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Dismantling Religious Boundaries by Sharing the *Baraka* through Pilgrimages in Lebanon

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ABSTRACT

This paper will explore the way in which religious votive pilgrimages affect (and increase) the permeability of the frontiers between religions in Lebanon. In Lebanon today, the worship of saints captures the essence of Christian as well as Muslim devotion, and has done so for centuries. This paper will particularly focus on individual votive visits to saints, which are most often shared by different communities. Popular pilgrimages have spread beyond their orthodox Christian and Muslim forms, demonstrating the people's piety and their need to build a relationship between their daily existence, their perceived problems and 'eternity'. In contrast with the codified religiosity of the mosque and the church, believers have developed a far less constrained religiosity, which some characterize as "popular" through the "ziyârât" (visits to religious sites, to saints). These visits and rituals show a significant degree of porousness within and between religions.

Sublimation of social references is observed through shared pilgrimages; gender, social class and religion have no place in saint worship and thus do not play any role in the achievement or success of the vow. In Lebanon, saint worship and shared pilgrimages have contributed to maintaining a dialogue amongst the faithful even during some of the most difficult moments of the war. Pilgrims meet and share in a cordial atmosphere, without artifice, often far from the tension and anxiety of the Lebanese reality. Borders and boundaries between religions can disappear for the time of a visit, a *ziyârâ*, but once back home pilgrims can choose to recreate frontiers or to maintain the dialogue with the "other".

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Dismantling religious boundaries by sharing the Baraka through pilgrimages in Lebanon

In Lebanon, an abundance of oratories, churches, chapels, monasteries, mosques, maqâms and mazars testify to the importance of the worship of Christian and Muslim saints in local culture. Members of different religions and denominations have long lived intermingled here and the history of this country is characterized by traffics, contacts and borrowings.

Popular pilgrimages have spread beyond their official Christian and Muslim forms in Lebanon, demonstrating the population's piety, and their need to create a relationship between their daily existence, their problems and "the divine"; Muslims, Christians, Druze and even Buddhists¹ take part in religious rituals. Saint worship and shared pilgrimages seem to have contributed to maintaining a "dialogue of the faithful", even between different religious groups, which is based upon shared figures of sainthood. Such dialogue was still observed even during some of the most challenging moments of the Lebanese War. Although co-existence between different Lebanese religious communities over the course of history has been marked by repeatedly bloody conflicts, belief in the concept of "living together" ("Al aaych al-mushtarak") has never been lost; the results of fieldwork conducted by Kanafani Zahar (2004) in the Lebanese village of Hsoun demonstrates the applicability of this concept to the Lebanese context.

This article is based on the results of fieldwork conducted over the course of a decade as part of the research for my thesis in religious anthropology. My research surveys Christian and Muslim religious sites visited by faithful from all denominations. In the course of my investigations, and in the qualitative analysis of the data I collected,² it emerged that most of the devotional practices observed at the holy sites are shared by both Christian and Muslim communities. Pilgrimages are not bound to include only those journeys

¹ In Lebanon, the large community of working-women coming from Asian countries do visit religious sites and practice votive rituals toward local saints.

² For this field work we can count about 200 days of participant observation and 450 interviews over more than 30 religious sites, Christians and Muslims, in different regions in Lebanon.

towards great sanctuaries, but can also include walks toward small local churches or oratories, and over the course of my research, I observed locally oriented interfaith practices that occurred in villages, small country towns, and the surrounding territory.

The article will explore the permeability of the frontiers between religions in Lebanon through votive pilgrimages, focusing particularly on individual votive visits to saints, which are most often shared by different communities. In contrast with the codified religiosity of the mosque and church, many believers have developed a less constraining religiosity, which some characterize as “popular” through the “*ziyârât*” (visits to religious sites, to saints). These visits and rituals show a significant degree of porousness within and between religions. Albera (2005; 2008; 2009) explored this perspective throughout the Mediterranean area describing several situations that demonstrate such cross religious practices. He documented numerous cases of devotional mixing, and quoted examples of tendencies toward interreligious crossing in the Mediterranean region.

Many religious officials in both Christianity and Islam heavily criticize such rituals, and try to preach against their development. Some parties characterize these practices as “popular” or “vulgar”, with others attributing them to “folk religion” or superstition. Gellner (1969) would identify such distinctions within the framework of the socio-anthropological concept of “great religion” versus “little tradition”. Regardless of such condemnations by religious leaders, the observations demonstrate the importance of the *ziyârât* in Lebanese culture, and are indicative of the development of rituals related to votive pilgrimages. What strikes me about my observations is the piety of the believers and the sincerity of their beliefs in the potency of these practices.

Sublimation of social references is observed through shared pilgrimages; gender, social class and religion have no place in saint worship and thus do not play any role in the achievement or success of the vow. This study will attempt to understand to what extent these devotional practices deviate from the canons of institutionalized religions. How do devotees look at these

overlapping forms of worship? Do these rituals and beliefs, in attracting the followers of all denominations, really open a gate to an interreligious dialogue?

Sharing saints: toward shared religious sanctuaries

The study revealed two broad categories, with numerous sub-types of shared saints: on the one hand, “recognized” saints who are venerated by Christians and Muslims and, on the other hand, saints who are exclusively Christian or Muslim, but are venerated by the faithful of both communities.

The first category includes the saints “recognized” and venerated by both communities, with the sacred figure of the Virgin Mary (Saydeh Maryam, Sitna Mariam) at the top of the list. The Virgin Mary occupies a prominent and unique place within Christian and Muslim religions; a very important devotion is reserved for her in the Middle East and particularly in Lebanon.³ Mary can thus be considered an excellent source of dialogue between Christians and Muslims and a symbol of national unity (Dousse, 2005, pp. 9-10). She is essentially venerated in Islam, being the only woman whose name appears 34 times in the Koran, and she is also a central figure in two Suras of the Koran (she is the only female figure to be mentioned there by name). Despite being venerated by both communities, most of the worship sites devoted to the Virgin Mary are Christian (there are more than 900 religious sites dedicated to her in Lebanon). Christian villages dedicate shrines, churches, chapels and oratories to her, and many girls are named Marie, Myriam, Maria, and other variations on the Virgin’s moniker. Numerous of these Christian sanctuaries are visited by faithful from different denominations and the most visited sanctuary in Lebanon, visited equally by Christian and Muslims, is dedicated to Our Lady of Lebanon in Harissa. Such shared holy sites can be related to a miracle or an apparition of the Virgin Mary, such as Saydet Beshouat (Bekaa

³ Every year since 2007 on the 25th of March, the association “Together around Mary, Our Lady” celebrates the Feast of Annunciation. This celebration is attended by both Christian and Muslim faithful, as well as religious leaders. The Feast of Annunciation marks the visit of the Angel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary, during which he informed her that she will carry a blessed child. A joint celebration is organized at the College of Our Lady of Jamhour. The Feast of the Annunciation was first recognized as a National Holiday by the Lebanese government on the 20th of February 2010.

Valley) and Saydet El Nourieh (North Lebanon), and they can also be visited for specific requests particularly related to motherhood, like Saydet El Bzaz (Our lady of the Breast). Mazar Al Saydeh in S'aaydeh (located on the road to Beshouat in the Bekaa valley) seems to be the only Muslim Shiite site dedicated to the Virgin in Lebanon. It is also interesting to observe that the holy maqâm of Nabi Omran, in Qleileh (South Sour/Tyre), known as the father of the Virgin Mary in the Muslim tradition, is a shared religious site in south Lebanon.

A second sub-group of saints brings together biblical prophets. It is evident that biblical figures could be common referents for the faithful of Jews, Christians and Muslims, who share a prophetic heritage. If the Koran ignores certain major biblical prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah), it mentions numerous others unknown to Christians (Sâlih, Chaïb). Such shared prophetic heritage means that, in the sanctuaries of the biblical prophets, followers of the different religions converge and meet. Of all the biblical saints, worship sites dedicated to St Elijah are by far the most prevalent, with 262 shrines in Lebanon devoted to him. More than a dozen Muslim shrines in Lebanon are also dedicated to him under the name of Nabi Ayla or Nabi Yassine, such as the little mosque of Ablah, the maqâm Nabi Elias in Qabb Elias, and so on. The worship of biblical prophets among Muslims in Lebanon is more important than among Christians, with numerous worship sites such as the Shiite maqâm Nabi Younes (the prophet Jonas) in Jiyeh (south Beirut), the Druze maqâm Nabi Ayoub (the prophet Job) in Niha El Chouf, the Sunni maqâm Nabi Yoush'a (the prophet Josua) in Minieh (North Lebanon)... Importantly, many Christians also visit these shrines, and share with Muslims a special devotion for these prophets.

The third sub-group is made up of saints claimed by both communities, but under different names; more specifically, these are Christian saints to which exist counterparts in the Islamic tradition. These figures can be designated as transreligious personages who are effectively interchangeable. Saint George (Mar Jiryès), or Al Khodr (also associated and occasionally identified as Saint Elijah) is universally renowned and venerated by Christians, Muslims and

Druze alike. Marvelous legends, transported to Europe, tell of his heroic actions and his passion. The legend of 'Saint George and the dragon' has been recounted from generation to generation across the globe and appears in many different forms. The Christian Church classifies him in the category of military saints, and he is almost always represented in a warrior outfit on his horse. We even found some representation of his icon in Muslim shrines including the Druze maqâm of Nabi Baheddine in Sharon or his maqâm in Sarafand. Saint George is the "mega-martyr", patron saint of Beirut, whose name varies in Arabic: Al Qedis Jirjis, Jerios, Jourios, Jawarjios, Jorjos, Djirjis, Jirjis, Kevork among Armenians, and Korkis among the Syriacs. Saint George can be identified with the Koranic figure of Al-Khadir, or "the green man," who is also known as Khidr, Khader, Hadir, Hizir etc. Although not mentioned by name in the Koran, he is identified with the Servant of God, who accompanies Moses in Sura XVIII; despite scarce mention in the Koran, Al-Khadir enjoys great popularity. After the Virgin Mary, it is Saint George's name which is associated with the greatest number of worship sites in Lebanon, with approximately 350 Christian sites (churches, cathedrals, convents, schools, chapels, grottos, and so forth) and about twenty Muslim sites, to name a few: maqâm Al Khodr in Sarafand (South Lebanon), maqâm Al Khodr in Ain Arab. Saint Peter (Mar Boutros), or Sham'oun, Semaan, is another saint who could be placed in this category. He is a martyr prophet mentioned in several parts of the Gospel. With a few disciples, he covered the provinces of the Middle East - from Syria to Asia Minor - and evangelized them. In some cities of the Lebanese coast, he preached, converted, healed the sick and assigned bishops. About forty churches, monasteries and schools are dedicated to him, and some of these shrines are associated to Saint Paul's name. Some of these Christian sanctuaries are shared, like the cave-chapel in the cliff of Akoura village, and there is also an important shared Shiite maqâm dedicated to Saint Peter in Chamaa in South Lebanon (maqâm Sham'oun El Safa) where he is said to have preached.

The second major category includes saints classified exclusively as Christian or Muslim saints but which are venerated by believers of all religious backgrounds. Hence we see that some religious overlaps appear under the

patronage of holy figures that unequivocally belong to one religion. The devotion reserved for Lebanese Christian Maronite saints - Saint Charbel, Saint Rafqa and Saint Hardini - has become so intense that they appear to have become patron saints of the entire country. The devotion and fervor that countless crowds have expressed towards them have preceded official canonizations in 1977, 2001 and 2004. They have become intercessors and defenders of all Lebanese communities and its national symbols. They are considered healing “generalist” saints, accomplishing all kinds of miracles and remedying all sorts of situations. Their worship sites are the most visited in Lebanon and people come from afar to beseech them. In Annaya, the sanctuary of Saint Charbel is the most visited religious site after Our Lady of Lebanon in Harissa and is visited almost equally by Christians and Muslims. In the second subgroup we can count Saints with therapeutic virtues, known as healing saints or thaumaturgies to which specific powers and virtues have been attributed; they are numerous in all of the communities. One saint can accumulate several specialties on his or her own, including therapeutic virtues, trade, protection, and so on. In Lebanon, there are a whole series of saints qualified as “specialized” healing saints by both Christians and Muslims alike. Among them are “ophthalmologists”, such as Mar Nohra (St. Light); “orthopedic specialists”, such as Mar Doumit; and oto-rhino-laryngologists, such as Mar Adna (the slave with the pierced ear). Others include Nabi Barri in Haytla who is a Muslim saint specializing in warts, and Immam El Ouzai’ who is known for healing or relieving rheumatism.

Studying Oriental saints as Vauchez (1966) did, indicates the extent to which Christian and Muslim saints can have sometimes similar life paths. The connection between the lives of these saints is often troubling, even if their status is different according to the two religions, and the similarities are striking. In Lebanon, a comparative approach to analyzing the lives of saints reveals very significant and unsuspected convergences. The cases of St. Marina (a Maronite Christian saint who lived in the Qadisha valley) and Sitt Shaawana (a Druze saint who lived in the Aammiq-Bekaa region), which testify to this rapprochement, have been particularly retained in memory.

Sharing rituals: Same devotional practices for the same motivations

Each sanctuary proposes a series of praying initiatives to the faithful. Several rituals may overlap, follow, and be organized to make up a single votive approach, or the framework for the same pilgrimage. Often, a main rite will be associated with other ritual practices, which crystallize in order to create an ambiance favorable to the fulfillment of the wish.

The majority of the described rituals are practiced in Christian and Muslim sites, and by devotees from both communities. From another side, very few rituals are exclusive to one denomination and yet only observed in sites related to a single faith community. In numerous Christian sites of worship, for example, pilgrims try to glue one or several coins on the walls of the sanctuary or church or onto icons. The pilgrim concentrates and expresses his or her wish by pressing hard on the coin; it is considered a good omen if the coin sticks. Pilgrims who visit the church of Saydeh in Ashrafiyeh try to glue coins to the glass of the miraculous icon of the Virgin. In Mar Charbel in Annaya they try to glue coins to the marble plate on the back of Saint Charbel's tomb. Spreading perfume ('itr) in or around a holy place and offering salt are practices much more typical of Muslims. Muslims also frequently seal their vows by placing a padlock on (or in) the vicinity of a saint's tomb.⁴ Muslims try to "chain" their vow to the saint, so that he will remember to fulfill it. If the vow is fulfilled the devotees unlock the padlock and remove it from the tomb. The rite of wearing a saint's clothing is a priori a Christian rite. It is rare that Muslims take part in it, fearing the "critical" gaze of "the other," as this rite forces the pilgrim to openly display his votive intentions.

The following large typology of shared rituals we propose is based on the "devotee's" action and not on the objects, the elements or the symbols that he will eventually use. These rites aim to establish, maintain and seal communication between people and saints, and the faithful will take advantage of any means available to them in order to maximize their chances

⁴ This practice is observed in countries around the world on secular sites such as bridges (i.e. in Moscow or Paris): lovers lock a padlock to the railing and throw away the key as a symbol of their eternal unity.

of success for their wish. All the rituals mentioned below are practiced by faithful from all the denominations.

The most basic ritual is the walk towards the worship site, which contains different elements: the distance walked, the circuit's difficulty level (path, route, stairs, etc.) and the means of movement: bare feet, on knees, in a wheelchair, on crutches, and so on. Kneeling, lighting one or several candles, burning incense (bakhour), kissing and touching tombs, statues, and walls of the holy place are simple shared ritual gestures, and are common practices among both Christians and Muslims. These are often the rituals parallel to the main rite. The ambiance that these pilgrims are trying to create aims for connection with the human senses, such as touch, smell, hearing, sight. The prayers accompanying the uttering of the vow vary greatly. The great majority of Christian or Muslim saints have special prayers (salat or ziyârat) attributed to them. The faithful thus recite these prayers before formulating their personal wish. Offerings or "ex-votos" are presented at the moment of the wish-making or to thank the saint. The offerings can take different forms; we can define two major types of ex-votos: the valuable offerings to ask for a favour or to thank for a favour as a "down-payment" or "payment", and the symbolic ex-votos such as leaving fragments of clothing, fabric or beads, elastics, handkerchiefs or photos at the shrine.

Almost all pilgrims bring back something from the worship site with them, something with the baraka or "sacredness" of the place (soil, water, a piece of cloth, tree or plant leaves, pieces of bark or roots, etc.); they invariably want to maintain their relationship with the saint and make it last. In some religious sites (especially in Christian sites) counters are at the disposal of the devotees to provide them with oil and incense, such as the counter in Our Lady of Lebanon, Harissa, and at the sanctuary of Saint Charbel in Annaya. In Muslim sites, it is commonly the guardian of the holy place that provides visitors with oil and incense; or in some cases the pilgrims serve themselves at the sanctuary from offerings of others.

From antiquity till nowadays, in thousands of pilgrimages across the world, water rituals have held a very important place. Water is perceived to heal, rejuvenate youth, ensure life, purify and regenerate because it dissolves and eliminates impurities. In the maqâm of Nabi Najjoun (Bekaa Valley) there is a basin where the level of the water never varies whether in summer or winter-time. This water is considered miraculous and the faithful come from afar to drink it or use it for ablutions. At the oratory of Mar Jiryes (St George) Al Khodr Batyieh, Sarba, the water of the cave is considered miraculous, and pilgrims can proceed to perform ablutions or to dive with their entire body into the water.

The circumambulation rite (taouaf, toufan, tatouaf), which is characteristic of certain places in the context of votive pilgrimages, consists of circling a certain number of times around a worship site, a tomb, a darih,⁵ a stalagmite or a tree. Multiple examples of this ritual are noted among Christians as well as Muslims. At the majority of Muslim worship sites, pilgrims make a systematic procession around the saint's tomb (the darîh), once, three or seven times counter-clockwise while reciting, thereby reenacting the Mecca "tawâf". In Mar Bandilèymoun in Bijdarfil, the rite followed by childless women consists of turning three times around the church accompanied by both a still single and virgin woman and another who has had several children. In Mar Sassine (Saint Sisinus in Beit Mery), the rite consists of a woman passing three times under the roots of the oak tree in the church square.

The incubation rite ("laylat El Istikhara"), a practice that still exists, consists of sleeping - sometimes for several nights and in very precarious conditions - in such places as the actual square of the worship site, in front of the sanctuary's door, on the ground, in the sacred interior, or in other unusual spots in order to soak up the "baraka" from the saint's blessing. Up until the 1950s, it was not only the faithful who slept at these sites, farmers and shepherds were also known to place sick livestock at the sites. The intake of a "remedy" from the worship site can have several different forms. Sometimes the pilgrim swallows

⁵ The "Darih" is the tomb of the saint but in some cases the tomb can be only symbolic and indicates a sacred presence.

directly, something from the holy place (sand or oil for example) and sometimes he takes the time to “cook” a “remedy” at the shrine or at home. Some devotees can swallow a piece of cotton soaked in blessed oil or a piece of communion bread soaked in sacred water from a miraculous cave or some sand collected around the maqâm mixed with blessed water. Some women choose to boil the sacred water with herbs, tree leaves or pieces of bark and drink it for the baraka.

In numerous Christian or Muslim worship sites in Lebanon, the existence of a sacred stone is notable (Maqâm El Ouzai', Mar Jiryès Amshit, Mar Antonios Qoshaya, and Saydet Beshouat, amongst others). These are called “Mahdaleh” by some or simply “El Hajar” (the stone), and are considered to have therapeutic virtues if rubbed on the injured part of the body. The visitors rub the afflicted part of their body with the stone as a form of “dry ablution”. Anointing with oil is an age-old tradition. Blessed oil is mostly distributed at Christian worship sites, but it is also sometimes found at Muslim worship sites, often offered by the faithful themselves. In the majority of cases, it is presented to the faithful on pieces of cotton in small sachets or flasks. Wearing a cloth belt is as common a practice for Christians as it is for Muslims, but it is only the Christian sites of worship that offer pilgrims cotton belts blessed beforehand by priests. Some Muslim sites provide visitors with holy cotton belts but Muslims also use the Christian ones or make their own at home or at the worship site, using, for example, pieces of the sitar (green cloth covering a saint's tomb). Christian and Muslim worshippers create and wear amulets (dkhireh, hijab, hjab). These amulets can be worn by the faithful on their clothing, kept in their home, on their pillow or in their car. They can be made by devotees or bought at the shrine. Sacrifice is an ancient ritual that has been practiced by Christians and Muslims for centuries; all recent documented cases of sacrifice involve a domestic animal, most specifically a sheep. Two kinds of sacrifice have been observed: a sacrifice at home or in the surroundings of the pilgrim's home; and a sacrifice at the site of worship.

The "Baraka" in the heart of the rituals

Encyclopedia and dictionary definitions tend to associate the word 'baraka' with Islam, but in the Arab countries, and in Lebanon specifically, the term "baraka" is used by Christians and Muslims alike to denote the divine blessing, the miraculous force of grace sent by the divine; it symbolizes the connection between the faithful and God. It is one of the most frequent terms that devotees and religious personnel mentioned while visiting shrines. Christians and Muslims believe that saints and prophets receive particular barakat (plural of baraka) and have the ability to perform miracles ('Aja'eb and Karamat), such as healing the sick, thought reading and so forth, and that they transmit the baraka for protection or success. This force can help the faithful in their everyday lives or in exceptional situations.

The concept of baraka is central to the ziyarat, pilgrimages to shrines. The saints and their shrines are a source of graces and benedictions and this is transmitted to ordinary people. The physical contact with the shrine and the tomb of the saint (Darih) emits the baraka. Pilgrims from all religious communities consider the baraka to have a positive effect. The faithful look at it asking for protection in their daily lives or for help in exceptionally difficult situations. People visit holy places in order to obtain graces, in order to make vows or fulfill them. To maximize the chances of a wish being granted, the baraka must be obtained. In Syria, as in Lebanon, the transmission of the baraka is at the heart of shared ritual actions performed in the context of vows (Fartacek, 2012).

Most of the shared religious sanctuaries in Lebanon have a very long history that dates back to the pre-Christian and Islamic times and the baraka is transferred from one religion to another. As the French nineteenth century thinker Ernest Renan (1997, p. 220) wrote: "[t]he sacred will replace the sacred." The baraka remains on site and is inherited and transmitted over generations; the faithful believe that the power of the baraka can also increase with time. The baraka as any other form of energy can pass from one source point to another, from a person to an object or to another person. Pilgrims believe that holy places emanate baraka that visitors are able to absorb. The

pilgrims make ziyārāt and rituals in order to receive the graces that baraka offers, but they also leave traces of themselves that can be observed by other visitors. It is often physical contact that is used to absorb the divine power of baraka: the pilgrim touches the wall of the temple, church or maqām, and/or touches or kisses the saint's tomb, or a sacred tree. The baraka is also transmitted through all the natural elements around the sanctuary such as the water, leaves of trees, grass around the maqām, or sand. The faithful will collect these elements to keep them for the baraka or to “cook” them in order to swallow the baraka. Most of the ritual actions observed serve to transmit the graces, and a lot of these rituals are inherited from antiquity and tradition. The motives for rituals are grounded in the idea of baraka, as the faithful attempt to become imprinted with the benediction and grace of the holy site and to carry the blessedness home.

Ziyârâ: A visit to the saint, a visit to the other...

Given the breadth of the number of worship sites in Lebanon as well as the volume of visits made by the faithful of different communities, many pilgrimages go beyond what can be classified as monolithically religious. The mixed shrines are part of a shared sacred geography that transcends religious diversity and several holy figures act as powerful intermediaries who encourage interfaith gatherings. At these shared worship sites, an interreligious conviviality is experienced that is favorable to the construction of local and national identities, something in which many Lebanese have trouble investing themselves. A long debate exists around the difficulties of building a single national Lebanese identity (Azar, 1999; Kiwan, 1993; Rizk, 2001; Weber, 2007). Observations around the shared religious sites contribute to supporting the faith in the construction of a national identity recognized by all religious communities.

A ziyāra is a personal visit to the saint, sahib al-maqām or al-mazār. The pilgrims hope that the saint will listen to their problems and their requests. They address the saints as confidantes believing that they understand their difficulties. In the course of their pilgrimages, believers meet other faithful pilgrims at sanctuaries who are often burdened with the same problems and

difficulties. Believers from different social classes, different educational backgrounds, and different geographical and cultural communities seek the assistance of the divine together, and in a shared and common fashion. The interaction between the followers of different denominations inside the shared shrines is significant: sometimes, the interaction seems minimal and episodic, and moments of communion are rare, and sometimes complicity between the faithful is strong and obvious. Most of the time pilgrims have the same requirements while visiting the shrines; they need to be sure that they are applying correctly the rituals, and they often need advice. So if a person seems more experienced and confident in proceeding to rituals, others can approach her for advice. As observed in some cases, pilgrims from different denominations come together to visit the shrine, and they can be neighbors or friends. It sometimes happens that a Muslim recommends the visit of the site of a saint to a Christian and vice versa, and that they organize a pilgrimage together.

The way in which the various parties (believers, tourists, accompanying persons, religious personnel for example) behave is influenced by the faithful themselves, by the structure of the places of worship and by the actions of those in charge of them. In some shrines there are no religious personnel to influence the visitors, but in others the sanctuary keepers can decide to what extent those accretions can be tolerable variations of the common ritual repertoire. A subtle management of space can preserve invisible boundaries and ensure that some spaces remain inviolable. In general devotees are discreet and respect the unspoken rule of noninterference; they share the same devotional practices but each one pray as per his own religion. In front of a saint's tomb you can find a Muslim proceeding to rak'aat (genuflections with prayers) and a Christian reciting the Lord's Prayer. Believers meet one another and perform the same practices without trying to hide or deny their religious identity in any way. There is no pressure on visitors at religious sites, and the religious identity of the pilgrim is invariably perfectly preserved and respected.

Based on my field research (participant observation) at local sanctuaries in

present-day Lebanon, I can conclude that there is evidence for existential or spontaneous *communitas* in Turner's sense (1995). My observation of shared pilgrimages and practices does not fit with the Durkheimian vision of pilgrimage sites that allow each religious community to affirm its own unique identity. The fieldwork did not reveal any overt conflicts or aggressive displays of rejection by the faithful. This objective tolerance appears to be bound up with a tacit recognition that the existential condition of all is the same: given life's difficulties and the threat of illness, they all need supernatural help.

Pilgrims repeat frequently "Allāh wahad" (there is only one God) and also "Kull al-qeddisīn fiyon al-barakeh" (all saints possess baraka). Both the faithful and the sanctuary-keepers strongly emphasize that the shrines and the saints are sacred to all, and that saints operate miracles for Christians and Muslims without distinction. The detour via the "other" can confirm the power and the virtues of the saint. The field trips conducted as part of my research revealed a variety of miracles performed for Muslims by Christian saints, and vice versa; these were largely related through the popular oral tradition. Aubin-Boltanski (2007) demonstrates how the impact of a miracle concerning a Muslim Jordanian child in the Christian sanctuary of Beshouat in Lebanon (and not a Christian Lebanese child) is amplified by oral communication, and will lead incredible numbers of pilgrims to visit the sanctuary. In my own experience, I heard many Christians at the sanctuary of St Charbel in Annaya "complaining" that the saint performed more miracles with the Muslims than with the Christians.

This research contributes to the recent work on contemporary phenomena of "interfaith crossing" in the Mediterranean (Albera; Couroucli, 2009) that offers a corpus of data on the division of sacred space, practices and sociability, and the interaction between the actors and the structures at sacred places which are nowadays attended by different religious groups. These "religious crossing" devotions cannot be interpreted as simple first-degree results of a need, but they are well rooted in interface crossings. The phenomenon of shared devotions is not confined in any sense to a few isolated and specific cases. Rather it is a much more general and applicable phenomenon in the

Lebanese religious scene. More ethnographic and historical research is necessary to better understand these phenomena, but this study will contribute to highlighting an interfaith dialogue that exists today across religious sites in Lebanon.

This article insists on the emphasis of the role of shared devotional practices in interreligious dialogue today. Complex controversies have marked relations between Muslims and Christians since the beginnings of Islam, and the dialogue between Christians and Muslims always arouses intense reactions and passions. Both Christian and Muslim authorities launched initiatives to promote and develop the interreligious dialogue. By the middle of the twentieth century, many thinkers, Lebanese in particular, dedicated research to Christian-Muslim relations. In Lebanon, a permanent Committee for such dialogue, formed by official representatives of the various Christian Churches and Lebanese Muslim communities, has been active since the beginning of the 1990s. At the initiative of the Middle East Council of Churches, a permanent Arab Committee of Islamo-Christian dialogue has sought, since the 1990s, to promote dialogue at the Arab level, especially in Egypt, Sudan, Jordan, in Palestine, in the Lebanon, in Syria and in Iraq. The Synod, in 1995, which brought together in Rome all Lebanese Christian communities with representatives of Lebanese Muslim communities, insisted on the importance of religious and cultural pluralism. In Lebanon, one will be surprised by the ubiquity of the word 'dialogue' and by the multiplicity of initiatives and interreligious conferences. We can count numerous NGOs and foundations working for this cause, including "Together around Mary", "Darb Maryam" and Adyan.⁶

Anne-Françoise Weber (2007, p. 88) is one of a number of scholars who differentiates between different types of dialogue in Lebanon: theological, intellectual, spiritual, ethical and "dialogue of life". The shared rituals we observed through this study can be placed in the context of the "dialogue of life": they exist and promote interreligious dialogue away from political

⁶ http://www.ndj.edu.lb/amicale/ensemble_autour_de_marie; <http://www.adyanvillage.net/>

interests. Dialogue is actually lived at the level of shared pilgrimages where the construction of a common peculiarity materializes by being a believer, by sharing the same needs and interests, and by partaking in the same visit. Upon visiting the religious sites, the devotees often exchange this wish: “Ziyara Makbouleh” (May your visit be accepted – fruitful!). By that quote the pilgrims wish to the devotees they meet that the shared saint they visited, together, will respond positively to their request too.

A pilgrimage is a path towards a sacred place that leads to an encounter with a saint, experienced through a series of rituals and devotional practices. These rituals are a natural means towards dialogue in a convivial atmosphere. In line with Stausberg (2011), I believe that visiting and touring different religious shrines is “a major arena for the encounter of and exposure to other religious traditions.” Pilgrimages are great interreligious encounters and they tend to encourage much more than the official conferences and meetings convened by interreligious and interfaith organizations; they can act as a “dialogue of religions”, in other words, as a natural and spontaneous dialogue between the faithful. Pilgrims meet and share in a cordial atmosphere, without artifice, often far from the tension and anxiety of the Lebanese reality, even if there is no evidence that this dialogue will be maintained in daily life, outside the pilgrimages. Visits to shrines and religious pilgrimages can temporarily erase borders and boundaries between religions. Once back home, pilgrims can choose to recreate frontiers, or to maintain the dialogue with the “other”; the frequency and incidences of which deserve further empirical research.

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