

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

POPULAR MARIAN RITUALS IN LEBANON:
AN OPPORTUNITY FOR CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM
ENCOUNTER AND LEBANESE NATIONAL IDENTITY

by
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ABSTRACT
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This research is an introductory study to popular Marian rituals in Lebanon. It seeks to understand the popular Marian rituals in Lebanon practiced by both Christians and Muslims and the implications they have on Christian-Muslim encounter in this context. Through nine interviews with Lebanese participants, *Popular Marian Rituals in Lebanon* discovers two of the most commonly-mentioned Marian rituals: the celebration of the Feast of the Annunciation and going to Our Lady of Lebanon – Harissa. These two popular Marian rituals, along with other, smaller-scale rituals and popular Marian beliefs, contribute to a unique environment that allows for Christian-Muslim encounter in Lebanon. Despite a lack of consensus as for how the symbol of the Virgin Mary does or does not lead to productive Christian-Muslim encounter, the results show that Lebanese individuals who are already interested in and/or seeking interreligious encounter and dialogue believe the best way to encourage it further is by using the Virgin Mary as a common point of reverence between Christians and Muslims. Furthermore, this essay touches on the increased sense of Lebanese national identity as a result of popular Marian rituals.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

A young Syrian-Lebanese Muslim woman, a distant friend of mine, told me about how some Muslim women go to Our Lady of Lebanon in Harissa, Lebanon (often referred to simply as Harissa) when they want to get pregnant or are having fertility issues. This peaked my interest and stood out to me as something very unique. As I was already in the process of formulating my research question related to the Virgin Mary in the fall of 2021, this piece of information changed the trajectory of my research and led to *Popular Marian Rituals in Lebanon: An Opportunity for Christian-Muslim Encounter and Lebanese National Identity*.

I became interested in learning about veneration to the Virgin Mary during my undergraduate study, surely due in part to my mixed Orthodox-Catholic upbringing and witnessing people around me practice Marian rituals. After living in Lebanon for over a year, I became fascinated with how people venerate the Virgin Mary here. Initially, I only looked out for Christian rituals to the Virgin Mary. However, I did find it interesting and confusing why, for example, I frequently saw many Muslims at Christian religious sites, particularly Harissa. The above exchange with my friend, who later became an interview participant under the pseudonym Aya, coupled with feedback from my research advisors, led me to shift what I originally thought my research would focus on – comparing Marian rituals among Maronite Catholic and Antiochian Orthodox Christians in Lebanon – to become something new and more relevant in today's world, which is popular Marian rituals in Lebanon. After further research and eventually interviewing Lebanese members of various religious groups, it became clear

to me that there is surely something distinct about popular rituals to the Virgin Mary in Lebanon. What was most intriguing to me was the opportunity for Christian-Muslim encounter through popular Marian rituals here. I guessed that this research would focus particularly on rituals at the physical location of Harissa, as I was expecting to hear my interviewees tell me about how special Harissa is for both Christians and Muslims in Lebanon. However, the content of my interviews led not only to discussion about Harissa, but also about Lebanese celebrations for the Feast of the Annunciation and other, smaller occurrences of popular Marian ritual. Interestingly, I also came to understand through my research that the Virgin Mary can be used as a symbol of Lebanese national identity. This is something I have noticed from my exposure to Lebanese discourse even before arriving to Lebanon, and more so from my time living here, but could not put into my own words.

The Virgin Mary is on display in Lebanon in the form of statues, paintings, and pieces of religious material culture such as icons, rosaries, and prayer cards. Not only is she visible at churches and pilgrimage sites, but also in homes, on streets, marking the entrance of villages, and other places where Christians and Muslims encounter each other. It feels vital to study the nuanced meanings behind and implications of the Virgin Mary's presence in Lebanon via popular rituals. The topic of popular Marian rituals in Lebanon is nuanced, yet there is very little literature on this topic. The purpose of this research is to begin analyzing these popular Marian rituals in the modern Lebanese context and their implications on interreligious encounter in Lebanon. This research does not attempt to exhaustively analyze popular Marian rituals or Christian-Muslim counter in Lebanon or elsewhere. Rather, it focuses on the Marian rituals mentioned by

the interviewees and how they provide an opportunity for Christian-Muslim encounter rooted in devotion to a key feminine figure in both Christianity and Islam.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

To provide a solid foundation for *Popular Marian Rituals in Lebanon*, I examined the literature related to popular Marian rituals and Christian-Muslim encounter in Lebanon. Interreligious encounter can be defined as “a genuine ‘spiritual dimension,’ paving the way for partners in dialogue to experience different religions ‘from within’” (Fahed, 2020, p. 399). Despite a wealth of literature on popular Marian rituals around the world, there is a major gap in the literature on this topic within the Lebanese context and even within the Middle Eastern context more broadly. I consulted research on popular rituals in general, popular Marian rituals, the Virgin Mary in Christian and Islamic contexts, and the small amount of literature focused specifically on popular Marian rituals in Lebanon and its relationship with Christian-Muslim encounter in Lebanon.

2.1. What are Popular Rituals/Devotions and Popular Religion?

It is critical to understand popular religion in order to understand popular rituals/devotionsⁱ and the central questions and purpose of this research. Popular rituals are a component of popular religion, as opposed to proper, organized religion. Popular religion is the religion practiced by the people, not necessarily what the religion’s doctrine states or what the Church encourages. According to Robert A. Orsi (2002), “Among its defenders, popular religion too often means the nostalgic evocation of peasant spirituality or the angry defense of magic and folk practices” (p. lviii). Later in

the same text, Orsi more clearly defined what he meant by popular religion. He views popular religion as the integration of two senses of religion: (1) the traditional sense of religion, including sacred rituals, symbols, prayers, and practices, and (2) “the people’s deepest values and perceptions of reality” (Orsi, 2002, lxii). Historically, popular religion has been contrasted with official religion, falling into the “classical dichotomy between sacred and the profane, the official and the vernacular, or the institutional versus the ‘folk’” (Bautista, 2021). However, more recent scholarship argues that popular religion and official religion intersect each other and are not so easily divided. María Del Socorro Castañeda-Lilesⁱⁱ wrote “there are degrees of fluidity between what are considered official and unofficial religious practices, making them difficult to separate” (Del Socorro Castañeda-Liles, 2018, p. 21). Popular religion, since it is the religion of the people, can take many forms and transcend traditional limitations and rules. Furthermore, deep-seated prejudices can be overcome through popular religion (Meinardus, 1996, p. 90).

Devotions can be defined as “external practices of piety that are not part of the official liturgy of the Catholic Church, but are popular spiritual practices” (Hermkens, 2021). Popular devotions, then, are devotions/rituals of the people. Coming from the Latin term *populus*, meaning *people*, popular rituals are deeply inspired by and linked to a given culture and society. There is a plethora of literature on popular rituals/devotions, and even more specifically on popular Marian devotions around the world. This study does not attempt to review the massive amount of literature on popular rituals and popular Marian rituals. Rather, *Popular Marian Rituals in Lebanon* is centered on the unique expression of popular Marian rituals, both among Christians and Muslims, in Lebanon. Importantly, this research is also interested in understanding the opportunity

for encounter between Christians and Muslims in Lebanon as a result of popular Marian rituals.

2.2. The Virgin Mary as a Symbol of Encounter Between Differing Groups

The key for any religious or cultural tradition to withstand time is having adaptable symbols and rituals. Clifford Geertz described symbols as words, acts, gestures, places, or anything that imposes meaning on experience (Geertz, 1973, p. 45). Over time, symbols' meanings often change and the environment around them changes, so they must be able to adapt in order to stay relevant. As Anya Peterson Royce wrote in *Ethnic Identity: Strategies of Diversity*, "The ability of an ethnic group to maintain boundaries, hence survive as a distinct identity, may depend on its ability to marshal an impressive array of symbols" (Royce, 1982). In this way, an ethnic group (or religious group) can create and maintain its identity by utilizing symbols. Furthermore, they can intentionally separate and remove themselves from other groups by using unique symbols and practices that differ from others'. The Virgin Mary is a popular symbol of purity, virginity, femininity, and motherhood, and she is the symbol at the center of popular Marian rituals. In analyzing Mary as the symbol of "the festa" – a popular ritual of Catholic Italian Immigrants of Harlem, New York City – Orsi (2002) wrote that "The symbol was the focus; the festa provided the context for expressing and experiencing the emotional and moral content underlying the meaning of the symbol" (p. 163). This explains how the Virgin Mary serves as the symbol and focus of popular Marian rituals in various cultural environments.

The Virgin Mary is also seen as a symbol of peace and unity in many contexts,

since she is a symbol that various groups can adopt. Studies on popular Marian rituals, such as Anthony M. Stevens-Arroyo's (2002) work in Cuba, point out how popular religious symbols can lead to harmony among differing groups. Stevens-Arroyo (2002) wrote about an instance of iconography in Cuba representing the three main races found there, and how it led to a stronger national identity. He wrote, "the popularity of the devotion is linked to its capacity to symbolize racial harmony and a resultant national identity..." (p. 51). Similarly, María Del Socorro Castañeda-Liles (2018) noted that devotion to *La Virgen de Guadalupe* fostered a sense of national pride among Mexican immigrants in the United States (p. 11). These two examples of popular Marian ritual, despite different contextual backgrounds, both show how popular Marian rituals can lead to a stronger sense of national identity.

2.3. The Virgin Mary in Christianity and Popular Christian Marian Rituals in Lebanon

The Virgin Mary is venerated in most denominations of churches across Lebanon.ⁱⁱⁱ The two largest churches in Lebanon are the Maronite Catholic Church and the Greek Orthodox Church of Antioch, so to limit this literature review to what is most relevant, I will focus on Maronite Catholic (referred to simply as "Catholic") and Antiochian Greek Orthodox (referred to simply as "Orthodox") doctrines, beliefs, and popular rituals. The literature on the Virgin Mary in Catholicism and Orthodoxy is, of course, extremely expansive. Some of the most important points are beliefs around the Immaculate Conception, perpetual virginity of Mary, and the assumption of Mary into Heaven. A key difference between these two Churches, however, is how they declare

their official beliefs regarding the Virgin Mary. The Catholic Church tends to declare doctrine and dogma to clarify Church teaching, while the Orthodox Church tends to transmit its teaching on the Virgin Mary through devotional and liturgical texts, as well as through tradition (Morris, 2007). The Orthodox Church gives precedence to the Gospel's basic fundamental truths and refrains from dogmatizing teachings on Mary, except that she is truly the *Theotokos*, the Mother of God (Daley, 2010, p. 860-61). Concerning this difference, Fr. John Meyendorff wrote on how a Byzantine Christian (of Eastern Orthodox tradition) would typically seek answers to their theology:

Through the liturgy, a Byzantine recognized and experienced his membership in the Body of Christ. While a Western Christian generally checked his faith against eternal authority (the magisterium or the Bible), the Byzantine Christian considered the liturgy both a source and an expression of his theology ... The liturgy maintained the Church's identity and continuity in the midst of a changing world. (Morris, 2007)

Despite this difference, the Orthodox Church and Orthodox Christians still hold very high regard for the Virgin Mary. Regarding their love for her, Meinardus (1996) wrote, "The profound and deep esteem of the Orthodox Christians in the East for the Virgin Mary is well known. Their devotion to her as the *Theotokos* constitutes an integral part of their liturgical life and popular piety" (p. 88).

A belief of primary importance to the Catholic Church is that of the Immaculate Conception. It is one of the four Catholic Marian dogmas, proclaimed in 1854 (Daley, 2010, p. 860), and upholds that Mary was born without original sin. This was explained in Pope Pius XII's encyclical *Munificentissimus Deus* which states, "Now God has willed that the Blessed Virgin Mary should be exempted from this general rule. She, by an entirely unique privilege, completely overcame sin by her Immaculate Conception"

(Pope Pius XII, 1950). Contrarily, the Orthodox Church does not believe that Mary was born without original sin (also called ancestral sin). The Orthodox Church upholds that Mary was born with original sin in order for God to assume her from it. By assuming original sin from Mary, God was able to assume sin from mankind (Morris, 2007).

The perpetual virginity of Mary, meaning that she remained a virgin even after the birth of Jesus, is another important belief among both the Catholic and Orthodox Churches. This belief upholds that the Virgin Mary never consummated her marriage with Joseph, nor did she have any other children besides Jesus. This is the reason behind one of her names, the Ever Virgin Mary, commonly used in Eastern Christian traditions. Fr. John Hainsworth pointed out that refraining from sexual relations after any great manifestation of the Holy Spirit was the practice for devout Jews at the time of Jesus. For example, Hainsworth mentioned a rabbinical tradition that notes Moses separated himself from his wife after encountering God in the burning bush. In another rabbinical tradition, one man exclaimed “Woe to the wives of these men!” after God had worked amongst them (Hainsworth, 1989). In the Catholic Church, Mary’s perpetual virginity was declared dogma at the Fifth Ecumenical Council in the year 553. A century later, Pope Martin I stated that Mary’s title as “ever-virgin” meant that Mary was a virgin before, during, and after Jesus’s birth (St. Paul Center, 2018).

The assumption of the Virgin Mary into Heaven has also been a core belief for Christians since the early centuries of Christianity. This teaching specifies that both Mary’s body and soul were assumed into Heaven – called by Jesus, her son. The evidence for this teaching originates from ancient liturgies and homilies honoring the Virgin Mary’s passing, as well as the *Transitus* writings spread throughout the Middle

Ages. Mary's assumption into Heaven is very widely believed and honored; even to Martin Luther, Mary's assumption was a well-known fact, despite not being present in scripture (Naumann, n.d.). The Catholic Church defined its teaching on Mary's assumption as dogma on November 1, 1950 in Pope Pius XII's encyclical *Munificentissimus Deus*. This dogma is one of the four Marian dogmas of the Catholic Church, and although it does not have a direct basis in scripture, it was declared as divinely revealed (Pope Pius XII, 1950). The Greek Orthodox Church does not dogmatize the assumption of the Virgin Mary, but celebrates her "falling asleep and translation to Heaven" on August 15th. This is a reflection of the gospel that shows the faithful community that they, too, may be like Christ and achieve victory over death (Morris, 2007).

A number of rituals to the Virgin Mary have been passed down through generations and provide Christians with a devotional heritage of ways to approach and worship Jesus through His mother, Mary. Often times, Marian ritual takes place in the form prayers like the Rosary and novenas, especially among Catholics. Orthodox Christians also venerate Mary and practice Marian rituals; however, they are less commonly practiced among Orthodox Christians than Catholic Christians. Archbishop Dmitri of the Orthodox Church in America wrote on Orthodox veneration of Theotokos, "Objections to the veneration of the Theotokos are based primarily on what is called 'a lack of scriptural evidence to support such a practice' ... there are several passages of the New Testament that really form the basis for our practice" (Archbishop Dmitri, 2013). It is important to note that in both Catholic and Orthodox traditions, rituals and prayers to Mary are meant to supplement attending Sunday mass/liturgy, not to replace it (Samaha, n.d.).

Popular Marian rituals, practiced by Christians around the world, vary greatly by cultural context. Orsi (2002) offers tremendous insight into how popular Marian rituals are rituals of the people in a given community. Regarding how people practice Catholicism and, therefore, Marian rituals, he wrote, “The people have their own ways, authentic and profound, of being Catholic” (p. lxvi). He noted that popular rituals last through time and generations (p. 171) and can take many forms and be the result of different needs of a society. Orsi wrote that popular rituals can serve as a connection between family and their deceased family members (p. 171), be practiced in an attempt to resolve family conflicts or to plead for help and healing (pp. 174-75), and can be practiced as an individual experience or as a family or group event. Suffering and sacrifice, common occurrences that are part of the human experience, can often lead Catholic communities to practice popular Marian rituals. Orsi continued, “Religious sacrifice allows men and women to believe that they have some control over their destinies even when they fear that they are otherwise bound by severe social and economic constraints” (p. 203). Furthermore, gender dynamics can certainly play a role in how popular Marian rituals are practiced in a society. Orsi (2002) noted that in his research in Italian Harlem, women plead to the Virgin Mary more than men (chapter 7). Because of their difficult lives, women in Italian Harlem during this time identified with the Virgin Mary, sought consolation from her, and drew strength from their connection with her (p. 205).

The literature on popular Marian rituals shows that a number of factors influence popular Marian rituals, including material culture, cultural complexity, cultural hybridity, and minority/majority societies. In each cultural context, popular Marian rituals are practiced in a unique and purposeful way. There is a major gap in the

literature on popular Marian rituals practiced among Christians in Lebanon. Three sources that discuss popular Marian Christian rituals in Lebanon are: (1) Fahed's "Lebanon Models Interreligious Dialogue through the Feast of the Annunciation" which focuses on the interreligious dialogue and encounter that has resulted from the celebration of the Feast of the Annunciation in Lebanon and that I examine later in the literature review, (2) Meinardus's "The Virgin Mary as Mediatrix Between Christians and Muslims in the Middle East" which focuses on Egypt but with some relevant information for the Lebanese context that I also mention later in the literature review, and (3) Jabbra's "Women's Marian Devotions in a Melkite Greek Catholic Village in Lebanon" which looks at two Marian rituals in a Melkite Catholic village in Lebanon.

Nancy Jabbra (2009) highlights a popular Marian ritual in Lebanon on a smaller scale, in a small, Melkite Catholic community in the Beqaa Valley near Zahle. The two Melkite Catholic Marian rituals that she mentions are "May" (devotions/celebrations during the month of May dedicated to the Virgin Mary) and Corpus Christi (p. 58). In this village, and presumably in other villages and cities of Lebanon, women play a special role in May rituals to the Virgin Mary. According to an account by a lady who was heavily involved in these traditions, on the last day of April, the sisterhoods would each set up a *samdi* (table covered in white with flowers and religious images) dedicated to Mary in the church. Each day following, at 6pm, the church bells rang and the groups of ladies would assemble in the church to pray a part of the rosary, sing, and recite a litany. On the last day of May, the sisterhoods, along with priests, nuns, and laypeople, processed down the street to the other church and chapel in town with a large picture of Mary and music (p. 59). Jabbra noted that since she witnessed these May rituals in 1973 until now, they have grown significantly and involve many people in the

community. She paid particular attention to how women play the leading role in these rituals. Secondly, Jabbra wrote about the celebration of Corpus Christi in the same village. Held in June, the Feast of Corpus Christi is also celebrated in this village with a procession and *samdi* tables after mass. During the procession there is music, notably the Lourdes hymn to Mary that is also used in May rituals. The Feast of Corpus Christi is focused on Jesus; however, in this context, Mary is also venerated in a meaningful way on this holiday that is devoted to her son, Jesus (Jabbra, 2009, pp. 58-60).

2.4. The Virgin Mary in Islam and Popular Islamic Marian Rituals in Lebanon

There is a wealth of literature on Islamic views of the Virgin Mary. Called *Maryam* in Islamic contexts and in Arabic, Mary is viewed as the mother of the prophet Issa (Jesus) and is renowned as a key female figure in Islam. Islamic affection for the Virgin Mary is derived from the Quran's references to her (Meinardus, 1996, p. 88). She is the only woman mentioned by name in the Quran and has a *sura* (chapter) dedicated solely to her. Sura 19, entitled "Maryam" goes into detail about her life, particularly her pregnancy and role as the mother of Jesus (Saritoprak, 2019). Sura Maryam details her genealogy, the line of prophets from which she came, her birth and early years in the synagogue, and the virgin birth. Furthermore, the story of Mary and her family is found in sura 3, "The Family of Imran" (Saritoprak, 2019). She is mentioned in the Quran over 30 times, more than in the New Testament (Davary, 2010, pp. 26-27). In addition to Quranic references of Mary, she is also mentioned in the Hadith, the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad. The Prophet Muhammad described the Virgin Mary as "the master of the women of Paradise" and she is also mentioned in the

Hadith with the Prophet's wife, Khadija, and daughter, Fatima, as well as Asiya, the wife of the Pharaoh (Saritoprak, 2019). The Virgin Mary is considered by many Muslims to be the most important female figure in Islam. She is the "epitome of virtue and a model for all people – both men and women – to aspire to (Davary, 2010, 27).

The literature on the Virgin Mary in Islam is expansive and it is not necessary to cover the many themes of her presence in Islam in this review. One theme that is important to understand for the purpose of this study is what scholars have pointed out as one of the Virgin Mary's most important features: her ability to act as an interreligious mediator (Davary, 2010, p. 26). Common characteristics of the Virgin Mary are found in both Christianity and Islam, namely, her virgin birth to Jesus. This allows her to serve as an important symbol for purity and chastity in both religious traditions, and is seen as a role model for women of these faiths. According to Islamic interpretation, the Angel Gabriel told Mary of her pregnancy and Mary accepted the spirit that touched her womb and conceived Jesus (Davary, 2010, p. 30). The celebration of this event, the Feast of the Annunciation, is a Marian holiday in both Islam and Christianity. In Lebanon, interreligious dialogue and spiritual solidarity are at the forefront of this holiday because this holiday is viewed as one that bridges similarities, rather than divides based on differences (Fahed, 2020). There are countless sites of veneration to the Virgin Mary in Lebanon, including shrines, monasteries, and churches, that both Christians and Muslims visit. Islamic *popular* Marian ritual is not widely researched,^{iv} and in Lebanon is virtually nonexistent except for Fahed (2020)'s writing about the Feast of the Annunciation.

2.5. Popular Marian Rituals Shared Between Christians and Muslims

Scholars and religious leaders have recognized the opportunity to use the symbol of the Virgin Mary to unite Christians and Muslims. By *unite*, I mean to encourage solidarity, mutual understanding, and peace – not to unite the two religions together. Despite Christianity and Islam’s lack of official or doctrinal statements that the Virgin Mary can serve as a link between the two religions, popular religion of the Middle East has, in some contexts, adopted the Virgin Mary as a uniting symbol between them. Her importance in some contexts of Middle Eastern popular religion has led to her being referred to as “the golden bridge” between Christians and Muslims (Meinardus, 1996, p. 88). Dr. Otto F. A. Meinardus (1996) argued that within the popular religious context of Egypt, the Virgin Mary “can play the role of mediatrix between Muslims and Christians” (p. 88). Meinardus offered a thorough analysis of popular Marian ritual among the Coptic Christians in Egypt, and its connection to Christian-Muslim convergence in Egypt. He wrote about the roots of popular Egyptian Marian rituals, Marian pilgrimage sites and saints, usage of icons and other material culture, and how these elements contribute to the religious life of both Egyptian Christians and Muslims. Furthermore, he emphasized the impact of popular religion and popular rituals, as opposed to formal theologies and exhortations of religious leaders, in the successful convergence of Christians and Muslims based on Marian recognition and ritual (p. 89).

The literature on popular Marian rituals specifically in Lebanon uniting Christians and Muslims is mostly limited to the interreligious celebration of the Feast of the Annunciation, with short references to other cases of interreligious ritual. In Lebanon, the Feast of the Annunciation of Mary is a holiday and popular Marian ritual

that unites Christians and Muslims and encourages interreligious dialogue. The Feast of the Annunciation, which has been marked as an official holiday in Lebanon since Prime Minister Saad Hariri's announcement in 2010, celebrates the Angel Gabriel's proclamation to the Virgin Mary that she was pregnant with Jesus. Ziad Fahed (2020) wrote that this Feast day is celebrated by various Lebanese religious groups and offers a "pioneering model rich in theological meanings, challenges, and opportunities... in which Lebanese reconfirm their faith in their country as a land of interreligious coexistence and a 'mosaic of religions'" (pp. 397-98). In the early 2000s, there were many efforts to encourage interreligious dialogue in Lebanon. Despite the many conferences and meetings on this topic, substantial impact on the ground was lacking, which prompted Nagy el-Khoury and Sheikh Mohammad Nokkari to co-found the Lebanese Committee for the Feast of the Annunciation of Mary. They founded this committee with the intention of leading and promoting the Feast of the Annunciation as a joint Christian-Muslim celebration in Lebanon that would include annual events on March 25th. The resulting interreligious dialogue and co-celebration of the Feast of the Annunciation have been substantial in Lebanon, with some scholars believing it can lead to "interreligious spiritual friendship" (Fahed, 2020, p. 411).

Another mention of popular Marian ritual in Lebanon among both Christians and Muslims is by Meinardus (1996). He noted that grottoes/caves, springs, and trees have commonly served as places of Marian pilgrimage among both Christians and Muslims. He wrote about two specific places of Marian ritual and pilgrimage in Lebanon in the following passage:

For example, there is the Saiyideh al-Mantara, or Notre Dame de Ia Garde, south of Saida (Sidon). ... Christian traditions identify this cave as the place were

Mary rested while waiting for her son who was at Sidon (Mt. 15:21). In spite of the Islamic prohibition of the veneration of icons, I have repeatedly observed Muslims venerating there the miraculous icon of the Holy Virgin. Christians and Muslims see in her the mother of all mothers, especially in view of the biblical confession: "Blessed is the womb that bore thee and the paps that thou has sucked" (Lk. 11:27). Irrespective of their religious identity, women in travail repair to the different Marian grottoes and caves in which they expect blessings for lactation, be it in Saiyidah ad Darr near Bsarre in northern Lebanon or in the Magharat as-Saiyidah, the well-known Franciscan "Milk Grotto" in Bethlehem. (Meinardus, 1996, p. 93)

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

This study *Popular Marian Rituals in Lebanon* attempts to offer an angle on Christian-Muslim encounter in Lebanon through popular rituals to the Virgin Mary used by both Christians and Muslims. It does not offer a conclusive analysis on Christian-Muslim encounter in Lebanon or on popular Marian rituals in Lebanon. I utilized nine interviews to research this topic. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the American University of Beirut.

The two central questions of these interviews were: (1) what Marian rituals do you and/or does your religious group in Lebanon practice? and (2) is the Virgin Mary a uniting figure/symbol between Christians and Muslims in Lebanon? In an attempt to understand these two key questions, I interviewed a variety of Christian and Muslim participants of various denominations/sects and positions within their religious groups (priest, imam, or layperson/community member) who are active members of their religious communities. In order to meet the interview participant criteria, they had to have some experience with and knowledge about popular Marian rituals in Lebanon, at least within their own religious group. However, all participants also had at least basic knowledge of popular Marian rituals in another religious group (i.e. in Islam if the participant was Christian, or vice versa). All participants were Lebanese. Finally, I interviewed a near-equal amount of male and female participants, five males and four females.

Interviewees were identified through already-established professional and religious networks or from religious institutions' public website information. I reached

out to participants by phone or email to describe the study and assess their willingness to participate in a 20- to 60- minute interview. Nine participants consented to participate in the study. All participants voluntarily participated to offer their insights on and experience with the topic, and were aware that they could skip questions and stop the interview at any time. Only their first names were recorded; however, in this project I have used pseudonyms for each participant for better anonymity and ease of writing (i.e. rather than writing “Participant #1”). Table 1 indicates the participating interviewees, their religious affiliation and position, and gender. The interviewees represent a range of religious backgrounds: 3 Sunni Muslims, 2 Antiochian (Greek) Orthodox Christians, 3 Maronite Catholic Christians, and 1 Latin Catholic Christian. The study did not include any Shia Muslim participants, which can be a significant distinction from Sunni Muslims, especially in the Lebanese context.

Table 1
Interview Participants

Pseudonym	Religious group and denomination/sect	Position in religious community	Gender
Abdallah	Sunni Muslim	Imam	Male
Ahmed	Sunni Muslim	Sheikh, judge, & former imam	Male
Aya	Sunni Muslim	Layperson	Female
Nicolas	Antiochian (Greek) Orthodox Christian	Priest	Male
Noura	Antiochian (Greek) Orthodox Christian	Layperson	Female
Elie	Maronite Catholic	Priest	Male
Antoine	Maronite Catholic	Priest	Male
Rita	Maronite Catholic	Layperson	Female
Ghada	Latin Catholic	Layperson	Female

The interviews lasted between 20 minutes and 90 minutes long. They were conducted either in person in Beirut or online via video call. In addition to the two key research questions mentioned above, I utilized a pre-set list of questions, as well as

follow-up questions to attain a clearer, more comprehensive understanding of their perspectives and insights. Sometimes, interesting points and topics emerged in the interview that I did not expect, which I may mention in the analysis section.

CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS

For cohesive organization of the interview results, I have divided my findings into four main themes with subthemes, mirroring the format of Ismail, Shealy, and Nahas (2021)'s results. The major themes that emerged throughout the interviews were: (1) popular belief about the Virgin Mary in Lebanon, (2) popular rituals that lead to Christian-Muslim encounter in Lebanon, (3) importance of the symbolism of the Virgin Mary in Lebanon, and (4) other popular Marian rituals in Lebanon. Not each of the four themes were necessarily covered in detail in each interview. I include the most relevant pieces of information from the interviews in the following thematic analysis.

4.1. Popular belief about the Virgin Mary in Lebanon

In this theme, I note the *popular* beliefs among interview participants about the Virgin Mary, rather than their religious groups' doctrine or official beliefs about the Virgin Mary. Since this study is interested in popular rituals (as a part of popular religion), this theme covers popular belief of the people.

4.1.1. Among Christians

Nearly every Christian participant emphasized that they view the Virgin Mary as the mother of Jesus/God. The Catholic participants referred to her as the Virgin Mary, while Nicolas (Orthodox) referred to her as St. Mary and Noura (Orthodox) referred to her as Theotokos, and said "she is above a saint, I don't know how to explain it." Nicolas indicated that the reason the Orthodox venerate and honor the Virgin Mary is

not simply because of her as a person, but because of her relationship to Jesus. He said that she was chosen by God, is the one that the Holy Spirit talked to through the angels, and that held the Son of God in her womb.

Rita said that the Virgin Mary is important and well-respected because Jesus said if one does not love His mother, then they do not love Him. A similar sentiment was echoed by Nicolas, who said that Jesus, himself, called Mary many times in a way that pointed to her value and dedication for God and her faith.

Elie said that the Virgin Mary is everywhere, and in Lebanon, people love their mothers a lot and place a special importance on their mothers. Similarly, in Lebanon, people relate their mothers to the Virgin Mary and consider the Virgin Mary to be their mother also. Rita also said that Lebanese (Maronite Catholics) “go to her and talk to her like a mother, we talk to her like we talk to our own mothers.”

4.1.2. Among Muslims

The three Muslim participants all mentioned a special respect for the Virgin Mary and emphasized her high position in Islamic tradition. They all referred to her as Maryam, and Abdallah said that they also call her the *Virgin* Mary in Islamic tradition. Abdallah and Ahmed stated that the Virgin Mary is not the mother of God, but she is the mother of the prophet Issa. All three participants said that the Virgin Mary is the only woman who has a chapter named after her in the Quran, and that other chapters mention her as well. Ahmed noted that she is mentioned a total of 37 times in the Quran, and she has the highest position of all women in the whole universe. Additionally, he told me that above each *mihrab*, a niche cut out of the wall in a mosque, there is a verse from the Quran mentioning the Virgin Mary.

Aya said that the Virgin Mary is like a hero, “more than a figure” that they (Muslims) look after. She said that they believe among all women, Maryam “is the purest human on earth.” Aya also said that “she is a miracle to us, and her son is a miracle.” Ahmed noted that Islam has upheld the belief of Mary’s Immaculate Conception since around 1450, before it was made dogma in the Catholic Church. Ahmed also said that the Virgin Mary is considered by some (in both Islam and Christianity) to be a prophet, although some people reject this. Abdallah mentioned that the Virgin Mary carried Jesus, and since Muslims do not believe that Joseph was in the picture, Mary was a single mom, raising Jesus alone, which shows her strength and courage.

Abdallah offered a very useful scale, from his own personal opinion, on how to categorize Muslim thought on the Virgin Mary. He said there are three categories that Muslims can fall into (or somewhere in between) regarding Marian rituals: (1) very strict or conservative Muslims (especially Salafis) who do not want to perform any Marian rituals in order to not imitate Christians, (2) liberal or “shallow” Muslims who are totally open to Marian rituals, and (3) interfaith Muslims (those who prioritize interreligious dialogue and encounter) who do interfaith work and rituals, and therefore encourage them.

4.1.3. Among both Christians and Muslims

All participants, both Christian and Muslim, expressed many similar attitudes in the way they discussed the characteristics of the Virgin Mary. They all, without exception, talked about her in a respectful way that showed her importance to them and their respective religious groups.

Most Christian interview participants said that they know Islam holds a high regard for the Virgin Mary. Noura said she knows that Maryam is mentioned in the Quran and that Muslims believe in the power of Marian rituals (she said this specifically after mentioning rituals about fertility). Ghada said she knows some of her Muslim friends acknowledge the Virgin Mary and have a positive outlook on her. She continued by saying there is tension between Christians and Muslims (in Lebanon) but the Virgin Mary is a bridge between the religions because Muslims do not have any skepticism or bad feelings toward her.

Both Christian and Muslim participants mentioned the role the Virgin Mary plays as an intercessor. Nicolas offered a thorough explanation of how the Virgin Mary intercedes for us and prays with us to God (this is the Orthodox understanding of Mary as our intercessor, which is very close, if not the same, to the general Catholic understanding). Nicolas explained that Jesus answers His mother's intercessions (if He chooses because it is right in a given circumstance), just like He listened to His mother at the wedding feast in Cana. Because of this example, Orthodox Christians (and other Christians) ask the Virgin Mary to pray fervently with them. Noura also noted the Virgin Mary's role as intercessor. Rita and Aya both talked about Mary's role as intercessor without using the term *intercessor*. Rita mentioned that Maronite Catholics pray to Mary to ask for certain things, including pregnancy and resolving problems.^v Aya discussed Muslims performing rituals in the form of *dua* (personal prayer) to plead to Mary if they are having various troubles or to regain faith. Ahmed also clarified that there is no Islamic prayer (*salat*) to anyone but God; however, there is *dua* to the Virgin Mary.

4.2. Popular rituals that lead to Christian-Muslim encounter in Lebanon

As I mentioned in the introduction, I became interested in the specific occurrence of Christian-Muslim encounter through popular Marian rituals after hearing about Muslim women's rituals to the Virgin Mary. Therefore, since I knew I was interested in this unique component of popular Marian rituals in Lebanon, I selected some interview participants who had experience with Christian-Muslim encounter and dialogue in Lebanon. One participant, Ahmed, has significant experience in this domain in Lebanon. Some others are open to and already interested in Christian-Muslim encounter and dialogue, and some others were less open to and interested in it. The accounts of the people I interviewed led me to understand that popular Marian rituals are certainly an *opportunity* for Christian-Muslim encounter in Lebanon; however, they will not work among all people because not everyone is interested in or open to interreligious encounter. People who are already interested in pursuing interreligious dialogue will find similarities in popular beliefs about and rituals to the Virgin Mary. Those who are not interested in interreligious dialogue will not seek out these commonalities, and may likely argue against the ability of Marian rituals to encourage Christian-Muslim encounter. The participants with an interreligious upbringing, lifestyle, or who have an inclination for interreligious encounter view popular Marian rituals as strong common ground between Christian and Muslims in Lebanon and even beyond.

4.2.1. The Feast of the Annunciation

The Feast of the Annunciation (in Arabic, *eid el bishara*) on March 25th celebrates the Angel Gabriel telling the Virgin Mary that she was pregnant with Jesus.

Ahmed works closely with the annual planning of the interreligious celebration of the Feast of the Annunciation in Lebanon. He said that prior to the first interreligious celebration in 2007, not many people knew about this holiday, it was more limited to priests and religious people. Over the years, it became more popular, especially after Prime Minister Hariri made it a national holiday in 2010. Often times during this celebration, the Quran's chapter *Maryam* is read aloud by both Christians and Muslims and dua is prayed by everyone at the same place and time. Regarding this holiday, Aya told me that Muslims around the world typically do not celebrate it; however, since Muslims and Christians have been living together in Lebanon for so long, they started to celebrate each others' holidays. She also said that people, both Muslim and Christian, do many rituals to the Virgin Mary on this day (prayers, candles, etc.). Rita noted that Maronite Catholics are supposed to go to mass on this day, and Noura said that Orthodox Christians should also go to the church on this day, then, since they are excused from the Lenten fast on this feast day, they traditionally go home to eat fish.

Since this popular Marian ritual had the most literature (Fahed, 2020) compared to any other Marian rituals in Lebanon, I expected it to be one of the most-mentioned pieces of information among participants. This certainly was the case with Ahmed, and less so with the remaining participants. To my surprise, Ghada was not aware of the Feast of the Annunciation at all.

4.2.2. *Our Lady of Lebanon, Harissa*

Harissa is known as a place of hybrid religious encounter and for its appeal to both Christians and Muslims, as well as visitors and tourists, in Lebanon. Harissa was mentioned by many of the participants without my prompting, and I prompted some

questions about Marian rituals at Harissa if they did not speak about it on their own. Interestingly, many participants had differing explanations of how rituals are practiced there, which points to the individual and personal nature of many Marian rituals.

All participants acknowledged that both Christians and Muslims go to Harissa.^{vi} Multiple participants even exclaimed that they have witnessed more Muslim women wearing hijab at Harissa and other Christian shrines/churches than Christian or non-hijab wearing women. Christian participants noted that churches named after the Virgin Mary and statues of her are special for making rituals such as personal prayer and the rosary (primarily Catholics). Ghada mentioned that she feels safe and comfortable when in churches and at Harissa. Aya offered the most in-depth account of what people, both Christian and Muslim, do at Harissa. She began by saying, “we don’t go for the view, we go to pray” which contradicts Abdallah’s view that Muslims go to Harissa for sightseeing and feeling peace, not to perform rituals. Aya mentioned that at Harissa, people remain quiet and light candles, offer monetary donations, pray dua, and plead to the Virgin Mary for intercession; furthermore, she stated that Harissa is the best example of how Christians and Muslims come together in Lebanon.

Multiple participants mentioned that women often go to Harissa to pray about fertility concerns, which I will discuss more in theme 4. Abdallah told me that he heard of a Muslim woman bringing a candle that was the same height as herself, presumably around five feet tall, to Harissa to light it there and ask Mary to help give her a child. Noura, who moved abroad, mentioned that every time she visits Lebanon, she goes to Harissa directly from the airport before going home or making other stops. She also said that she had a health concern a number of years ago, and pleaded to the Virgin Mary that if she solved the medical issue, she would go to Harissa during her next trip to

Lebanon and pray there all night. Her medical results came out resolved, and so the next time she went to Lebanon, she went to Harissa and stayed there praying until 6am.

Participants also mentioned a few other Christian churches, shrines, and pilgrimage sites named after the Virgin Mary in Lebanon at which Christians and Muslims encounter each other, namely, Saydet el Nourieh. At these sites, many denominations of Christians as well as Muslims go for their own personal reasons, which may include sightseeing, personal prayer/dua, saying the rosary or other Marian prayers, reading sura Maryam, and taking wedding photos. Although they may not engage directly with each other in dialogue, interreligious encounter is present.

4.3. Importance of the symbolism of the Virgin Mary in Lebanon

Upon conducting the interviews for this research, it became apparent that the symbol of the Virgin Mary means different things to different people. What is important, then, is understanding that the Virgin Mary will be interpreted in however way a person or religious group decides. Elie, who studied symbolism in his graduate degree, told me that the key difference between Christianity and Islam (viewing Jesus as God versus as a prophet) shapes the way they view the Virgin Mary. Certainly, then, Christians and Muslims do not view the Virgin Mary in the same way. However, she is important to both groups and the function of her symbolism is what is important. Furthermore, this function can be used for interreligious encounter.

4.3.1. Most common views of Mary as a symbol

The overwhelming responses that I received to the question, “What do you see the Virgin Mary as a symbol for in Lebanon?” were related to motherhood, strength,

purity, and love. Abdallah was the only participant to say that he views the Virgin Mary as a symbol for being a single mother, as well as a mother who has lost a child in front of her own eyes. Additionally, he views her as a symbol of courageous youth, ready to carry a great task. Ahmed and Elie both said they view her as a symbol of protection. Aya told me she sees the Virgin Mary as a symbol of purity, honesty, and strength. Noura said the Virgin Mary is a symbol of love and sacrifice, and of mothers who sacrifice and suffer for the good of their families. Antoine said he views her as a powerful, yet tender, lady. Both Ghada and Elie described the Virgin Mary as feminine energy. Elie even said that he views her as a symbol of the feminine side of God. He continued by explaining that in popular religion, what we do not see in our father figure of God, we put in our mother figure, Mary.

4.3.2. Mary as a symbol of Lebanese national identity

Multiple participants mentioned that they also view the Virgin Mary as a symbol of Lebanese national identity. Not only is the Virgin Mary incredibly important in both Christianity and Islam, which are deeply engrained into Lebanese society, but she is also tied to countless famous locations in Lebanon, including churches, shrines, statues, etc. that visitors and Lebanese people make an effort to visit. These sights have become monumental in promoting Lebanon's beauty (therefore tourism) and rich cultural mosaic. Furthermore, by having some Marian rituals in common, various religious groups and sects feel a connection between them because of the Virgin Mary, creating a stronger sense of national identity. Elie and Antoine connected the Virgin Mary with Lebanon in general and even with the cedar trees in the Bible and on the Lebanese flag. Elie joked that we could replace the cedar tree in the middle of the Lebanese flag with

an image of the Virgin Mary. This gives insight as to how Lebanese devotion to the Virgin Mary is situated in a nest of devotion to Lebanon. Noura even told me, “If more people prayed to Mary, then maybe we would have peace in Lebanon.”

4.4. Other popular Marian rituals in Lebanon

Additional popular Marian rituals came up in the interviews to a lesser extent that are relevant and certainly worth mentioning.

4.4.1. May rituals

Around the world, the month of May is dedicated to the Virgin Mary by Christians, most often Catholics. Noura said that May rituals are more celebrated by Catholics than Orthodox in Lebanon. Both she and Aya said, however, that in May, Harissa is considerably more crowded than usual, with both Christians and Muslims. Elie said the same thing, and that people even come from Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey for rituals at Harissa in May. Rita offered the most information on May rituals. She said that some people fast throughout the month of May, sing hymns to Mary, say the rosary, and attend mass. Additionally, if someone is very sick, then a girl might wear clothing resembling Mary for the month of May to honor Mary, asking for prayers for the sick person. According to Elie, May 1st and 31st are the largest celebration days of May rituals.

4.4.2. Marian rituals about fertility and family concerns

Aya, who was the first person to tell me about Marian rituals among Muslim women back in the fall of 2021, provided great information on popular Marian rituals of

women regarding fertility and family issues in Lebanon. Aya told me that women often perform rituals to the Virgin Mary in the form of sacrifice and fasting, candles, personal prayer/dua, and pleading to the Virgin Mary for children, good health, or marital issues. Sometimes, if a woman is struggling to get pregnant and performs rituals to the Virgin Mary and then has a baby girl, she will name the girl Mary or Maryam.

Aya also said that people will perform rituals to the Virgin Mary if someone is sick or to regain faith. She has heard about Marian miracles of healing cancer and paraplegics, and heard a specific story about a teacher with cancer, after walking around at Harissa without shoes, was miraculously healed. Elie mentioned two places, Mar A'bda and Saydet el Bizaz (which means Our Lady of Breasts) in Lebanon that people also go to for pilgrimage and prayer if they are having trouble becoming pregnant. However, Elie, a Maronite Catholic priest, told me that he advises women to go to a doctor rather than to go to church for pregnancy issues. Noura also told me a story about an American Catholic couple who were having trouble getting pregnant. They traveled to Lebanon and went to Saydet Nourieh, an Orthodox monastery and church, and got pregnant after that visit.

4.4.3. Marian rituals related to dreams or visions

Two participants told me stories about dreams of the Virgin Mary that led to Marian rituals. In the first, Noura described a dream she, herself, had. In the dream, she saw Our Lady of Lebanon smiling at her with arms outstretched. Noura asked her Orthodox priest what that dream meant, and he told her that the Virgin Mary wanted to tell her something good. Shortly after, Noura found out she was pregnant (with her fourth child) and decided to name the baby girl Mary.

Aya told me a story about a vision that her great grandmother (Muslim) had while awake. The vision that she saw was the Virgin Mary floating in from the window. The woman asked the Virgin Mary why she came to her, since she was just an ordinary person and no one special. The Virgin Mary did not reply, but was simply smiling at her.

I think it is interesting to note here that Antoine, a Maronite priest, told me that in some popular rituals (in Lebanon and in general) there are traces of superstitions and even paganism. He clarified to say there is still strong faith (in God), but that some rituals border superstition. He did not tell this to me in the context of dreams or visions; however, it is fitting to mention it.

4.4.4. Marian rituals and material culture

In many of the interviews, the topic of material culture came up, even if we did not use the term material culture. Multiple participants mentioned candles at Harissa, of course the statue of Harissa was a focus of conversation, and Aya mentioned that in Achrifiyeh, Beirut, there are many statues of the Virgin Mary with rosaries and lit candles around them. Elie offered an interesting opinion on the importance of material culture among Muslims in Lebanon. He told me that since Muslims have less material culture than Christians due to the lack of icons, pictures, etc. and they “only have the transcendence of God”, it is his opinion that Muslims in Lebanon like to use Christian signs and material culture. Perhaps this is a contributing factor as to why some Muslims light candles at Harissa or visit shrines of the Virgin Mary. This occurrence provides further opportunities for Christian-Muslim encounter.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

This research is significant because it is the first study analyzing multiple popular Marian rituals among both Christians and Muslims in Lebanon. A central goal of this research project was to learn what popular Marian rituals are being practiced in Lebanon, and if they provide a strong basis for interreligious encounter between Christians and Muslims. The results of these interviews are interesting because, while there is much agreement about the importance of the Virgin Mary as a symbol and of popular Marian rituals, there is disagreement regarding the possibility and effectiveness of popular Marian rituals leading to interreligious encounter between Christians and Muslims in Lebanon.

The interviews, with three Muslims and six Christians, provide a thorough start in understanding if popular Marian rituals can lead to Christian-Muslim encounter and better interreligious relations and dialogue. Out of the three Muslim participants, two (Ahmed and Aya) enthusiastically believe that the symbol of the Virgin Mary is a uniting force between Christians and Muslims in Lebanon (and outside of Lebanon). The third, Abdallah, was not very enthusiastic about it, but did not deny or dislike the idea. Out of the six Christian participants, one (Elie) believed that the symbol of the Virgin Mary is a uniting force between Christians and Muslims in Lebanon. Three (Nicolas, Antoine, and Rita) did not believe the Virgin Mary can be used as a symbol to unite Christians and Muslims (two of them cited political reasons as a factor why not). The remaining two, Noura and Ghada, said it is possible, but depends on the people and context. These varying perspectives show that popular Marian rituals are an *opportunity*

for positive Christian-Muslim encounter in Lebanon – it depends on the context, which actors are involved, and if they are already open to interreligious encounter and dialogue. Participants with an interreligious background or inclination for interreligious dialogue and encounter tend to view popular Marian rituals as strong common ground between Muslims and Christians in Lebanon, therefore providing an opportunity for encounter. People without this interreligious background or inclination tend to think popular Marian rituals cannot provide an opportunity for encounter.

The other component of this subtitle, *Lebanese national identity*, comes from the findings that popular Marian rituals quite often lead to a stronger sense of Lebanese national pride. This is because many of these rituals are at beautiful sites that both Lebanese people (Christians and Muslims) and tourists flock to, creating a sense of national beauty and identity. Secondly, many of the popular Marian rituals in Lebanon are practiced, or at least witnessed, by both Christians and Muslims, fostering a sense of Lebanese national identity that can transcend rigid religious identity.

This research was limited by a small number of interviews, and would benefit from additional interviews, specifically with active members of religious communities in Lebanon that regularly participate in popular Marian rituals.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This research highlights an important nexus of unique Christian-Muslim encounter and national identity in Lebanon: through popular Marian rituals. Over the course of this essay, I presented the literature available on this topic, explained my methodology for the research, and thematically analyzed the results of the interviews. I conclude that popular Marian rituals can certainly be an opportunity for positive Christian-Muslim encounter in Lebanon, and foster an increased sense of Lebanese national identity. When people have a background in interreligious encounter and/or are interested in pursuing interreligious endeavors, it is more likely that these rituals can pave the way for better Christian-Muslim encounter, dialogue, and understanding. The Virgin Mary is one of the strongest symbols in Lebanon that can be used for mutual understanding and respect between religious groups. In the unique case of Lebanon, popular Marian rituals are a promising path forward for increasing interreligious encounter, and they increase a sense of national Lebanese identity among Lebanese Christians and Lebanese Muslims.

Joseph Prabhu (2011) offers an insightful perspective on the encounter of religions and cultures in the modern day due to globalization. He notes that the emergent Second Axial Age, from the late 20th century until now, is characterized by increased globalization and a global shift of consciousness, rather than a personal shift of consciousness as was in the First Axial Age. He argues that this spike in globalization has led to the merging of cultures and religions, but it does not cause them to lose their distinct identities. Rather, their identities become stronger through meeting

other cultures and religions, and the interfaith dialogue leads to intrafaith dialogue, causing them to become more fully aware of themselves. The emergent Second Axial Age strongly encourages dialogue, and the goal of this interreligious encounter is a quest for truth and wisdom, transcending and transforming individual religions. Prabhu notes that contemporary globalization is characterized by two opposite forces: greater convergence, and greater divergence or tribalism; therefore, such interconnection not only produces positive encounters, but also great tensions. This perspective can be helpful in understanding the analysis of *Popular Marian Rituals in Lebanon*. The encounter between Christianity and Islam in Lebanon has been a key factor in how Lebanese society has developed socially, religiously, politically, and economically. Furthermore, popular Marian rituals serve as a method of encounter between these two religious groups in Lebanon; this encounter does not encourage “bland universalism or unbridgeable pluralism” (Prabhu, 2011). Rather, it encourages dialogue and mutual respect, therefore leading to a better understanding of one’s own religion and a stronger religious identity.

To further develop the research on popular Marian rituals in Lebanon, it would be helpful to draw upon the works of scholars of sociology and religious studies, especially pertaining to popular symbols and rituals. Using a theoretical framework(s) to study how the Virgin Mary serves as a popular symbol at the center of rituals in Lebanon will offer more depth to understanding the implications of her symbolism. It would also be interesting to study popular Marian rituals in Lebanon specifically in the context of Christians as a minority community in Lebanon. Popular religion and popular rituals are uniquely celebrated by minority communities as opposed to majority communities, and the Lebanese case would benefit from taking this into account.

Additionally, material culture plays a massive role in popular religion and popular rituals, and the field would benefit greatly from research focusing on material culture's role in popular Marian rituals in Lebanon.

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ⁱ I use the term *popular rituals* throughout this paper to include rituals of all faiths, rather than using the term *devotion* which is typically used to describe Catholic rituals; however, when studying popular rituals, many scholars (many of whom researched Catholic popular rituals) use the term *popular devotions*

ⁱⁱ Del Socorro Castañeda-Liles and some other scholars use the term *lived religion* in place of *popular religion*

ⁱⁱⁱ Reflective of global trends, the Virgin Mary is venerated in Catholic and Orthodox Churches in Lebanon, and less so (if at all) in protestant Churches in Lebanon

^{iv} See Otto F. A. Meinardus' "The Virgin Mary as Mediatrix Between Christians and Muslims in the Middle East" for a comprehensive look at popular Marian ritual in Egypt among both Muslims and Christians

^v It is important to note that some interview participants use the language "pray to Mary" when they are not actually talking about praying *to* Mary, but asking her to intercede for them. There is a key difference between the two, and due to a minor language barrier and lack of correct religious vocabulary, many people say that they pray *to* Mary

^{vi} Since Harissa has both Christian and Muslim visitors, it shares similarities with St. Mary of the Angels Co-Cathedral in Chennai, India and the Shrine Basilica of Our Lady of Good Health in Velankanni, India (both of these churches in India have both Christian and Hindu visitors), and a comparison of one or both of the shrines/churches in India with Harissa would be a great opportunity for future research