease with capturing images, and not the Muslim actors. All the same, during the first visits, I developed a bias, namely that the actors I was dealing with, precisely because they were Muslim, would necessarily be reluctant to being captured in photographs.<sup>23</sup> I reactivated this belief when orally explaining my use of images. I specified to the group that if any of their faces appeared in one of my shots, it would be blurred. While I was indeed concerned with guaranteeing the anonymity of the actors – according to the ethics of ethnographic fieldwork – I was also troubled by the unconscious belief evoked above. I wanted to reassure the Muslims who were doubtless mistrustful of the reproduction of their faces, particularly when they were engaged in ritual practices.

In observing and analysing my photographs, I noted that their framing attested to my unease. By virtue of its formal characteristics, photography thus served me by drawing my attention to the bias mentioned above. Over time, I observed that the Muslim actors themselves used photography and circulated images using social media platforms whose boundaries more or less corresponded to those of the association. In fact, I realised not only that several men took photographs of themselves (selfies) shortly before the Friday prayers, but also that such images circulated on the platforms, to which I had access for a number of months.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, I was never questioned while taking photographs in the centre, let alone asked to stop. These observations imply that there is a legitimate practice of capturing and circulating images among Muslim groups.

### **The inscription of the researcher/photographer**

After three years of intermittent visits to the Albanian Islamic cultural centre, the photographic data proves that I was typically situated in a very specific way in the centre, as I will now describe.

As one can see in photos four and five, the environmental portion in which I situated myself while taking photographs is on the side-lines of the collective activities, whether during the prayers (photo 4) or during the period of waiting before the Friday prayers (photo 5). Such photographs display the relation between the principal activity undertaken by the actors of the association and a simultaneous but secondary activity, namely that of the production of images as undertaken by the researcher.

One of the primary objects present in this portion on the side is a table ('the famous table', to cite the expression of a man who frequented the Albanian Islamic centre when I asked him to sketch the locale

<sup>23</sup> It is worth noting that, on several occasions when I introduced the subject of my study to third parties, they were surprised that the board of the association had accepted my using photography to produce my data. Does this surprise refer to the fact that the reproduction of images would be likely to harm the collective? Is it rather that the use of photography in an Islamic context is surprising because it would tend to undermine the intimacy of the group during prayers? Or should we identify the belief that Islam forbids the representation of faces?

<sup>24</sup> The circulation of such images, whether depicting the activities of the group or the centre's interior design, testifies to the way social media can facilitate relations between actors who, at times, do not know each other personally, and can be dispersed throughout Switzerland and abroad, on the topic of the impact of social networks on migration process see Dekker and Engbersen (2014); Hiller and Franz (2004) and King and Wood (2001). A certain 'deterritorialisation' of the associational space using these new platforms for communication can be identified (Appadurai 1991). For instance, a WhatsApp group (to which I did not have access) unites several members of the association and it is by means of this channel that information circulates. Mutually feeding off of each other, the circulation of images on these platforms demonstrates the dynamism of certain associations as well as the establishment of new places of prayer.

on a piece of white paper). There are generally chairs positioned around the table. Nearby, some shelving has been installed in order to display a series of trophies. These testify to the group's victory in football tournaments organised by an association for Muslim youth. On the other side, a coffee machine and a beverage cooler have been placed in a sort of cubby hole. To put it simply, the arrangement of this portion of the environment clearly materialises another logic than that of discretion as mentioned above. Instead, this arrangement testifies to a logic that I refer to as conviviality. This term is justified because the forms it generates testify to those relations and interactions amongst actors who consider themselves as partners in their common activities and as 'brothers in religion'. The arrangement of this portion on the side-lines allows the users of the space to settle in around the table to chat, drink a coffee or read.

It is from this portion on the sidelines that I spontaneously positioned myself, time after time, to observe the activities of the group. During one of my first visits to the centre, a person in charge asked me to be seated in this portion, and it was here that I conducted interviews with group members. This 'spontaneous' and 'sudden' positioning was at times influenced by the number of people visiting the room. As the Friday prayers attracted a great number of people, I identified three portions which were available to me: the usual portion on the side where I tried to take up as little space as possible, a space between the cooler and the coffee machine indicated above, or else the entrance way where the ablutions are performed and where the visitors arrange their shoes on shelves before entering the room.

Taking photos of a Muslim associational space, beyond all individual or collective activity, allows the researcher to document the organisation of the room, whether on the level of its environmental forms (interior design) or of the situations there produced (placement and regrouping of the actors in the room, as well as production, recognition and maintenance of the forms which establish existing regions or portions – a front side, a back side, a side-line etc. – in relation to a principal course of action). Photography also allows for a materialisation of the distinctions between actors in copresence: the Muslim actors who interact together to make religion and interact with a divine entity and, at a distance, the researcher who observes them and photographs the situation.

I will now return to the two logics that have been highlighted until now: discretion and conviviality. While the logic of discretion enables the group to manage the impression they might make on outside observers, and thus to select what can or cannot be seen of the centre by such observers, the logic of conviviality concerns moments when men can share an instant around the table, drinking a coffee of chatting or while they stand by waiting for the prayers to start.<sup>25</sup> To be clear, the logic of conviviality does not only concern Muslim actors. It also concerns visitors from the outside, as is the case of the photographer-observer. As I have described, it was precisely in the environmental portion attached to the 'famous table' that I placed myself – even though it is folded up and put away before the prayers in order to optimize the space dedicated to the ritual.

While a principle action like prayer is underway, the observer sees themselves relegated to a rear portion representing, in some sense, the 'wings' of the space. From this position – and according to Goffman's definition – he undergoes less risk of putting the definition of the situation in question. The border between the portion dedicated to prayer and that governed by the logic of conviviality symbolically separates the practitioners from the observer. It also duplicates the general distinction between inside/outside, coupled with that of insider/outsider and materialized through diverse arrangements: the windows, the threshold of the association, the corridor for the ablutions<sup>26</sup>. Taking photos from the wings, if it is to breach this symbolic frontier, necessitates complex procedures as the gaze of the researcher rests on an environmental portion and its activities which are not addressed to them. The portion dedicated to conviviality must thus not be understood as designated uniquely to Muslim actors, but rather as an environmental portion where an exterior observer can be situated without upsetting the main course of action.

Here, one begins to perceive the interest in studying not only material culture, but also the question of the social production of space. Following the formal perspective that photography invites one to adopt, it becomes simpler to elucidate the complexity of a room (even if its dimensions are limited to 100m<sup>2</sup>!)

<sup>25</sup> In spatial organization, the challenge for the group is therefore first to delimit a portion of space (the logic of discretion) and then, through specific practices, to establish relationships that promote affective ties with this portion of space and the other individuals who occupy it (the logic of conviviality), on this topic see Segaud (2010: 72).

<sup>26</sup> Rather than opposing them, these two distinctions are to be understood as a process of negotiation between two spatial portions and states. This is the very idea of the 'threshold' as thematized by Segaud (2010: 133) when she speaks of a zone that hosts interactions between individuals.

in the way it is used by actors, and notably by those who are invested in establishing and experiencing a relation with the divine. The following section of this article returns to the pertinence of using photography for understanding Islam as an ‘ordinary religion’.

### 3. Analysing the ordinary forms of Islam through the use of photography *A matter of details...*

Beyond using photography in order to study artefacts and techniques, social scientists have long linked the photographic procedure to their study of the sequences and gestures, organizing practices, and particularly rituals. A classical example of this tendency can be seen in the work *Balinese Character* by Bateson and Mead (1942) which concludes with photographic work on rites of passage. The use of photography was then timidly taken up by the study of religion. Following a study conducted in Great Britain, Pye (1977) published an account containing several remarks on the ways that photography could serve as an instrument in this field: according to him, photography assists in defining the questions of the study (photographic work as a focus for the definition of research questions) and serves as preparation and orientation for the fieldwork subsequently undertaken. Photography can be further employed as “an aid for recalling observations” and is particularly pertinent for taking inventory, studying sequences of activities (as in the study of ritual practices) and, finally, as an “aid to interviewing technique”. While one could further refine and discuss the different elements of this list, for our purposes, it is enough to show how the use of photography can be beneficial during all research stages, as is noted, incidentally, by Williams (2015: 192).

Photography, as with any other kind of data, is a construct of the researcher serving to illustrate the social world and thus needs to be inserted in an analytic framework (Emmison and Smith 2000). Evident as this may seem, one should emphasize that using photographic data to study religion commits the researcher to apprehending certain aspects of their object to the detriment of others. In particular, a microsociological approach to religion is appropriate to photography because it commits the researcher to extracting as many details as possible from the situation which has been photographed.

The anthropologist Albert Piette has indicated on many occasions (Piette 1992; 1993; 2007; 2020) that photography is a “specific kind of knowledge”. One argument for the pertinence of photography in capturing and analysing social situations rests on its indexical character: a photo quite simply shows what has been (Piette 2007: 25)<sup>27</sup>. The anthropologist references Roland Barthes’ reflections on photography, notably citing the phrase “there, that’s it, that’s how it is!” (Barthes 1980: 15-16)<sup>28</sup>. Furthermore, Piette takes up Barthes’ distinction between the *studium* (the theme of a photograph, its general interest) and the *punctum*, a detail or a supplement which deranges the *studium*. This encourages one to read social life while considering “the effect of the particular in the general or of the potential in the actual” (Piette 2020: 192)<sup>29</sup>. Consequently, photography renders visible those elements of a situation which were already there but which one failed to observe – this brings details to the foreground in a particular way, as the scholar of the social world should strive to do. According to him, the study of the social should above all be an affair of identifying and analysing remainders, thus focusing the study not on the homogeneity of the social – as do many researchers – but on ruptures, things that do not seem pertinent to the unity of the situation under analysis (Piette 1996: 52).

Allow me to reflect a little further on Piette’s critique of a tendency he identifies in the social sciences, namely the particular attention that is brought to bear on the homogeneity of the social world (Piette 2020). To illustrate this critique<sup>30</sup>, I will take up two specific claims made by Piette, one of which deals with cultural anthropology, and the second with microsociology. He points to the way cultural anthropologists sometimes use description to illustrate the specific tonality of a given culture: “The aim is to present the tone of a culture. What mediates between the singularity of a ritual or some other activity and the tone of the culture is the idea of ‘homogeneity’ or ‘shared identity’ within one community of

<sup>27</sup> Let us note here that Piette emphasizes the produced character of the photographic image, thus refusing to think the image apart from its relation to the observer-photographer (Piette 2020: 193).

<sup>28</sup> Translation by the author.

<sup>29</sup> Translation by the author.

<sup>30</sup> My aim here is not to comment on these criticisms. Some, such as Olivier de Sardan (2008: 150) have rejected this vision as a widely caricatured ethnological model. I mention them in order to come to the notion that will occupy us later, that of ‘ordinary religion’, as theorized by Piette.

people who respect each other, anchored to a circumscribed location” (Piette 2015: 24). The second critique concerns Goffman’s microsociology. While recognizing its potential to account for the details of a situation, Piette nonetheless claims that these details are nonetheless reintegrated in the play of pertinence, impertinence and strategy (Piette 2020: 141). He writes: “The interaction is first regarded as a set of relevant, meaningful signs, acceptable to other participants, providing a starting point for the next message. Second, the interaction is based on mutual acceptance. Against the backdrop of existing information that enables the participants to predict other people’s behaviour and behave in such a way as to prompt a desired behaviour, and also learn what is expected of them, the action’s guiding lines determine the important points of ‘working consensus’.” (Piette 2015: 28)

Piette’s work on ordinary religion has dealt with Catholicism in France, but also on the practices of so-called ‘secular’ religions. One example of a photographic analysis of religion in his work can be found in Piette (1996). Concentrating on the ordination of a catholic deacon, and subsequently on the consecration of a protestant pastor, Piette explains that he wishes to defend an approach based on close-up observation of reality. He does so through the use of photography by referring to details that do not seem relevant to the unity of the situation being analysed and thus nearly irretrievable as the actors themselves will rapidly forget them. Using these images and the context in which they were captured, Piette presents the persons therein depicted, provides some excerpts of dialogue, and inserts the images in the chronology of their situation.

Although the built environment is not a privileged point of entry for Piette’s photography and situational analysis – this is one of the points which distinguishes his research from my own – he notices the agency of objects that inform (such as a brochure) or directly incite action. In order to stay as close as possible to the situation and to avoid the risk of over-interpretation, Piette does not evoke the objects with regard to a symbolic register. Instead, it is a matter of noting “their function of coordination for the action” (Piette 1996: 60). On the one hand, the anthropologist thus analyses the situation’s context and the way in which the appearance of the frame where the action occurs is constructed. On the other hand, he analyses the precise way a work space is constructed using a set of material resources that aid in orienting actions and by realigning behaviours on the basis of spatial constraints. Through this example, one sees, when using photography to analyse a situation, one cannot spare oneself the effort of minutely describing and observing the built environment and the role it plays in the course of human actions. This is because photography shows one the spatial configurations in which human entities and their material resources are inscribed through the course of action.

### ***Islam as an ordinary religion***

In the case of religious rituals, viewing objects as ‘coordinators of action’ is a concrete example of apprehending religion in its ordinary dimensions. For Piette, it is always a question of showing how the most banal aspects participate in the fabrication of the religious. He thus proposes a “secularised reading” of ritual (Piette 1996: 78). This approach seeks to ‘bring ritual down to Earth’ in order to avoid the over-interpretative effect that appears, according to him, in the

description of sequences of events according to a textual ideality that is programmed and organised, functional valorisation of ritual as if it needed something of the order of intention and specific direction, association of gestures and objects to a symbolic dimension referring beyond the ritual itself (Piette 1997: 34)<sup>31</sup>.

He proceeds by deconstructing the three fundamental concepts of ethno-sociology of religion: i. ritual is taken as a set of codified gestures within a given framework, ii. belief, for its part, is studied in its concrete manifestations, i.e. in situations (Piette speaks of “belief in act”) and, iii.

the ‘symbol’ I see as one object among others with the regulative role in coordinating interactions and capable of launching – in a way that is punctual, non-necessary, and not generalised by the individuals participating in the situation – a cognitive and/or affective process of focalisation-evocation (Piette 1997: 35).

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<sup>31</sup> Translation by the author.

Ordinary religion is the result of a certain approach to observing, describing and analysing ‘the fabrication of the religious’ which does not stop at the commonalities of practitioners – their shared beliefs and practices – or at the supposed consensus established in the definition of the situation. Piette defines ordinary religion using three focal points: i. anodyne and contingent activities which construct and stabilize the fact of religion; ii. moments of particular emptiness, absences, pauses when the wings are highlighted in opposition to the strong moments in whose succession they are inserted and iii. gestures, actors and objects which are of secondary importance although they nonetheless performed simultaneously and in the copresence of the focalized sequence of action (Piette 2003: 2).

Studying the spatial configuration of a Muslim association through the use of photography commits me to observing and describing the ordinary forms of Islam such as they are experienced in a local Muslim association. Which material arrangements constitute the built environment? How do the resources available in this environment participate in organizing the behaviours that occur there and what new behaviours emerge, spatially, from this usage of the place? To answer these questions, one must observe concrete situations in those aspects which are as banal as they are strategic for the environmental organisation: thresholds which may or may not be materialized by doors facilitating the passage between an exterior and an interior or to determine, within the interior, the place of an entity coming from the exterior; a zone of conviviality materialized by a table and chairs. Finally, the forms that emerge here testify to the borders, interweavings and even confrontations that exist between different social logics that generate the associational space at hand.

The configuration of the associational space is the product of a certain reading undertaken by the researcher through the use of photography and referring back to their experiences in the field. This research object and the reading it informs allow the researcher to account for its contours and what they testify about Islam as it happens, as it is being expressed by actors whose behaviour can correspond more or less to those logics which organize the built environment of the Muslim association, more or less aligned to communitarian logics. Thus, photograph five presents us with a main scene: the Imam, dressed in white, preaches while his congregation listens. The person of the Imam is situated in a portion of the environment containing the *mihrab* which, in being illuminated, indicates the direction where the practitioners should orient themselves. Nonetheless, the photograph also exhibits forms of distracted listening: a man, leaning on his left arm, scratches his ear with his right hand; another is busy with the cell phone that he holds in front of him (is he still listening to the Imam? Does he even understand Albanian, the language in which the imam is speaking?); yet a further directs his attention to the regions for entry and ablutions, etc. It is easy to see that the first phase of the Friday prayers, notably the arrival of the congregation while the Imam preaches, involves as ordinary as complex configurations.

## Conclusion

At the end of this article, the reader may ask: where is God - the divine entity - in this Muslim space? And what about the beliefs of individuals? I have intentionally addressed only two of the most ordinary social logics in the spatial configuration of the Albanian Islamic cultural centre in which I conducted my fieldwork, namely the logics of discretion and conviviality. Indeed, I consider it important to take some distance from the concept of belief in view of a (re)materialized study of religion (see in this regard Bräunlein 2016; Houtman and Meyer 2012). Unless it is studied in terms of ‘belief in action’ as does Piette, the concept of belief seems tricky to examine closely from a microsociological perspective. Moreover, it seems fundamental to question the places in which actors dealing with religion believe, in the manner of Kerestetzki (2018). Thus, I have not returned in this article to a third logic - studied in my doctoral research - concerning the "relationship to God." What I can say, however, is that this third logic is indissociable from the other two, since before experiencing a relationship with God, at the moment of the ritual of prayer for example, the actors – particularly in the case of an association – still have to set up a place that makes it possible, and do so by outfitting this place with specific material resources.

Specifically devoted to the use of photography in my research, this article has listed some issues related to this subject. Photography is an appropriate tool for studying the spatial configuration of a collective since it allows not only a close examination of the built environment of the social group but also, from a reading of the photographic images informed by the experiences of the field, the new forms that emerge as a result of the practitioners’ activities.

In my case, photography was also a tool that allowed me to take a critical distance. If the researcher does not appear on the image, they are nonetheless part of the situation at the time of the shot. Their situation in an environmental portion - negotiated with the actors in co-presence - in other words their use and experience of the space, are parameters contributing to the very constitution of their research object. And it is thanks to photography that the researcher gains an insight into the mode of apprehension of the group, the place from which he observed the group and its practices. It is of course a matter of questioning the reasons for this inscription and the type of images taken. While one is quick to think of the risks of undermining, through the use of photography, a particular intimacy that characterizes activities in a religious context, examining the photographs and subsequently reflecting on their production revealed to me that the problem or reluctance to take images was hardly based on the Muslim actors but more on my own perspectives and fears with regard to the situations observed.

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