**Orthodoxy as a Way of Living: Religion, Sect, and Crisis in Lebanon**

by

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## Dedication

To Beirut, a city that forgets easily and remembers often.

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This dissertation has been shaped by numerous challenges and transformations, but it is equally the result of the collective effort of many individuals who, in both significant and subtle ways, have contributed to its making.

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## Preface

During my long-term field research among the Rum Orthodox community in Lebanon, a series of multidimensional systemic breakdowns struck the country, with widespread consequences across all segments of society. Nationwide demonstrations in Lebanon (and Iraq), the COVID-19 pandemic, economic and financial collapse, and the 2020 explosion at the Port of Beirut amounted to one the most severe crisis in over a century, according to a 2021 World Bank report. Collectively, these events had a profound impact on the community I was working in, and, thus, on the outcome of this dissertation. What follows is a brief overview of the events.

On October 17, 2019, major cities in Lebanon witnessed widespread anti-government demonstrations, or what came to be wished for and known as *thawra* (revolution). Sparked by a proposed new tax on WhatsApp calls, long-standing and pent-up feelings of anger, frustration, and uncertainty overflowed the streets. The root causes for these feelings ran deep, including a crippling debt crisis, foreign currency shortages, rising unemployment, exploitative working conditions, and a lack of essential public services like water, electricity, and waste management. Anti-establishment slogans (*killun yaʿni killun* – Arabic for "all of them means all of them"), sounds of tanjara (pans), and patriotic songs filled the squares of cities and towns. Demands for the overthrow of the political and economic regime in place since the end of the civil war (1975–1990) led to the resignation of Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri and his cabinet on October 29, 2019. A sense of excitement for a future "otherwise" echoed across sectarian lines, class divisions, and political affiliations, as people from all walks of life gathered in squares, occupied streets, and set roadblocks. Often times, these crowds faced the violence of the state apparatus and opposition from partisan supporters of political parties and sectarian factions, as well as internal disagreements on how this "otherwise" would look like. At the onset of the thawra, I was conducting field research within a Rum Orthodox parish in Beirut. Faced with roadblocks that hindered my access to the field, and sensing the hope of the events, I started documenting their unfolding on the ground. In solidarity with Lebanon, I joined the protests, which brought back vivid memories of the 2018 anti-government protests in my native country, Romania.

As the protests gained momentum, there was also a growing awareness of the severity and magnitude of the crises that Lebanon was succumbing to. The structural failure of the banking system and the collapse of the national currency highlighted a Ponzi-style financial engineering that involved the banking sector, the Central Bank of Lebanon (BDL – Banque du Liban), and state institutions. Starting with November 2019, Lebanese banks implemented policies of "capital control" and "haircut" on local depositors, particularly on transactions involving their dollar accounts. These ad-hoc measures curtailed depositors' access to their life savings, leaving them increasingly unable to cope with the devastating repercussions of a triple-digit inflation. At the same time, BDL was issuing successive circulars setting arbitrary exchange rates. As a consequence, the country started operating on multiple exchange rates, with an unregulated black market thriving on a pervasive and growing dollarized cash economy.

The outcomes of these systemic breakdowns in the post-war political economy of Lebanon had a far-reaching impact on the daily lives of ordinary Lebanese. They translated into debilitating financial uncertainties, an increase in multidimensional poverty, widening class disparities, an escalating shortage of basic amenities (i.e., electricity and water), and limited access to healthcare services, among other predicaments. Daily rhythms were also dictated by these absences, with extended delays in just about every facet of life becoming the norm. Hours spent queuing for gas, social interactions defined by the constant possibility of power outages, and price volatility for goods and services were just a few of the challenges people faced in their everyday lives. Within the Orthodox community I was working on, many experienced job loss or substantial pay cuts, leading to their increased dependence on confessional, sectarian, and diasporic networks for survival. Conversations over lunch, after church, or during religious gatherings were marked by references to dollar fluctuations on the black market, and the rising cost of food and gas. Prayers for saintly interventions mingled with memories and imagined futures of civil war. Criticism of the myriad failures of the Lebanese state mingled with sectarian anxieties and a sense of hope(lessness) in divine management.

The COVID-19 pandemic halted the momentum of the protests and further enhanced the vulnerabilities and inequalities in Lebanon and across the globe. With intermittent governmental lockdowns and mandates to shelter in-place starting with March 2020, the urban and social landscapes of Beirut changed drastically. Its combusted, loud, tiring streets were engulfed in an eerie silence. The atmosphere was heavy, burdened by the existence of an unknown pathogen

and the overpowering collective dread of people isolated at home. Downtown Beirut, once bursting with the sounds of a hoped-for revolution, had succumbed to a desolate silence. The initial absence of a vaccine, the subsequent global politics of vaccine distribution, and the potential strain on the Lebanese healthcare system further added to the pandemic crisis.

Then, on August 4, 2020, one of the biggest nonnuclear explosions in history tore through the urban fabric of Beirut and the bodies of its residents. Caused by the detonation of some 2,700 tons of ammonium nitrate that had been improperly stored for years, the explosion destroyed half of the port and its surrounding areas. According to a 2020 report by the municipality of Beirut and UN-Habitat, the blast caused over 200 deaths, and left more than 6000 injured or missing. Around 300.000 people were displaced or affected by the destruction of buildings, homes, and urban infrastructure, exacerbating a housing crisis already fueled by real estate speculation. Adding to the physical damage, the explosion left long-lasting psychological scars on the city's residents and their livelihoods. As of now, more than three years post-explosion, the investigation into the incident and all efforts to establish accountability have been thwarted through judicial and governmental bureaucracy.

Collectively, these systemic fractures and their impact on the ground reverberate through the chapters of this dissertation, each requiring various negotiations on my roles as a researcher, a foreigner, and a friend. As such, my engagements with Rum practitioners blurred the lines between personal and professional, home and fieldwork. At the Orthodox socio-medical center (*mustawsaf*) where I conducted research and volunteered, I was the foreigner who advocated for beneficiaries in a "broken" (*mkassar*) Arabic, but also the outsider who would never entirely grasp the intricacies of Lebanese culture. In the parish where I did long-term fieldwork, I was seen as a Romanian Orthodox, but also as a "non-Lebanese." During the 2019 thawra, I stood in solidarity with my Lebanese interlocutors and friends, but I was also questioned on why I allowed myself to be tear-gassed for a cause that was not inherently my own. These were the negotiations of an engaged researcher who is not from Lebanon, yet decided to stay; an anthropologist who is not Lebanese, but comes from Eastern Europe, a region that was partly under the Ottoman Empire, and was born in Romania, a country with a history of communism and Orthodox nationalism. Yet, more than that, these chapters reflect the challenges and adjustments of the many Lebanese whom I interacted with, and who generously shared their time in moments when one struggled to keep alive and survive.

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## Notes on Transliteration

Throughout this dissertation, I use a simplified version of the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (IJMES) system for translating Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). I omit indications of long and short vowels or distinctions between heavy and light letters. Diacritical marks are used only to indicate the Arabic letters hamza (ʾ) and ayn (ʿ). In the case of the Arabic vernacular spoken in Lebanon, I transliterate words and phrases to better reflect the way they are commonly pronounced in colloquial speech. For instance, the definitive article is indicated by /el-/ rather than /al-/, while *ta marbuta* (ة) is indicated by /eh/ rather than /a/.Thus, *al-kanisa* becomes *el-kniseh*. For colloquial speech, I also apply the consonant assimilation rules for the definite article, so *al-dawla* becomes *ed-dawleh, al-sharika* become *es-sharikeh.* For names of cities and places, I choose more commonly accepted versions, while keeping a phonemic and spelling consistency. For proper names and names of organizations, the spelling used by persons themselves and institutions is preferred.

Speakers predominantly used the Lebanese vernacular, English, and French. All non-English words are italicized, except those included in the *IJMES* list of such words or those that are often repeated (i.e., *waqf, mustawsaf, abuna,* and *sharikeh*). In quotations from written sources, I keep the transliterations chosen by the authors. All translations are my own. In line with ethnographic practices, most of my interlocutors are referred to only by their first names.

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## Abstract

Since 2019, Lebanon has grappled with a series of systemic breakdowns that ushered in multidimensional regimes of precarity. Drawing on ethnographic and archival research conducted from 2018 to 2021 in Beirut, this dissertation documents and historicizes how members of a Rum Orthodox community navigate and make moral sense of structural conditions of longue-durée inequalities and existential uncertainty. It proposes the analytical frame of Orthodoxy as a way of living (*tariqat ʿaish*) to investigate "Rum-ness" as a comprehensive model of existence anchored in the socio-political realities of crisis-ridden Lebanon.

Through a focus on Antiochian Orthodoxy as an institutional tradition and a community of practice, my work makes a critical intervention in the scholarship on sectarianism (*taʾifiyya*) in post-civil war Lebanon. It investigates alternative communal formations (e.g., church, parish, eucharistic community), along with their institutional articulations in Orthodox theology and religious practice, to disrupt a public and academic focus on sect as a homogeneous analytical category and a ubiquitous social formation. Moving beyond dichotomies such as sectarian-ecumenical and sacred-secular, I examine disrupted religious lives within broader social worlds that intersect and go beyond crumbling state structures, sect-based networks, and secular ontologies. Each chapter in this dissertation works in and through crisis across multiple forms, highlighting its translations on the ground and in the lives of Rum practitioners, all within the urban environment of Beirut. These encompass welfare practices in a socio-medical center (*mustawsaf)* shaped by divine management and economic duress; foundational liturgical rituals challenged by conundrums of digital and epidemiological mediations; and real estate practices that ground Muslim-Christian interactions.

By highlighting the local histories and experiences of this Arab Christian community, my dissertation prompts a critical examination of the political dynamics underlining studies of global Christianities. I engage with Orthodox anthropology to underscore relational networks and models of collective becoming that challenge scholarly understandings of personhood and transcendence rooted in dominant Western assumptions. Also, working at the junction of the

normative aspirations of Orthodox tradition and the contingencies of precarious lives, I highlight the dynamic nature within institutional spaces of what counts as "right" belief and practice. I look at the ethnographic activation of theological tropes to highlight local Orthodox worldviews that intersect with the social reality of sectarianism in Lebanon.

## Introduction Orthodoxy as a Way of Living

> R: What does it mean for you to be Rum?
>
> A: A way of living (*tariqat ʿaish*). I do not go around saying that I am Rum like others says they are Sunnis or Maronites. It is a way of living. How you choose to live your life. I cannot be a Rum Orthodox just in church. It is a way of living through the liturgy and the history of your community. But not like I am in the right and I must break the head of others.[1]

These were the words of Assaad, a young man shy in his demeanor yet steady in his opinions. As a local of Mazraʿa, he was an active member in the parish of Mar Mikhail and Jubrail Orthodox Church.[2] An acolyte to *abuna*[3] Boulos, he was skilled in most aspects of liturgical practice. Assaad also experimented with *taratil* (religious hymns) under the guidance of Fouad, the primary *murattil* (chanter) of the parish. At the time of our interview, Assaad was employed by the administrative office of the *waqf* (religious endowment) in Mazraʿa. We sat face-to-face on leather couches in a church annex that served as abuna's office. The cold air from the air-conditioning contrasted sharply with the hot humid summer days in Beirut. Alongside power outages, our discussion was periodically interrupted by young members of the parish scout group who were coming in and out of the office.

***

Assaad's answer did not come as a surprise to me, nor was the question unfamiliar to him. During my fieldwork among the Rum Orthodox community in Beirut, I frequently asked my interlocutors what it meant for them to be a (good) Rum. Whether inquired explicitly in semi-structured interviews or hinted at in everyday conversations, the more I posed the question, the more varied and even puzzling the answers became. Attending the liturgy, praying, emulating the lives of saints, obeying abuna, abiding by tradition (*parádosis* in Greek; *al-taqlid al-sharif* in

[1] Assaad, interview by author, June 29, 2020, office of the parish priest in Mazraʿa, Beirut.
[2] Mazraʿa is one of the twelve administrative districts of Beirut, and it is also the name of a sector within this district. For more on this, *see* Chapter 4 "In Search for Futures Lost: Waqf, Parish, and Locality."
[3] *Abuna* is a term used to address a priest (*khuri*). It has a pastoral facet and it literally translates as "our father." I use *abuna* rather than priest or *khuri* since my interlocutors were consistent with using this term irrespective of the language they were speaking in (i.e., Arabic, English, French).

Arabic)—these were just a few of the reactions I got. Yet, amid this apparent inconsistency, two constants stood ground: the centrality of the liturgy and Orthodoxy as a way of living (*tariqat ʿaish*). For Rum practitioners, Orthodoxy is worship centered on the liturgy as a foundational corporate act, with sacraments as regulated forms of human-divine communion and ecclesial structures as upholders of tradition. Built around these central elements is a variety of scripted practices that anchor congregants in relational networks and sacred hierarchies centered on God as the ultimate source of authority. These practices underscore a dynamic relation between tradition—as theological and historical normativity reflected in prescriptive texts, liturgical calendars, and the writings of the Holy Fathers—and the adjustments and pragmatic considerations within and beyond religious practice. Too much focus on heterodoxy overshadows not only the overarching influence of ecclesial authority in matters of correctness and truth, but also the concerns of believers with doing their religion right.[4] Conversely, too much focus on orthodoxy overlooks the dynamic nature of what counts as "right" *doxa* and *praxis.* It leaves unnoticed practices that may circumvent institutional borders, yet still abide by Orthodox tenants. Thus, while preoccupied with matters of authenticity and tradition, scholarly approaches to Orthodoxy must leave opened the potential for doubt, creativity, failure, and deferral as modes of engagement with the sacred.

Since my work argues for an engagement with concepts emerging from the field, I propose Orthodoxy as way of living (*tariqat ʿaish*) to be the meta-narrative that informs this dissertation. The phrase denotes modes of being in the world that are shaped at the junction of the systemic nature of tradition and the messiness of religion as lived.[5] It argues for projects of religious fashioning anchored in the socio-political realities of crisis-ridden Lebanon, characterized by institutional shortcomings, crippling uncertainty, and precarious livelihoods. In this regard, my approach to Orthodoxy as a way of living makes three main interventions. First, I argue that Orthodoxy entails a comprehensive model of existence that resists a sacred-secular dichotomy and argues for the "unpredictable coexistence of different nuances, moments, and

[4] Andreas Bandak and Tom Boylston, "The 'Orthodoxy' of Orthodoxy: On Moral Imperfection, Correctness, and Deferral in Religious Worlds," *Religion and Society* 5, no. 1 (2014): 32–35, https://doi.org/10.3167/arrs.2014.050103.

[5] Samuli Schielke and Liza Debevec, introduction to *Ordinary Lives and Grand Schemes: An Anthropology of Everyday Religion*, ed. Samuli Schielke and Liza Debevec (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012), 2–3.

registers of life."[6] Being open to this coexistence requires one to go beyond the boundaries of religious rituals and into the mundane. Stories of saints, *taratil* (religious hymns), colloquial phrases of divine intercession, Facebook liturgies, WhatsApp biblical verses and their contemporary relevance— all examples of Orthodox registers that punctuated the everyday lives of Rum practitioners.[7] Concurrently, these registers intertwined with narratives of unemployment, black market dollar rates, energy scarcity, sectarian violence, bio-viral disaster, and political protest. Amid the recent structural failures that have marked Lebanon, the religious lives of my interlocutors revealed a fragility of being that coexisted with Orthodox tenets as moral guidelines for "this-worldly" engagements. These tenets embedded Rum practitioners in religious structures shaped by activist models of social and civic engagement, fostering expressions of communality that intersected and went beyond sectarian networks and dysfunctional state structures.[8]

Second, Orthodoxy as a way of living makes a critical intervention in the scholarship on sectarianism (*taʾifiyya*)—understood both in a political register and beyond the domain of politics proper—as an overbearing reality in Lebanon. My interlocutors often expressed criticism towards expressions of Orthodoxy as sect (*taʾifa*). These included distributing medical supplies and social services on sect-based criteria, pledging allegiance to communal and political leaders (*zuʿamaʾ*) in exchange for favors and security, or engaging in sectarian political strife against the background of the 2019 nationwide protests. For them, the corrupted networks of Rum as sect diverged from Orthodoxy as Church (*kanisa*) or eucharistic community.[9] Paying attention to these alternative social formations and their articulations in Orthodox theology and religious practice allows for disruptive narratives that challenge a scholarly focus on sectarianism as a pervasive social order in Lebanon. It also challenges ubiquitous depictions of religion as a

[6] Samuli Schielke, *Egypt in the Future Tense: Hope, Frustration, and Ambivalence before and after 2011* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2015), 11.
[7] For similar approaches, *see* Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004); Andreas Bandak, "Exemplary Series and Christian Typology: Modeling on Sainthood in Damascus," in "The Power of Example: Anthropological Explorations in Persuasion, Evocation, and Imitation," ed. Andreas Bandak and Lars Højer, special issue, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 21, S1 (2015): 47–63, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.12165.
[8] For a similar approach to Islamic charity, *see* Amira Mittermaier, *Giving to God: Islamic Charity in Revolutionary Times* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2019).
[9] Liturgically, an equivalent of the term "eucharistic community" in Arabic would be *jasad al-masih,* which translates as "the Body of Christ."

conductor of sectarian ideologies by highlighting attempts to destabilize sectarian structures from within the Orthodox tradition.

However, the stance against Orthodoxy as sect was not as clear-cut in the social realities on the ground, where various communal instantiations (e.g., church, sect, parish, or confession) intersected in complex ways. This attention to different social formations and their institutional grounding constitutes the third intervention of my work. While acknowledging the diversity of Orthodoxy as liturgical and everyday practice, I also focused on the structures that Rum practitioners were embedded in. These encompass Orthodox institutions (i.e., *waqf*, church, *mustawsaf* – socio-medical center) and central rituals (i.e., liturgy, Holy Communion), but also broader failed systems that Lebanese had to navigate in their precarious daily lives. My interlocutors strove to secure their livelihood and cope with volatile circumstances triggered by a "Molotov cocktail" of post-war neoliberal capitalism, sectarian clientelism, and economic collapse.[10] These structural circumstances—which ordinary Lebanese had little power over, but which significantly influenced their livelihoods—perpetuated stark inequalities and identity differentiation. In addition, the position of Rum Orthodox as an Arab Christian minority in the Middle East and their status as a sect with limited political power in Lebanon contributed to recurrent outbursts of collective anxieties and sectarian sensibilities. These tensions were often directed toward what was perceived as an overwhelming Muslim presence and a dwindling Christian one, turning projects of coexistence into zero-sum scenarios.

All these mutually constitutive layers suffuse and clash to create a complex image of what it means to be Rum in Lebanon. Encompassing these layers, the approach to Orthodoxy as a way of living allows me to shift from the aspirational dimension of theology to the reality of sectarian politics on the ground; from the sphere of liturgical sensorium to urban geographies and their politicized aesthetics; from the immediacy of need in a temporality of crisis to the hope for divine management; from sect as an ordering force in Lebanon to church as a social structure present within and beyond national borders and secular ontologies.

Concretely, Chapter 1 analyzes Orthodox forms of sociality and welfare practices shaped by local theological models of social and civic activism, but also by sect-based sensibilities and

[10] *See also* Judith Naeff, *Precarious Imaginaries of Beirut: A City's Suspended Now* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 1–34; Rima Majed, "'Sectarian Neoliberalism' and the 2019 Uprisings in Lebanon and Iraq," in *The Lebanon Uprising of 2019: Voices From the Revolution,* ed. Jeffrey G. Karam and Rima Majed (London: I.B. Tauris and Bloomsbury, 2023), 76–88.

class divisions. Chapters 2 and 3 shift the focus to the profound impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, exploring negotiations around disrupted Christian praxis through the lens of embodied liturgical practice, medical and religious materialities, and the overarching theme of existential precarity. The evolving relational dynamic between these dimensions illuminates the intricate entanglements of God, humanity, and nature, advocating for a more-than-human approach to the coexistence of medical registers and religious trust during the pandemic. Chapter 4 zooms in on an Orthodox community in an area with a history of mixed Muslim-Christian residency until Lebanon's civil war (1975–1990). Here, the waqf (religious endowment) is (re)defined as a sectarian asset, a communal local heritage, and a charitable institution in the context of an accentuated housing crisis.

**Dissertation Map**

At this point, a brief description of who are the Rum Orthodox is necessary. The term "Rum"—used in contemporary Arabic and found in Ottoman Turkish texts—is derived from the Arabic word *al-rum* meaning "Roman." It was used to denote Christians under the Eastern Roman (or what came to be known as the Byzantine) Empire, and it later referenced an Ottoman millet dominated by Greek upper clergy. Today, "Rum" refers to the Arab-speaking Christians who adhere to the Byzantine rite and fall under the authority and guidance of the Rum Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East, located in Damascus, Syria. I do not use the term "Greek Orthodox," in order to avoid associations with Greek nationalist historiography and to emphasize the Arab character of the Antiochian Church, which has historically resisted Greek linguistic and hierarchical domination.

A thematic thread in this dissertation is the twentieth century *nahda* (revival) within the Antiochian Orthodox Church, which was marked by an emphasis on strengthening theological education, increasing participation in sacramental life, and revitalizing monasticism. In 1942, driven by the fervor of the *nahda* and influenced by the writings on Orthodox spirituality of Russian émigrés in Paris, a group of students from Beirut established MJO (*Mouvement de la Jeunesse Orthodoxe, Harakat al-Shabiba al-Urthudhuksiyya,* Orthodox Youth Movement). Spread across Syria and Lebanon, this religious organization has a community-based approach, organizing social and religious activities throughout parishes and dioceses in the two countries. Yet, my focus extends beyond the organizational boundaries of MJO. It encompasses Rum

practitioners, predominately from Beirut, who observe the Byzantine rite, attend regularly the main feasts of the liturgical year, and are affiliated with a parish within the purview of the Antiochian Patriarchate. Most of my interlocutors are from middle and lower- middle class, comprising both clergy and laity. The analytical discussions in this dissertation also extend to the Rum community as a whole in present-day Lebanon. As one of the eighteen officially recognized sects, Rum sway little political power and hold no seats at the uppermost levels of the confessional power-sharing system in Lebanon. As a community, they are considered the second largest Christian group in the country, even though they have registered a steady decrease in numbers.[11]

Empirically, this dissertation builds upon ethnographic and historical research conducted from 2018 to 2021 within the Rum Orthodox community in Beirut. Throughout my long-term fieldwork, my methodology was reactive to the current critical events impacting the country, requiring extensive ethical and pragmatic adjustments. The outcome was a diverse collection of data, incorporating semi-structured interviews, an archive of photographic and audio material, comprehensive ethnographic fieldnotes, as well as theological and religious literature.

The following paragraphs outline the research methods I employed, with additional details on each chapter provided throughout this introduction. I conducted close to sixty semi-structured interviews with Rum practitioners across several parishes in Beirut. The majority of these interviews were deliberately conducted in person, taking place in churches, cafés, or private homes. I incorporated open-ended questions and elicitation techniques such as story retelling and picture description, while also paying attention to the sensory environment of the interviews. However, with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and its reach to Lebanon, I found myself confined to a one-bedroom apartment in Beirut. To foster social engagement and explore new research methods, I conducted online interviews with Rum practitioners, seeking to gain insights into doctrinal and sensorial negotiations of digital Orthodoxy as "right practice." Also, noticing the growing online presence of the Orthodox community and the digitalization of liturgical activity, I participated in Zoom prayers and liturgies, attended conferences organized within the Rum community in Lebanon and the diaspora, and documented interactions within several WhatsApp groups affiliated with parishes and religious organizations like MJO.

[11] Bassel F. Salloukh, "The Architecture of Sectarianization in Lebanon," in *Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East*, ed. Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 217.

The interviews were complemented by immersive fieldwork at various sites across Beirut. For more than a year, I attended the weekly meetings of two MJO groups in Ashrafiyeh and Dekwaneh. These gatherings, described by participants as opportunities for spiritual and social fellowship, involved discussions on various religious and biblical themes, as well as social activities to foster group cohesion. As part of these groups, I documented the social life of MJO, engaged in debates on Christian theology and anthropology, joined group members in the 2020 nationwide protests, and attended various conferences and workshops organized by the organization across Lebanon. From 2019 to 2020, I volunteered and conducted research at the MJO *mustawsaf,* an Orthodox socio-medical center in Ashrafiyeh. The focus of my work at this center, as detailed in Chapter 1, leaned more towards its social dimension and was significantly impacted by the pandemic and the August 4 explosion. With the COVID-19 outbreak, I remained active, although intermittently, at the center, helping in the distribution of essential welfare services to those who required assistance. Following the August 4 explosion, my involvement at the *mustawsaf* intensified. I assessed the material damage caused by the explosion, distributed food kits to affected families, and collaborated with foreign organizations on emergency aid programs. Lastly, from 2019 to 2021, I attended regularly the liturgical and social activities of the Mar Mikhail and Jubrail Church in Mazraʿa. My immersive research practice encompassed active participation in the liturgical program, sharing meals and celebrations at people's homes and at church, and fostering enduring relationships within the parish. Additionally, I documented the history and urban presence of this Orthodox church and its endowment (*waqf*) in Mazraʿa. As detailed in Chapter 4, I did this through transect walks, photographic research, and interviews with members of the parish and local residents.

The research dimension of this dissertation was complemented by a deliberate decision to write from the field, challenging recurrent academic representations of what the writing process should look and feel like. A distance is often expected between the "the messy stage of ethnographic research—the fieldwork—and the structured phase of reflection and scholarly production that comes afterward."[12] This distance often implies doing fieldwork in cultures and societies in the Global South and then engaging with the collected data within Euro-Atlantic institutions and gated academic environments. This pattern risks replicating an extractive logic

[12] Ieva Jusionyte, "Writing In and From the Field," in *Writing Anthropology: Essays on Craft and Commitment*, ed. Carole McGranahan (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 26.

tied to enduring colonial power dynamics and structural inequalities within anthropology as a discipline.[13] In writing this dissertation, I substituted the interlude between fieldwork and rigorous revisions of scholarly work with continuous critical reflections on my intersected positionalities in relation to the country where I work and live – Lebanon; the country where I am from – Romania; and the academic institution where I trained – the University of Michigan.

My approach to writing *in* and *from* the field had two dimensions. First, I actively paid attention to concepts and experiences emerging from the material realities of a fieldsite in crisis, and the work of ethnography within a state of crisis. Sensitive to Tomoko Masuzawa's critique of an enduring Orientalist paradigm of the West producing history and the East preserving it,[14] I stayed attuned to Orthodox concepts and experiences of Rum practitioners emerging from the structural fractures in Lebanon, and grounded in local theological and historical genealogies. Second, my interlocutors were involved in my writing process. While some lacked the interest or the ability to read in English, others were always eager to verify and question my findings. Priests read and commented on chapters and drafts. MJO members engaged with my work in several of our weekly meetings.[15] Through casual visits, protests, communal meals, mourning ceremonies, shared trauma of an explosion, veneration of saints, and navigating sectarian clientelist networks, my writing process was inescapably relational. Thus, the field continued to act as a generative space for rethinking the act of writing. Moreover, writing from the field entailed the intellectual act of writing in the future of an ethnographic present that would have no longer been, coupled with the experience of being in a present that was constantly becoming. The temporalities of these two different modes of embodiment collided, triggering different sensibilities that collided as well. In the words of anthropologist Vincent Crapanzano, "However much the writer of ethnography wishes to separate his ethnography from the ethnographic confrontation, the writing of ethnography is a continuation of the confrontation."[16]

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[13] Girish Daswani, "The (Im)Possibility of Decolonizing Anthropology," *Everyday Orientalism* (blog), November 18, 2021, https://everydayorientalism.wordpress.com/2021/11/18/the-impossibility-of-decolonizing-anthropology/.
[14] Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 4.
[15] Jione Havea et al., "Dialogues: Anthropology and Theology," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 28 no. 1 (2022): 297–347, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.13667.
[16] Vincent Crapanzano, "On the Writing of Ethnography," *Dialectical Anthropology* 2, no. 1 (1977): 69–73, http://www.jstor.org/stable/29789885.

## Conceptual and Analytical Dialogues

### *Along and Beyond Sect*

By now, a rich body of historical scholarship on Lebanon has argued for sectarianism (*taʾifiyya*) as a social and historical product[17] rather than the result of primordial sectarian differences or solely a foreign colonial invention.[18] In a classic of scholarship on Ottoman Lebanon, Ussama Makdisi argued for sectarianism as a modern product of both imperial agendas and domestic politics. Focusing on the 1860 Maronite-Druze hostilities in Mount Lebanon, he highlighted a shift from inter-sectarian hierarchies and feudal kinship to sect-based allegiances and centers of power.[19] Ottoman authorities and European powers played a significant role in driving this shift by framing the conflict in terms of primordial ethnic and religious divisions.[20] As argued by historian Leila Fawaz, the 1860 upheavals and their subsequent management had a Janus-faced impact on Beirut. On the one hand, they marked the city's ascendancy as a center of political and economic power.[21] On the other hand, the unresolved tensions and their sectarian underpinnings seeped out from the mountain and into Beirut, where urban economic interests mixed with patron-client relations around different sects.[22]

Another period that shaped Lebanon's history and further entrenched understandings of sectarianism as integral to the functioning of the state and society was the French mandate.

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[17] Fuad Shahin, *Al-taʾifiyya fi Lubnan hadiruha wa judhuruha al-tarikhiyya wa-l-ijtimaʿiyya* [Sectarianism in Lebanon its present and its historical and social roots] (Beirut: Dar al-Hadatha, 1986); Ahmad Beydoun, *Identité confessionnelle et temps social chez les historiens Libanaises contemporains* [Confessional identity and social time among contemporary Lebanese historians] (Beirut: L'Université Libanaise, 1984); Fawwaz Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon* (New York: Pluto Press, 2007); Max Weiss, *The Shadow of Sectarianism: Law, Shiʿism, and the Making of Modern Lebanon* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

[18] Michel Chiha, *Politique Intérieure* [Domestic Politics] (Beirut: Éditions du Trident, 1964). Chiha argued for a sect-based political system as the best solution to accommodate the reality of confessional difference. Kamal Salibi, *A House of Many Mansions: The History of Lebanon Reconsidered* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1988). Salibi's work on the history of modern Lebanon tends to replicate a binary between nationalism and premodern religious communities as tribes. For a more detailed analysis on the historiography of sectarianism in Lebanon, *see* Max Weiss, "The Historiography of Sectarianism in Lebanon," *History Compass* 7, no. 1 (2009): 141–54, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1478-0542.2008.00570.x.

[19] Ussama Makdisi, *Culture of Sectarianism: Community, History, and Violence in Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Lebanon* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000).

[20] These differences were institutionalized in 1861 through the *mutasarrifiyya,* a semiautonomous administrative structure for Mount Lebanon.

[21] Beirut became the capital of a vilayet bearing its name in 1888.

[22] Leila T. Fawaz, "The City and the Mountain: Beirut's Political Radius in the Nineteenth Century as Revealed in the Crisis of 1860," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 16, no. 4 (1984): 489–95, https://doi.org/10.1017/S002074380002852X.

Following the fall of the Ottoman Empire, France held mandate powers over "Greater Syria" (Bilad al-Sham) from 1918 to 1946. In 1920, it carved L'État du Grand Liban as a new political entity/colonial construct different from Greater Syria, albeit both stayed under French authority. Building on Ottoman remnants and with the assistance of local elites, France shaped the legal and civic infrastructures for the sect-based political and public systems in place today.[23] Following Lebanon's independence in 1943, the National Pact (*al-mithaq al-watani*) solidified political sectarianism in the newly formed republic. This unwritten agreement established a Christian-Muslim power-sharing system based on demographics from a 1932 census.[24] While imagined as a framework for reconciling social heterogeneity, the Pact further reinforced communal identities by assigning them political and legal status.[25]

Yet, the period that featured the most in my fieldwork when it came to militarization of communal identities was the 1975–1990 civil war in Lebanon. Often reduced to a Christian-Muslim domestic conflict, this war was a complex and multifaceted series of events involving local political factions, militia groups, and international actors (i.e., Palestinian, Syrian, Israeli, American).[26] While the nature and causes of the war have been ferociously debated among scholars, political pundits, and ordinary Lebanese, they all coalesce around its shattering impact.[27] Stories abound of people who disappeared, Lebanese who were questioned at random checkpoints for having Christian or Muslim sounding names, and homes that were raided on suspicion of allegiance to the "wrong" side. Moreover, the urban landscape of Beirut turned into shifting areas of influence, demarcated by local militias and political factions. Neighborhoods grew in ethnic and confessional homogeneity thorough displacement and internal migration, with

[23] Traboulsi, "From Mandate to Independence (1920–1943)," in *A History of Modern Lebanon*, 88–108.
[24] Elizabeth Picard, *Lebanon: A Shattered Country: Myths and Realities of the Wars in Lebanon,* trans. Franklin Philip, rev. ed. (London: Holmes & Meier, 2002), 69–72. The ratio was 6:5 in favor of Christians over Muslims.
[25] One enduring consequence of this pact is the sect-based allocation of the top three positions in the state: the president must be a Maronite, the prime minister a Sunni, and the speaker of parliament a Shiʿa.
[26] Sami Hermez, *War Is Coming: Between Past and Future Violence in Lebanon* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 22–25. Considering both its domestic and regional aspects, Hermez critically examines the terminology employed by scholars and his interlocutors to describe the fifteen years of protracted conflict in Lebanon. He proposes the term "Lebanon's war" as an alternative that recognizes both the foreign and domestic dimensions of the conflict.
[27] Theories on the breakout of Lebanon's war vary, encompassing discrepancies in national imaginaries (Salibi 1988), incommensurable socio-political divisions (Gilsenan 1996), or the Palestinian presence in Lebanon (Khalidi 1983).

Beirutis struggling to secure services and basic livelihood in a disintegrating city.[28] After fifteen years, the fights concluded with the ratification of the 1989 Taʾif Accord. Designed as a temporary solution working towards the abolition of political sectarianism, it trapped Lebanon into a permanent temporary, "allowing for and institutionalizing a sectarian present in order to facilitate a transition into an ever-delayed non-sectarian future."[29]

Political sectarianism extends to definitions of citizenship and personal status laws, making sect affiliation a deeply public matter. In Lebanon, citizens are known to the state through the prism of their sect and, as anthropologist Maya Mikdashi argued, through their sex.[30] Matters of inheritance, marriage, and divorce are resolved through fifteen personal status laws assigned to the eighteen sects recognized by the state.[31] Therefore, Lebanon's sectarian politics is not only an elitist project embodied by political villains as easily identifiable targets. It is also reproduced through the bureaucratic apparatus of state institutions and the people who engage with them.[32] Public and sectarian structures are co-constitutive, with sect being entangled in discourses and practices of a modern Lebanese state.

With Lebanon emerging as the "poster child" for scholarship on sectarianism in the Middle East, much of the emphasis has been placed on exploring the historical and political genealogies of this phenomenon.[33] However, processes of differentiation and association along communal lines also "operate through the everyday—through socialization, through family systems, and through various other aspects of social organization in both systematic and erratic or contradictory ways."[34] Along these lines, I argue that "Rum-ness" in Lebanon is shaped by communal forms of charity, materialized through urban practices, and embodied as affective-

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[28] Samir Khalaf, *Civil and Uncivil Violence in Lebanon: A History of the Internationalization of Communal Conflict* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 232–72; Samir Khalaf, "Urban Design and the Recovery of Beirut," in *Recovering Beirut: Urban Design and Post-War Reconstruction*, ed. Samir Khalaf and Philip S. Khoury (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 11–62.
[29] Maya Mikdashi, "The Magic of Mutual Coexistence: The Taif Accord at Thirty," *Jadaliyya*, October 23, 2019, https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/40134.
[30] Maya Mikdashi, *Sextarianism: Sovereignty, Secularism, and the State in Lebanon* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022).
[31] Alawite, Armenian Orthodox, Armenian Catholic, Assyrian, Chaldean, Copt, Druze, Ismaʾili, Jewish, Roman Catholic, Rum Catholic, Rum Orthodox, Maronite, Protestant, Sunni, Shiʿa, Syriac Catholic, and Syriac Orthodox.
[32] For example, *see* Linda Sayed, "Negotiating Citizenship: Shiʿi Families and the Jaʿfari Shariʿa Courts," in *Practicing Sectarianism: Archival and Ethnographic Interventions on Lebanon*, ed. Lara Deeb, Tsolin Nalbantian, and Nadya Sbaiti (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022), 31–51.
[33] *See also* footnotes 17 and 18.
[34] Suad Joseph, "Pensée 2: Sectarianism as Imagined Social Concept and as Imagined Social Formation," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 40, no. 4 (2008): 553, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743808081464.

sensorial registers that shape religious practice and everyday life. It is also expressed through social ephemera of appearances and expectations. You are Rum if your name is Mitri, Bustros, Tueni, Sursock, or Trad. You are Rum if you come from the Kura district or you live in areas of Beirut like Ashrafiyeh, Mar Nikula, or Mustashfa el-Rum.[35]

Questions like *Shu ismak/ismik?* (What is your name?) or *Min wein inta/inti?* (Where are you from?) are ubiquitous discursive tools whose ambiguous intentionality shifts between wanting to know one's name or place of origin and indirectly inquiring into one's sect or political affiliation. These questions are tied to enduring sectarian geographies entrenched during the civil war, publicly expressed through religious symbols and imprinted in the sensory -scapes of Beirut. Moreover, the specter of the war as a conflict without closure haunts the present as an inevitable future potential, structuring communal perceptions and everyday lives.[36] The uncertainty and volatility brought about by the recent crises further heightened collective anxieties about the imminent return of a war that has never left the Lebanese collective imaginary. For many Lebanese, recurrent power outages, fuel scarcities, and a lack of street lighting served as vivid reminders of the crumbling urban infrastructure during the war. In the course of the 2019 nationwide protests, fears of sectarian conflict overpowering national enthusiasm got exploited by political leaders and sectarian factions to undermine the legitimacy of the demonstrations. The coping mechanisms varied; seeking support within sects and their affiliated elite families, wielding *wasta* (connections) to expedite bureaucratic procedures, relying on diaspora remittances, or turning to church charity.[37]

### *State Absence and Religious Presence*

Orthodoxy as a way of living reacts to sect as a perennial, abstract category by showing how Rum identities are emergent and contingent on different historical and social factors. A case in point, Chapter 4 delves into negotiations of sect as social formation through urban practices

[35] Kura is a district located in the northern region of Lebanon, which is known for its strong Orthodox presence. In Beirut, areas such as Ashrafiyeh, Mar Nikula, and Mustashfa el-Rum are socially recognized as predominantly inhabited by middle-class and higher-middle-class Christian communities. These areas boast a significant number of Orthodox churches, schools, and institutions that have historical ties to traditional Orthodox families and the larger Orthodox community in Beirut.

[36] Sami Hermez, "'The War Is Going to Ignite:' On the Anticipation of Violence in Lebanon," *PoLAR - Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 35, no. 2 (2012), 327–44, http://www.jstor.org/stable/24497775.

[37] Kristin V. Monroe, *The Insecure City: Space, Power, and Mobility in Beirut* (New Brunswick, NJ, Rutgers University Press, 2016), 135–37.

around the Orthodox *waqf* (religious endowment). In its function as a real estate asset, the waqf was a profit-making structure feeding a Christian minority's quest for influence in Mazraʿa, a predominately Muslim area. In its function as communal heritage, the waqf catered to the housing needs of the local Rum community. Reactionary to the increasing challenges of economic deprivation and housing insecurities, my interlocutors turned to clientelist networks built around their confessional community and its assets. On one hand, these networks facilitated affordable and secure rentals for Rum parishioners in Mazraʿa, particularly at a time when many had lost their jobs or faced a significant decrease in their household income due to the financial crisis. On the other hand, these networks were "based on exploitative labor relations that become perceived as privileges in the context of rampant unemployment, underemployment, informality and precarity."[38] Loyalties in the shape of political voting, consumer loyalties, and manpower were exchanged for protection and livelihood. While these relations provided a sense of belonging and secured livelihoods, they also maintained and replicated deep-rooted mistrust towards radical otherness.

Here I align with a rich yet inchoate ethnographic scholarship that adds a dimension of everyday experience to the study of sect formations. Bringing together ethnography and critical spatial practice, Mohamad Hafeda investigates how physical and immaterial borders in Beirut are constructed, embodied, and subverted by the residents of a city marked by politico-sectarian segregation.[39] Hiba Bou Akar looks into urban planning to show how Beirut's peripheries become spaces of sectarian contestation, alimented by the apprehensive logic of a "war yet to come."[40] Joanne Randa Nucho illustrates how "Armenian-ness" is constructed through infrastructural materialities, access to public services, and religious networks of patronage.[41] These ethnographies offer compelling perspectives on how sectarian identities are lived both across sect-based borders and through the social intimacies of intra-communal relations. In their diversity, they challenge the reductive association of sect (*taʾifa*) with religion (*din*) by highlighting the dynamic socio-political and spatial capital of sectarianism.

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[38] Majed, "Sectarian Neoliberalism," in Karam and Majed, *The Lebanon Uprising of 2019*, 78.
[39] *See* Mohamad Hafeda, *Negotiating Conflict in Lebanon: Bordering Practices in A Divided Beirut* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2019).
[40] Hiba Bou Akar, *For the War Yet to Come: Planning Beirut's Frontiers* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018).
[41] Joanne Randa Nucho, *Everyday Sectarianism in Urban Lebanon: Infrastructures, Public Services, and Power* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

However, in their quest to challenge a "religious effect"—meaning the reconfiguration of cultural categories into religious ones under the influence of Western epistemologies and colonial practices,[42]—they tend to brush off the social reality of the very element they had argued against in the first place: religion. Here I find it imperative to highlight that Rum Orthodoxy as sect is not the sole expression of Christian public presence in Lebanon. Not all forms of religious difference are sectarian in nature, and not all communal-based distinctions are rooted in sectarian divisions. In this regard, my analytical approach does not subscribe to the reductive and schematic overlap between sect and religion. Neither does it abide by ideals of total separation between the two. Instead, I investigate the dynamic relation between Orthodoxy as community of practice and Orthodoxy as sect, together with their expressions in the lives of my interlocutors as they navigate a precarious everyday.

My focus on Rum practitioners draws attention to social formations advertised by Orthodoxy as institutional tradition and religious practice. These formations point to a dimension of Rum identity grounded in ontological and epistemic orders that cut across the social reality of sect. For instance, Chapter 2 explores the Orthodox notion of the eucharistic community (*jasad al-masih*) and its liturgical enactments through the Eucharist as a fundamental church sacrament *(sirr kanasi*). This notion weaves a network of relations that extends across different temporalities, among different historical churches, and between actors of different existential orders. Nevertheless, these corporate forms advertised by the Orthodox tradition and anchored in the structures of the Antiochian Church are not isolated experiences. They intersect with sect-based allegiances and practices in complex and meaningful ways. They reinforce, contradict, and cancel each other—sometimes all at once. A concrete example is the MJO *mustawsaf* in Chapter 1, a socio-medical center that functioned both as a provider of social services and as an extension of its parent religious organization, MJO. Within the environment of this center, sect-based welfare practices intersected with divine-human relations grounded in local Orthodox models of social activism and communion (*sharikeh*). Material and social support incorporated into the framework of divine management (*al-tadbir al-ilahi*) served as a substitute to an "absent" state, experienced through a lack of basic services, insecurity, and hopelessness.

[42] Daniel Dubuisson, *The Western Construction of Religion: Myths, Knowledge, and Ideology*, trans. William Sayers (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2003), 91–95.

In addition, the forms of communion advocated by Orthodox religious practices materialize in sacred geographies and ecclesial structures that intersect but also extend beyond the Lebanese national context. The Patriarchate of Antioch and all the East for the Rum Orthodox is located in Syria.[43] Consequently, the Antiochian Orthodox Church as a historical and social formation extends across countries, anchoring Rum in forms of belonging where nationality is not the main form of identification. My interlocutors often referenced their allegiance to transnational structures of authority, spanning from convents in Syria and Mount Athos to cloisters in Russia and Lebanon. In its focus on digital worship during the COVID-19 pandemic, Chapter 3 pays attention to these rich social worlds. It shows how restrictions to in-person worship accentuated forms of communion defined in between the privacy of domestic spaces and the social affordances of Orthodox transnational networks. Such networks were populated by saints, God, communal and political leaders (*zuʿamaʾ*), Christian and Muslim others, Mary as *walidat Allah* (mother of God), Holy Fathers, monks and nuns, theologians, and *wasta* (connections) agents. At times, these references aimed to convey detachment from local sectarian affairs. Other times, they reinforced sect-based categorizations or compensated for the limited political sway of Rum as sect.

Together, Chapters 1 and 4 examine a broader spectrum of interactions between religion and sectarianism, moving beyond the notion that one always reinforces the other. A logic of inherent reinforcement posits religion as a hindrance to stability and projects of national statehood in the Middle East. This implication, if not critically engaged with, tends to replicate the same Orientalizing discourses of sectarian violence that have authorized colonial and neocolonial powers to exert influence over local politics. For instance, the presence of sectarianism in the region is often associated with failed nationalism, while the absence of a secular sphere is seen as the consequence of a failed liberal state.[44] However, scholars working on Lebanon have effectively challenged this schematic divisions between modernity – framed as liberal, national, and secular – and sectarianism as the essentialized "other" – portrayed as irrational, violent, and religious. The sociologist Rima Majed has proposed the term "sectarian

[43] Its location in Damascus dates back to the fourteenth century, while its location in Syria as a state is intricately tied to the political borders set by the mandate system in the aftermath of World War I.
[44] Hussein Ali Agrama, "Asecular Revolution," *Immanent Frame,* March 11, 2011, https://tif.ssrc.org/2011/03/11/asecular-revolution/; Saba Mahmood, introduction to *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 1–28.

neoliberalism" to highlight the intersectional nature of sectarianism and neoliberalism. These two social and political structures get entangled as they both thrive on identity politics, social differentiation, and class divisions.[45] Maya Mikdashi expands the realm of political and legal possibilities beyond the religious-secular dichotomy illustrating how "the recognition of religious difference is an act that both performs and amplifies secular state sovereignty."[46] This differentiation enshrined in law claims to safeguard rights and liberties typically associated with liberalism, such as freedom of belief and "equal," albeit proportional, representation of all sects in the public and political sphere. In practice, it validates sectarian distinctions and hinders the potential for envisioning alternative forms of statehood and civic nationalism.

Pivoted against "imagined" national communities, religion as both analytical frame and practice, cannot be envisioned as having social potential for transformation outside the sectarian frame of differentiation. Yet can religion afford "imagining" community along something other than sectarian lines? Adhering to a frame where the secular and the religious twist and turn and get entangled, can we think of politicized religion as a tool for cooperation rather than differentiation? Can we think of political solidarity rooted in religious ethos? I argue that an engagement with Orthodox theology as a social discipline opens spaces to think of an *otherwise* where religious difference and similarity need not conform to the sectarian-ecumenical divide. It affords envisioning an Orthodox ethos that advocates for genuine civil and national sensibilities such as mutual care, tendency towards inclusion, freedom of religious belief, and equal civic rights.[47] Chapter 1 explores Orthodox models where religion is envisioned as an incentive for change beyond postcolonial secular ideals of national unity and against sectarian models of differentiation. Building on Christian tropes anchored in the Antiochian *nahda* and MJO, these models propose projects of inclusivity and civil justice based on relationality between God, the world, and others. At the same time, the chapter tackles the holistic tendencies intrinsic in these Orthodox tropes, which advertise specific, often unilateral, understandings of what is means to be human.

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[45] Majed, "Sectarian Neoliberalism," in Karam and Majed, *The Lebanon Uprising of 2019*, 76–88.
[46] Mikdashi, introduction to *Sextarianism*, 9.
[47] For a similar approach, *see* Angie Heo, "Saints, Media and Minority Cultures: On Coptic Cults of Egyptian Revolution from Alexandria to Maspero," in *Politics of Worship in the Contemporary Middle East: Sainthood in Fragile States,* ed. Andreas Bandak and Mikkel Bille (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 53–71.

***Religion, Christianity, Orthodoxy***

I had attended the weekly gatherings of MJO Beirut for close to two months when the group asked me to deliver a presentation on my research. This particular group consisted of young professionals who were also theologically savvy Rum practitioners. Our meetings were a dynamic mix of discussions on religious topics, professional knowledge sharing, and community building. Conceived as an elicitation tool but also as an opportunity to get feedback on my work from the community, my presentation combined ethnographic material and open-ended questions focused on the experiences of Rum practitioners within Lebanon's multi-confessional context. As a consequence, it stirred quite a few lively debates and our discussions extended over two weeks. During our second meeting on November 27, 2019, a conversation emerged regarding the significance and implications of the term "Rum Orthodox." After decrying an excessive preoccupation with minor differences that overshadow the sense of belonging to a larger Christian community, a general consensus was reached on the liturgy as a unifying communal element. Leading the conversation, Rami, a vibrant personality in the group, emphasized this particular aspect. Reclining with his hands behind his head, he argued that Rum Orthodoxy epitomized the Church (*al-kanisa*), stressing how the community comes together to celebrate their collective encounter with God.

Rum practitioners who made the focus of my research rarely referenced their Orthodox belonging through terms like religion (*din*) or religious (*dini*). At times, these labels even took an antagonistic tone, used to convey that Orthodoxy is more than "just religion" (*mish bes din*),[48] meaning a mindless, ritualistic practice confined to sacred spaces and liturgical calendars. Instead, my interlocutors employed idioms such as *iman* (faith), *kanisa* (church), *jamaʿa* (community), *ʿalaqa ma allah wa-l-akharin* (relation with God and the others), as well as *taʾifa* (sect) to validate and articulate broader meanings of Orthodoxy. In this frame, limiting my engagement with Orthodoxy to the analytical category of "religion" confines complex social processes to a bounded dimension of society and human existence.[49] It also presupposes an implicit evaluation of what counts as religious and what falls within the realm of the secular. Such an approach risks perpetuating a rigid religious-secular dichotomy that my work seeks to

[48] A more accurate translation of the Arabic phrase "*mish bes din"* is "not only religion."
[49] Robert A. Orsi, "Afterward: Everyday Religion and the Contemporary World: The Un-Modern, Or What Was Supposed to Have Disappeared but Did Not," in Schielke and Debevec, *Ordinary Lives and Grand Schemes*, 147.

challenge.[50] Instead, I construct narratives that not only highlight the porous nature of religious and secular domains, but also reveal the limitations of these analytical categories on the ground. By engaging with MJO archival texts, Chapter 1 highlights civic and political commitments anchored in Orthodox theology shaped by the twentieth century Antiochian *nahda* (revival). These commitments interact with sect-based sensibilities and class hierarchies, prompting a consideration of Orthodox activist models beyond traditional divisions of sacred-secular and national-sectarian. In Chapter 4, the overlayered definitions of the Orthodox waqf feed into each other, replicating and replicated by sensorial registers, sectarian sensibilities, and parish life. In these cases, separating religion as experience and practice from other social and political fields that define Orthodoxy in Lebanon can result in fractured narratives of seemingly heterodox practices.

In addition to ethnographic approaches, advocating for Orthodoxy as a way of living requires an engagement with the disciplinary genealogies of anthropology and its complex relation with the category of "religion." Talal Asad, in his critique of Clifford Geertz and the larger school of symbolic anthropology, challenged the implicit assumption of "religion" as an ahistorical and apolitical category. He argued that Western discursive practices and a secularized Christian exegesis were foundational to the development of anthropology as a discipline and the anthropology of religion as a sub-discipline. Given the historical and intellectual entanglements of ethnographic endeavors, missionary work, and colonial expansion,[51] religion as an analytical category hides the Christian ghosts of anthropology's past. Arguably, some of these ghosts haunt through an overemphasis on meaning,[52] representations of the human as an "imperfect and suffering being,"[53] or the prevalence of transcendence in studies of agency and self.[54] Paradoxically, this enduring heritage has also contributed to long-term disciplinary aversion

[50] Scholars such as Talal Asad (2003), Charles Taylor (2007), Hussein Ali Agrama (2012) or Saba Mahmood (2004, 2009) have critically examined this dichotomy, along with its ideological commitments and normative formations. Their intellectual contributions have echoed in studies of everyday religion (Bandak and Bille 2013), revolutionary movements (Heo 2013), and sensorial scholarship (Engelhardt 2014, Ramzy 2011).
[51] Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 27–30.
[52] Matthew Engelke and Matt Tomlinson, "Meaning, Anthropology, Christianity," in *The Limits of Meaning: Case Studies in the Anthropology of Christianity,* ed. Matthew Engelke and Matt Tomlinson (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006), 1–37.
[53] Marshall Sahlins et al., "The Sadness of Sweetness: The Native Anthropology of Western Cosmology [and Comments and Reply]," *Current Anthropology* 37, no. 3 (1996), 397, http://www.jstor.org/stable/2744541.
[54] Webb Keane, "Epilogue: Anxious Transcendence," in *The Anthropology of Christianity,* ed. Fenella Cannell (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 308–24.

towards Christian epistemic regimes. The strivings of anthropology to separate from Christian metaphysics as it aspires to become a modern secular enterprise has made out of Christianity either a "repressed and repugnant other,"[55] or a topic "too familiar" to be worthy of attention.[56]

Asad's elaborations on the fraught relation between anthropology and religion reverberated within the anthropology of Christianity as well.[57] In a 2006 edited volume, Fenella Cannell drew attention to a Christian-inspired ascetic bias in anthropology and traced its genealogy back to Durkheimian and Weberian social models of modernity. As a consequence, she argued, heterodox expressions of Christianity outside Western paradigms of modernity and personhood have been overlooked.[58] The drive to approach non-Western Christianities as historical and cultural phenomena in their own right has also defined Joel Robbins' work on Pentecostalism in Papua New Guinea. Against recurrent approaches to Christianity as a colonial "point of contact," he argued for a local Christian model centered on historical and theological ruptures. Furthermore, he went beyond ethnographic particularities to propose a paradigm of rupture as a tool to disrupt anthropological approaches to Christianity centered on continuity.[59]

However, acknowledging biases in the conceptual genealogy of religion and subverting them through research on non-Western communities can still replicate Christian-based biases, albeit in different forms. Asad's critique is tied to a "particular Christian history," primarily influenced by European imperial conquests and Protestant or Catholic missionary expansion.[60] The anthropology of Christianity tends to work within the borders of these two traditions, unintentionally perpetuating some of the same biases. While arguing against Christianity as a "homogeneous phenomena," a closer look at the chapters included in Cannell's edited volume reveals a focus on heterodox practices in relation to Protestant and Catholic orthodoxies. Similarly, Robbins' work on Pentecostalism argues for rupture as a model with normative analytical aspirations across Christian denominations. While debates within the subfield have emerged in reaction to the secularized Christian heritage in the anthropology of religion, they

[55] *See* Susan Harding, "Representing Fundamentalism: The Problem of the Repugnant Cultural Other," S*ocial Research* 58, no. 2 (1991): 373–93, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40970650.
[56] Cannell, introduction to *The Anthropology of Christianity,* 3.
[57] Jon Bialecki, Naomi Haynes, Joel Robbins, "The Anthropology of Christianity," *Religion Compass* 2, no. 6 (2008): 1139–58, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-8171.2008.00116.x.
[58] Cannell, introduction to *The Anthropology of Christianity,* 19–22.
[59] Joel Robbins, *Becoming Sinners: Christianity and Moral Torment in a Papua New Guinea Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 27–34.
[60] Asad, *Genealogies of Religion,* 40–48.

primarily revolve around religious traditions associated with the West as their place of origin. The lack of critical reflection on this particularity not only hinders the study of Islam and Muslim communities, but also limits investigations of Christian communities whose genealogies do not trace back to the West.[61] Ultimately, we may find ourselves confronted with a subfield that perpetuates the very biases that Asad criticized. In this case, however, the biases are more insidious as they reference communities that share the same name.

### *The Case for Rum Orthodox*

In the midst of the multipronged crises and structural failures that have characterize post-civil war Lebanon, a paradigm of rupture like the one proposed by Robbins risks obscuring various expressions of continuity within the Rum Orthodox community. One notable expression is the legitimization of an uninterrupted presence in the region through a lineage going back to the Holy Fathers, the apostles, and ultimately Jesus. This sense of continuity was also perpetuated in Orientalizing imperial narratives that often reduced the region to its role as the "cradle of Christianity" and the preserver of biblical history and materiality.[62] Locally, continuity is reinforced through expressions of internalized Orientalism, whereby Christian self-representations are often anchored in religious historical narratives.[63] By tying the legitimacy of their presence in the region to the beginning of Christianity, Christians in Lebanon aim to assert the enduring presence of their community in the country. These assertions are often reactionary to collective anxieties surrounding their minority status and the perceived encroachment of Muslim "others." My interlocutors frequently voiced their frustration regarding Muslims (particularly Shiʿa) and other Christians (particularly Maronites) encroaching upon Rum areas in the capital.[64] This dynamic holds special significance for the Rum community due to historical narratives and social imaginaries that portray them as an urban community with deep roots in

[61] Chris Hann and Hermann Goltz, "Introduction: The Other Christianity?" in *Eastern Christians in Anthropological Perspective*, ed. Chris Hann and Hermann Goltz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 1–29.
[62] A literary and visual genre that perpetuates these narratives is the travelogue of the 18th and 19th centuries. *See*, for example, Francis Frith, *Sinai and Palestine* (London: William Mackenzie, 1862).
[63] For an engagement with "Orientalism" beyond an "East-West" divide, *see* Hakem Al-Rustom, "Internal Orientalism and the Nation-State Order: Turkey, Armenians, and the Writing of History," *Ariel* 51, no. 4 (2020): 1–31, doi:10.1353/ari.2020.0026.
[64] These narratives of territorial encroachment reach a climax in the case of the Ashrafiyeh district, a politically charged Christian landmark in Beirut. The area is widely regarded as a stronghold for middle to higher-middle class Lebanese Christians. *See also* footnote 134.

Beirut.[65] Chapter 4 explores the interplay between such expressions of continuity and various forms of rupture. As part of a numerical minority in a Sunni-Shiʿi contested area, members of the Rum community in Mazraʿa hold onto narratives and memories of when they were a majority in the area. In the aftermath of the civil war, experienced as a significant rupture, they have sought to reaffirm their presence through local kinship ties and parish life.

The focus on Protestant and, more recently, Catholic denominations, even when outside the East-West divide, shapes the types of questions posed by scholars in the anthropology of Christianity. The epistemological heritage of these denominations may operate under the guise of normative Christianity, with certain ways of being Christian passing for Christianity itself.[66] This renders Orthodoxy comparatively invisible. For instance, the historical and theological development of Arab Orthodox communities was not ignited by European imperial expansion, neither is the Euro-Atlantic world their homeland. Across history, their relations with European powers have often translated into Greek ecclesial and linguistic domination, cultural essentialism, and imperial patronage.[67] Moreover, Rum Orthodox are Arab Christians, but they are not part of Oriental Orthodox or non-Chalcedonian Churches. Conversely, the "Eastern-ness" of Orthodoxy is often tied to Euro-Asian nation-states, overshadowing Antiochian Orthodoxy as part of Chalcedonian Christianity.[68]

While these aspects have strongly influenced the focus of this dissertation on Rum Orthodoxy, my intention here is not to argue for radically different ways of being Christian. Instead, the study of Eastern Christianity, including Arab Orthodoxy, can "create distortions in the corpus on Western Christianity and its tendency of normativity in definitions and analytical

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[65] Leila T. Fawaz, "Population Change," chap. 5 in *Merchants and Migrants in Nineteen-Century Beirut* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983); May Davie, "Au prisme de l'altérité, les orthodoxes de Beyrouth au début du XIXe siècle" [The Orthodox Community in Beirut at the Beginning of the 19th Century as seen through the Prism of Otherness], *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée* 107–10 (2005): 161–82, https://doi.org/10.4000/remmm.2805.

[66] For a skeptic approach on the emergence of this subfield, *see* Chris Hann, "The Anthropology of Christianity per se," *European Journal of Sociology/Archives Européennes de Sociologie* 48, no. 3 (2007): 383–410, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003975607000410.

[67] Masters, *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Arab World*, 12–13. A notable example occurred in the latter part of the nineteenth century, when Arab Orthodox laity rose to challenge the dominant Greek ruling of their Patriarchates in Antioch and Jerusalem. As a consequence of these efforts—sometimes subsumed under Arab nationalist fervor—Meletius II (Dumani) was elected in 1899 as the first Arab Patriarch to preside over the Antiochian Patriarchate since 1724.

[68] This terminology references a schism that occurred after the fourth ecumenical council held at Chalcedon in 451. This council confirmed the doctrine of the two natures—divine and human—of Christ. The communities that rejected the Chalcedonian definition broke away to form what became known as "Monophysite" or "Miaphysite" churches. These churches are now commonly referred to as the Oriental Orthodox Churches.

terms."[69] One aspect that my research disrupts is the often-compliant association of Christianity with the individual as a bounded introspective entity. This association has a longstanding anthropological genealogy, dating back to Marcel Mauss' elaborations on the genealogy of personhood in 1985.[70] In an effort to deconstruct canonical approaches to individualism and their origins in Western, often colonial, contexts, scholars have engaged with understandings of personhood emerging from the cultural milieux of their interlocutors. Terms like "fractal person" (Wagner 1991), "dividual" (Marriott 1976, Strathern 1998, Mosko 2010) or "relational selves," (Joseph 2000, Deeb 2006) have challenged normative representations of the "modern Western individual" and its Christian underpinnings.

While I align with this impetus to challenge Western biases in conceptual models of what it means to be human, I do so from within Christianity itself. My approach is warranted by the awareness that when I say "Christianity" I do not necessarily mean "the West" and when I say "the West" I do not necessarily mean "Christianity." To counter this homogenized picture of Christianity, Chris Hann and Herman Goltz contrast the long history of liberal individualism in the West with the Eastern Christian notion of *koinonia* as a communion between the individual and the collective.[71] While not in favor of sharp divisions, I also argue that one does not need to go beyond the Christian framework to challenge "the self-possessed liberal subject that seems to increasingly mark global imaginaries."[72] For instance, Orthodox anthropology underscores a human ontology that is relational—in relation to God, where Man is an icon of the divine; in relation to other human beings, where individuality morphs into a Christian "we" as the Body of Christ; in relation to the environment, where humans are stewards over the entire creation.[73]

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[69] Chris Hann, "Personhood, Christianity, Modernity," *Anthropology of This Century*, no. 3 (2012), http://aotcpress.com/articles/personhood-christianity-modernity.

[70]Michel Foucault and Louis Dumont engaged critically with this genealogy in their reflections on the conceptual development of the modern individual as an introspective self, in relation to God and detached from the social world.

[71] Hann and Goltz, "Introduction: The Other Christianity?" in Hann and Goltz, *Eastern Christians*, 12.

[72] Jon Bialecki and Girish Daswani, "Introduction: What Is an Individual? The View from Christianity," *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 5, no. 1 (2015): 279, https://doi.org/10.14318/hau5.1.013.

[73] My intention is not to create a sharp contrast between relationality within the Orthodox tradition and individualized subject formations within Western Christianity. Rather, I seek to draw more attention to the significance of relationality within the anthropology of Christianity. Moreover, it is worth noting that calls for engagement with relationality came from both anthropological and theological/philosophical works on Protestantism. For example, Martin Buber's philosophical elaborations on dialogue in Judaism have significantly influenced Paul Tillich and his notable theological and philosophical work on Protestantism. In anthropology, *see* Tanya M. Luhrmann, *How God Becomes Real: Kindling the Presence of Invisible Others* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020). I owe the inspiration for this reflection to Paul Christopher Johnson.

Along these lines, this dissertation engages with Orthodox theology and its anthropological elaborations on relationality to think critically about "personhood." Twentieth century Orthodox theology saw a revived interest in Christian anthropology and personhood as a relational category. For the Russian theologian Vladimir Lossky, personhood was an act of becoming through human-divine communion, made possible through the Incarnation.[74] The Greek theologian and former Metropolitan John Zizioulas elaborated extensively on trinitarian and human formations at the intersection of otherness and communion.[75] The French theologian Olivier Clément placed personhood as the junction of communion with others and unity of divine essence. "When we become living beings, we expand far beyond the limits of our own individuality into the vastness of the Body of Christ, no longer separated in space or time from any other being. Henceforth we carry within us the whole of humanity."[76] Locally, these corporate understandings of personhood were emphasized in the religious literature and pastoral theology published by MJO, as discussed in Chapter 1. Reflecting the commitments of the twentieth century Antiochian *nahda*, writings by several MJO members have argued for expressions of personhood as being in communion that extend beyond liturgical rituals and sacred spaces. Framed within a larger ecology of life where humans as image-bearing creatures are accountable to God, creation, and others, these Orthodox expressions seeped into wider historical and social contexts such as the civil war or the current conditions of socio-economic instability and moral uncertainty.[77]

Nevertheless, these aspirational forms of corporate communion were not devoid of individual sensibilities, ritual failures, and power hierarchies.[78] Against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, limitations on sensorial and physical devotion, public health regulations,

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[74] Aristotle Papanikolaou, "Personhood and Its Exponents in Twentieth-Century Orthodox Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology,* ed. Mary B. Cunningham and Elizabeth Theokritoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 233–36.
[75] John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985).
[76] Olivier Clément, *On Human Being: A Spiritual Anthropology* (London: New City, 2000), 45; *See also* Alexander Schmemann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, [1963] 1998), 23–28.
[77] Costi Bendaly, *Iman wa tahrir: al-buʿd al-ijtimaʿi li-l-hayat al-ruhiyya* [Faith and liberation: The social dimension of spiritual life], 2nd edition (Beirut: An-Nour Publications, 1997); Nadim Haidar, "Al-Haraka wa-l-qadiyya al-ijtimaʿiyya: ruʾya kanasiyya" [The Movement and the social cause - ecclesial vision], March 27, 1988, in *Antakiya tatajaddad*: *shahadat wa nusus: 1942–1992* [Antioch in revival: testimonies and texts: 1942–1992] (Beirut: An-Nour Publications, n.d.), 495–99.
[78] For projects focused on failed rituals and limitations of meaning, *see* David Jeevendrampillai et al., *The Material Culture of Failure: When Things Do Wrong* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).

and ecclesial decisions impacted liturgical activations of personhood. Chapters 2 and 3 engage with these structural factors and provide complex insights into how Rum practitioners negotiated between theological ideals of communion and grounded realities of bio-viral disaster. In Chapter 1 as well, tropes like "reflecting Christ," or "seeing God reflected in others" activated forms of sociality in tune with aspirations of divine similarity and reactionary to precarious livelihoods.[79] Together, these chapters exemplify the processual complexity of Orthodox subjects when their religious experiences are not just "epiphenomena of the real," but in themselves real.[80]

### *Orthodoxy as Discursive Tradition*

The concept of tradition (*al-taqlid al-sharif*) holds deep significance within Orthodoxy. It encompasses an unbroken lineage of teachings and experiences that trace back to the apostolic discipleship and the scriptures. The Orthodox tradition incorporates the writings of the Holy Fathers as interpreters of tradition, the lives of the saints as its living icons, and the ecclesiastical structures as its custodians.[81] However, within the anthropology of religion, the concept has garnered considerable attention through the paradigm of Islam as a discursive tradition. Spearheaded by Talal Asad, it posits that Islam does not subscribe to a dichotomy of orthodox authority and popular practice. Instead, the aims and forms of Muslim devotion are defined and authorized through discursive acts that reference the authority of the Qurʾan and the Hadith.[82] This approach challenges a normative and ahistorical engagement with the nature of truth as it attempts to establish a link between past and present Muslim practice within the context of an ever-changing world.[83] It promotes a historically contingent and socially performed tradition,

[79] For a similar approach to the social as the medium for divine expressions and civil involvement, *see* Nofit Itzhak, "A Sacred Social: Christian Relationalism and the Re-Enchantment of the World," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 27, no. 2 (2021): 265–84, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.13494.
[80] Cannell, introduction to *The Anthropology of Christianity*, 3.
[81] For a theological approach to tradition *see* Vladimir Lossky, "Traditions and Tradition," in *In the Image and Likeness of God,* ed. John H. Erickson and Thomas E. Bird (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1974), 141–68. For different approaches to what the Orthodox tradition entails, *see* Theokritoff and Cunningham, *Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology*, 21–63.
[82] Talal Asad, "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam," Occasional Papers Series (Georgetown University, Center for Contemporary Arab Studies), 1986, repr. in *Qui Parle* 17, no. 2 (2009): 1–30, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20685738.
[83] Asad, "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam," 20–21.

where religious knowledge is engendered both through authoritative interpretations of Islamic texts and through the practices and experiences of ordinary Muslims.[84]

The paradigm of Islam as a discursive tradition has inspired extensive scholarship on the formation of pious Muslim subjectivities at the junction of religious texts and ethical self-fashioning. Saba Mahmood's research on Egyptian Muslim women, Charles Hirschkind's study of aural techniques of ethical becoming, and Lara Deeb's investigation into Lebanese Shiʿa are valuable references in this regard. Creatively integrating sensorial research, ethical studies, and theories on agency and power, they document how religious practitioners work towards developing a coherent, meaningful life according to the tradition they belong. [85] My work aligns with their approach to tradition as embodied experience anchored in hierarchies of power and legitimized by authoritative discourses. This approach opens the possibility to think about formations of pious Orthodox subjects within the historical and theological context of the Antiochian revival. In this regard, Chapter 1 investigates the intersections of Orthodox piety and charity in the context of the objectives and infrastructure of the MJO *mustawsaf*. Chapters 2 and 3 historicize the religious sensibilities of Rum practitioners during the COVID-19 pandemic within the context of the revival and its impact on embodied liturgical practice.

Nevertheless, works of scholars like Mahmood, Hirschkind, and Deeb are grounded in particular interpretations of Islam and historicized within specific Islamic revivalist movements. Also, the conceptual genealogy of "discursive tradition" within the anthropology of Islam is premised on the epistemic and ontological specificities of this particular Abrahamic faith. These specificities may create tensions when attempting to apply the concept outside Islam and beyond the disciplinary subfield. Attempts may brush off aspects of historical specificity and circumvent divergent religious and theological elaborations on matters of correct practice and belief. So, if Asad was critical of the idea of religion for its universalizing undertones, are we risking doing the same with the concept of (discursive) tradition when applying it to Orthodoxy? In her introduction to *Praying with the Senses*, Sonja Luehrmann wrote, "anyone who tries to find out what 'the teaching of the Orthodox Church' on a particular issue is will quickly encounter the

[84] Nada Moumtaz, "Refiguring Islam," in *A Companion to the Anthropology of the Middle East*, ed. Soraya Altorki (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 126–29.
[85] Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012); Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), Lara Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shiʿi Lebanon* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

workings of discursive tradition."[86] However, I argue that the centrality of texts for authorizing discourses in Islam may not necessarily apply to Orthodoxy. A liturgical script without its corporate and mystical enactment is just a text. The Eucharist, as the body and blood of Christ made possible through Incarnation, is just theological discourse if not ingested and enacted by the Church as a corporate event. Chapters 2 and 3, in particular, show how Orthodox tradition cannot be defined solely within discursive interpretations on correct practice and dogma. Beyond the textualized aspect, the liturgical and institutional dimensions are essential to the experience of the Church in communion as an ultimate source of authority.[87]

Furthermore, in studies on Islamic piety, interlocutors often appear to be ritualized subjects endowed with a form of individuality and choice that is rarely challenged by ambiguities of quotidian life. They are portrayed as self-aware individuals who constantly work towards becoming better versions of themselves. In addition to the overemphasized coherence of religious subjectivities, which received its share of criticism in the anthropology of Islam,[88] I find the individual-centered aspect to be problematic when thinking about piety and tradition in Orthodoxy. As argued in my analysis of liturgical practices during the pandemic, Orthodox modes of interacting with the sacred are strongly predicated on corporate and structural forms of authorization and authentication. Church sacraments are corporate events performed within the structure of the liturgy and under the monopoly of church hierarchies.[89] The Church becomes the Body of Christ through the corporate celebration of the Eucharist and the liturgy. By not paying attention to this institutionalized corporate dimension of Orthodoxy, we may overshadow pious formations *within* communities of practice and ecclesiastical structures of power.[90]

### *Structures in Everyday Religion*

Against the backdrop of the multilayered crises that have profoundly affected daily life in Lebanon during my fieldwork, Orthodoxy as a way of living looks into divine and social relations that emerge from structural conditions of economic precarity, moral uncertainty, and

[86] Sonja Luehrmann, introduction to *Praying with the Senses: Contemporary Orthodox Christian Spirituality in Practice*, ed. Sonja Luehrmann (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018), 14.
[87] Bandak and Boylston, "The 'Orthodoxy' of Orthodoxy," 27, 35–37.
[88] *See* Schielke and Debevec, introduction to *Ordinary Lives and Grand Schemes*, 5–8.
[89] For instance, the sacrament of the Eucharist cannot be carried out without a priest or by the priest alone.
[90] Vlad Naumescu, "Becoming Orthodox: The Mystery and Mastery of a Christian Tradition," in Luehrmann, *Praying with the Senses*, 29–53.

political instability.[91] I thus challenge piety studies in their overarching focus on religious commitments and their insufficient attention to the lives of which these commitments are part of. Here I echo Samuli Schielke's criticism of piety scholarship on Islam. In *Egypt in the Future Tense: Hope, Frustration, and Ambivalence before and after 2011*, he argues that an empirical focus on pious perfectionism overshadows other segments of life and the ambiguities, hopes, and frustrations that they entail.[92] Schielke astutely explores the religious lives and struggles of his Muslim interlocutors under structural conditions of neoliberal capitalism, revivalist Islam, and political polarization. He goes beyond the limits of religious traditions and pious strivings to understand his interlocutors' approach to Islam. Along these lines, "a religious life is inseparable from the wider course of life which involves different pursuits and interests, different emotions and experiences, varying periods and degrees of engagement, and complex motivations."[93]

My work follows a similar ethnographic commitment to the complexity of lived experience. Embedded in a crisis-ridden environment and a temporality of contingency, my interlocutors were not always preoccupied with religious norms and their moral requirements. Often times, they struggled to navigate a financial crisis that had their life savings stuck in banks. They were concerned with the increasing cost of living and the volatility of the currency exchange rate on the black market. They wrestled with the frustrations and anxieties brought about by the pandemic and the August 4 explosion, especially with the prospect of a strained healthcare system. Each of these structural conditions called for various modes of engagements with the world, demanding different yet intersecting allegiances and moral commitments. At the same time, these conditions influenced what aspects of the Orthodox tradition gained salience in their lives. For instance, my interlocutors viewed attending the Sunday liturgy and taking communion as essential requirements of Orthodox practice, yet the pandemic challenged the parameters of what constituted "right practice." Debates on what Orthodoxy was and was not intersected with discussions on public health regulations and medical data. Habitual forms of religious practice intersected with digital alternatives of worship. Compliance with governmental regulations mixed with the deference shown to church authorities.

[91] *See also* Andreas Bandak and Mikkel Bille, eds., *Politics of Worship in Contemporary Middle East: Sainthood in Fragile States* (Leiden: Brill, 2013).
[92] Schielke, *Egypt in the Future Tense*, 57.
[93] Schielke and Debevec, introduction to *Ordinary Lives and Grand Schemes*, 8.

Nevertheless, while accounting for the larger structures that shaped the lives of his interlocutors, Schielke tends to maintain an individual-centered perspective in his ethnographic focus. His theoretical elaborations on "grand schemes" as structural ideals greater than one's ordinary life sets them in an ambiguous and unachievable future. In their ever-delayed status, these ideals are stuck in a temporality of *not yet,* while still being relevant as aspirations for living in the present. In other words, the structural is ideal, with institutions – religious or otherwise – being absent in his ethnography. Instead, my work looks at the lives of Rum practitioners as they are anchored in dynamic structures on the ground. Chapter 1 accounts for the institutional frame of the *mustawsaf* to investigate the affordances of theological models and welfare services in a precarious everyday. Chapters 2 and 3 approach sacrament (*sirr*) and liturgy as institutionalized structures within the Orthodox Church. The potential and limitations of these religious structures impacted practitioners' negotiations of right practice during the pandemic. Moreover, the triadic (God–human–nature) relationality intrinsic to the liturgy and the Eucharist as a sacrament impacted my interlocutors' reactions to public health regulations.

Schielke's work fits within a larger body of scholarship working within the conceptual frame of "everyday religion." This scholarship highlights the creative potential of failures, ambiguities, and unknowns emerging from social practices and novel circumstances.[94] In arguing for the unsystematic character of religion as lived practice, these models challenge dichotomies of normative theology and popular practice, a pattern replicated in different forms—"great traditions" and "little traditions" (Redfield 1956), "magical religiosity" and "salvation religion" (Weber 1948), or specialized orthodoxy and syncretic practice. While aligning with the impetus of this scholarship, I also argue that an ethnographic sensibility for inconsistencies of daily life should not obscure the structural dimension of existence. Orthodoxy as a way of living takes seriously the structural as social formation and analytical frame. Starting with the *mustawsaf* as a socio-medical organization and ending with the *waqf* as a communal and urban structure, each chapter addresses the mutually constitutive relation between institutions and everyday practice.

In addition, my work engages with the structural in the absence of structures. The catastrophic structural failures that have marked Lebanon during my fieldwork have had devastating consequences for the country and its inhabitants. A crumbling financial system that

[94] Orsi, "Afterward," in Schielke and Debevec, *Ordinary Lives and Grand Schemes*, 146–60; Nancy T. Ammerman, ed., *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

led to a historic economic meltdown, a horrifying explosion, and governmental structures rife with corruption have exacerbated housing and financial insecurities, deepened class divisions, and plunged large segments of the population into poverty. Amidst these structural forms of violence, *shatara* (loosely translated as street-smart) and *wasta* (connections) emerged as primary modes of securing livelihood. In the absence of state-provided social protection system and soaring poverty rates, many Lebanese had to rely on clientelist networks and alternative support systems to assure their livelihoods. In this challenging environment, Orthodoxy as Church intersected with Rum-ness as sect, each with overbearing legal, political and social manifestations.

### *The Social Life of Theology*

In arguing for Orthodoxy as a way of living, my engagement with theology is twofold. First, I hone in on liturgical practice. No encompassing analysis of the liturgy in Orthodoxy can be done without engaging with its theology. This is mainly because, in the words of one of my interlocutors, the liturgy is *lahut bi-l-fiʿl,* translated as theology in action. As the "holy of holies" of church life, the liturgy is meant to reenact the entire history of salvation, to express the dogmatic foundations of the Orthodox Church, and to offer the context for the corporate and mystic experience of the sacraments.[95] It is embodied and lived through pedagogical models of practice and prayer,[96] sensorial regimes, and materialities that gain meaning and utility within the frame of eschatological mediations. All these dimensions became crucial in Chapters 2 and 3 in order to grasp the liturgical disruptions that took place during the pandemic and the negotiations that Orthodox practitioners undertook in exceptional circumstances. Frustrations arising from worship restrictions during the Lent and Easter period intertwined with heightened anxieties and the prioritization of safety measures. Official statements of the Antiochian Church on the pandemic intersected with governmental regulations triggering a variety of reactions within local parishes. Medical questions were answered in theological terms and liturgical materialities were

[95] For in-depth theological analyses of the Orthodox liturgy, *see* Schmemann, *For the Life of the World*; Raymond Rizk, *Al-qudusat li-l-qiddisin: taʾammul fi al-quddas al-ilahi* [The holy ones for those holy: meditation on the divine liturgy] (Beirut: An-Nour Orthodox Cooperative, 2011).
[96] Vlad Naumescu, "Pedagogies of Prayer: Teaching Orthodoxy in South India," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 61, no. 2 (2019): 389–418, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417519000094.

explained in scientific registers. Together, these chapters complicate portrayals of Rum practitioners and their actions as uniform, conservative, unintelligible, or simply naive.

Second, I zoom out to look into the "Orthodox infusion of life beyond its institutional presence."[97] Here, I engage with local pastoral theology, where the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church intertwines with social and civic activism.[98] This fusion was at the core of the twentieth century Antiochian *nahda* and has become central to the work and identity of MJO. This theology proposes Orthodox models where social and economic contributions to the betterment of society are part of a Christian economy of salvation. Within the context of post-war Lebanon, the aspirations of these eschatological models where heaven starts from earth contended with but also reinforced sectarian networks, social hierarchies, and the precarity of everyday life. By closely observing the interactions of these elements on the ground, my work provides a better contextualization to the complex relation between the traumatic and destabilizing events happening in Lebanon and a stubborn, sometimes considered misplaced, trust in God and his mediating agents.

In *The Slain God: Anthropologists and the Christian Faith*, Timothy Larsen argues that "theology not only has been but continues to be a conversation partner for anthropology."[99] Even though sharing fundamental concerns with human existence, these conversations have often been characterized by a mutual ambivalence and discomfort. While anthropology has recurrently discarded theology, the latter often forgets that Christian revelation is also anthropological (i.e. the Incarnation). The creative potential of this discomfort took center stage in the 1990s, when social sciences and the humanities witness a return of theology as a viable conversation partner.[100] Douglas Davies' *Anthropology and Theology* stands out as a comprehensive attempt to highlight the intertwined conceptual genealogies of the two disciplines.[101] However, it was Joel Robbins' 2006 programmatic article "Anthropology and Theology: An Awkward

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[97] Tom Boylston, "Review Essay: Orienting the East: Notes on Anthropology and Orthodox Christianities," *New Directions in the Anthropology of Christianity*, May 26, 2014. https://www.new-directions.sps.ed.ac.uk/orienting-the-east/.
[98] For more on the concept of pastoral theology and the Antiochian *nahda*, *see* Chapter 1 "When God Provides: Welfare Services, Hope, and Precarity."
[99] Timothy Larsen, *The Slain God: Anthropologists and the Christian Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 225.
[100] Philip Fountain and Sin Wen Lau, "Anthropological Theologies: Engagements and Encounters," in "Anthropological Theologies: Engagements and Encounters," ed. Philip Fountain and Sin Wen Lau, special issue, *Australian Journal of Anthropology* 24, no. 3 (2013): 229, https://doi.org/10.1111/taja.12048.
[101] Douglas Davies, *Anthropology and Theology* (Oxford: Berg, 2002).

Relationship" that pushed anthropologists to critically reflect on core concepts within the discipline through the disruptive lens of Christian theology. Answers to his call soon followed. Special journal issues and book projects delved into investigations of Christian categories and their potential for philosophical, cultural, and disciplinary critique.[102]

Another branch of scholarship that brings together theological concepts and anthropological fields of inquiry are "thick" ethnographic projects. In their empirical rigor and cultural grounding, these projects counteract theology as an exclusively elite disciplinary practice, or a reified category separated from the social. Timothy Carroll calls for an ethnographic reading of theology not only as a cultural artifact, but also as a social force. His call implies an analytical move towards theological formations that permeate the lived worlds of those who are at the center of our ethnographic endeavors.[103] One example that stands out is Yasmin Moll's work among the religious revivalists in Cairo, where "theologically reasoned narratives" are central in authorizing and discrediting religious media production.[104] Juliet du Boulay and Tom Boylston also persuasively show how Orthodox theological concepts are rooted in the cultural and cosmogonic worlds of Ethiopian and Greek Orthodox Christians, without sidetracking concerns for Orthodox authenticity.[105]

My work aligns with these examples as I argue for an analytical move to account for the social life of theology without discarding its structural grounding in ecclesial hierarchies and Orthodox institutions. Moreover, I do not approach Orthodox theology as an elitist intellectual project. Instead, I am interested in its pragmatic manifestations in the everyday lives of lay congregants who, often time, are not religious experts but strive to do their religion well. Arguing against theology as a reified category, I underscore its inherent social character in two distinct ways. First, theological concepts permeated the daily reality of my interlocutors and

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[102] Among them, Joel Robbins and Matthew Engelke, eds. "Global Christianity, Global Critique," special issue, *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 109, no. 4 (2010), https://read.dukeupress.edu/south-atlantic-quarterly/issue/109/4; Jione Havea, ed., *Vulnerability and Resilience: Body and Liberating Theologies* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2020); Derrick J. Lemons, ed., *Theologically Engaged Anthropology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[103] Timothy Carroll, "Theology as an Ethnographic Object: An Anthropology of Eastern Christian Rupture," in "Ethnography and Theology," special issue, *Religions* 8, no. 7 (2017), 1–21, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel8070114.

[104] Yasmin Moll, "Television is not Radio: Theologies of Mediation in the Egyptian Islamic Revival," *Cultural Anthropology* 33, no. 2 (2018): 237, https://doi.org/10.14506/ca33.2.07.

[105] Juliet Du Boulay, *Cosmos, Life, and Liturgy in a Greek Orthodox Village* (Limni, Evia: Denise Harvey, 2009); Tom Boylston, *The Stranger at the Feast: Prohibition and Mediation in an Ethiopian Orthodox Christian Community* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018).

actively shaped their understandings and engagements with the world they lived in. Second, "theology in the Eastern understanding is not a scholarly discourse *on* God; it is rather a liturgical discourse *of* and *between* God and human beings."[106] It is a dialogical enterprise that advertises a relational mode between its objects of knowledge: God, man, and the world.[107] Along these lines, Chapter 2 argues for a more-than-human perspective on the Holy Communion in order to understand how medical efficacy, biological processes, and religious materialities coexisted in the worldviews of my interlocutors. God, humans, and viruses got entangled in divine and pathological mediations, defined through theological and medical discourses grounded in structures of authority. Third, Orthodoxy as a way of living emphasizes the relations between aspirational theological concepts and their pragmatic expressions in the particular context of present-day Lebanon. For example, the inclusive Orthodox notion of *sharikeh* (communion) activated in the context of the *mustawsaf* was bracketed in the selective practices of renting on the *waqf* in Mazraʿa, where communal and local affiliation gained primacy.

This approach to theology as "inherently social" challenges an array of pervasive dichotomies in the anthropology of religion, including the orthodox–heterodox divide. The sub-discipline's drive to focus on religious practices and beliefs divergent from or antithetical to a normative tradition overshadows the permeable borders between what is considered "right" and "wrong" practice. Writing against this drive, Veena Das argues for "folk theology" as a way to capture the dynamic interpretations of Islamic principles and their potential transformative roles in people's lives.[108] Similarly, Chapter 3 engages with the Orthodox leitmotif of houses turning into churches (*buyutkun sarit kanaʾis*), which gained traction during the pandemic. Competitions on best home altars were conducted over Facebook. Practitioners tried to replicate Holy Communion at home. Fragments from the divine liturgy of Saint Basil the Great were celebrated on Zoom in the absence of a priest. These actions could be approached as heterodox engagements in liturgical practices outside the church. However, a more rewarding perspective is to look at these actions through the lens of theology as a creative structure that enables the possibility of these expressions without canceling concerns for right practice. The practitioners

[106] Hann and Goltz, "Introduction: The Other Christianity?" in Hann and Goltz, *Eastern Christians*, 14.
[107] Alexander Schmemann, "Theology and Eucharist," *St. Vladimir's Seminary Quarterly* 5, no. 4 (1961): 10–23, https://www.schmemann.org/byhim/theologyandeucharist.html.
[108] Veena Das, "For a Folk-Theology and Theological Anthropology of Islam," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 18, no. 2 (1984): 293–300, https://doi.org/10.1177/006996678401800208.

who engaged in customized digital worship during the pandemic also sought the advice of clergy and lay Orthodox leaders, while making efforts to adhere to the guidelines of the Antiochian Patriarchate.

While not falling within the pious paradigm, this approach presupposes religious practitioners who are genuinely preoccupied with theology and religious knowledge. My interlocutors strove to be "good Orthodox" in their alignment with church dogmas through liturgical practice, religious education, and deferral to clergy and other authoritative figures.[109] MJO members attended weekly interactive meetings that focused on a variety of religious, biblical, and social topics.[110] Theology classes for lay audiences were organized under the auspices of the Archdiocese of Beirut. Monthly gatherings presided by religious leaders brought Orthodox families together to discuss on practical applications of theology and Christian doctrine. Monasteries like Saint George in Deir el-Harf in Lebanon, magazines like MJO's *An-Nour* (The Light), and printing houses like *Taʿawuniyyat An-Nour al-Urthudhuksiyya li-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawziʿ* (*An-Nour* Orthodox Cooperative for Publishing and Distribution), formerly known as *Manshurat An-Nour* (*An-Nour* Publications), have been nodes of disseminating religious knowledge by translating and publishing literature on an array of religious topics.[111] All these engagements argue against theological knowledge resting chiefly with theologians or clergy, yet without negating their authority as part of ecclesial hierarchies.

My intention is not to make savvy theologians out of my interlocutors, but rather to emphasize how their lives were not devoid of religious mindedness. The theological and religious knowledge accumulated through these activities and programs made its way into narratives and practices of similarity and difference that add layers of interpretation to the multilayered crises that have engulfed Lebanon. Inspiring stories of saintly intercession and divine provisions mingled with discussions on currency exchange rates, housing instability, and emigration. Church genealogies going back to the apostles argued for the moral superiority and uninterrupted presence of Christians in Lebanon. Embodied experiences of the Eucharistic

[109] Bandak and Boylston, "The 'Orthodoxy' of Orthodoxy," 25–46; Joel Robbins, "On Knowing Faith: Theology, Everyday Religion, and Anthropological Theory," *Religion and Society* 10, no. 1 (2019): 14–29, https://doi.org/10.3167/arrs.2019.100103.
[110] Nicolas Abou Mrad, "The Witness of the Church in a Pluralistic World: Theological Renaissance in the Church of Antioch," in Theokritoff and Cunningham, *Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology*, 246–60.
[111] Anna Poujeau, "Monasteries, Politics, and Social Memory: The Revival of the Greek Orthodox Church of Antioch in Syria during the Twentieth Century," in Hann and Goltz, *Eastern Christians*, 178–81.

sacrament interacted with the epidemiological profile of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Paying attention to these intersections and the political, economic, and theological structures that grounded them offers a comprehensive approach to the existence of Rum Orthodox in Lebanon.

## Chapter 1 When God Provides: Welfare Services, Hope, and Precarity


**Figure 1** – 1.1. *Allah bidabbir* (God takes care/manages). August 9, 2021, Lebanon. Photo by author.

It was August 5, 2020. I was sitting on a chair inside the socio-medical center (*mustawsaf*) of MJO (*Mouvement de la Jeunesse Orthodoxe, Harakat al-Shabiba al-Urthudhuksiyya,* Orthodox Youth Movement) in the district of Ashrafiyeh. Patricia, my friend and nurse working at the center, was assiduously cleaning the open wound on my head. I had incurred it a day before, during what came to be known as the August 4 explosion, in the Port of Beirut. The pungent smell of disinfectant stung my nostrils, just like the alcohol stung my skin. It hurt. I wanted to tell her to go gentler, but I could not. I knew the heaviness of her touch was the result of embodied frustration and powerlessness. The wound was superficial; the bewilderment was not. As we tried to ground ourselves in what remained of our understanding of the sensible and the possible, Patricia remarked to me and to herself, "We say this is the land of the saints (*ard el-qiddisin*). But I think God has forgotten us."[112]

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[112] The Arabic expression *lubnan ard el-qiddisin* (Lebanon is the land of the saints) is part of a Christian discourse of appropriation that limits Lebanese culture and heritage to Christian features. It also authorizes the presence of Christians in Lebanon by activating genealogies of Christian sainthood and territorial legacies.

Like many other Beirutis, Patricia was reacting to the jarring shifts and multilayered crises engulfing Lebanon. The 2019 nationwide protests and their potential to become a revolution (*thawra*) were cut short by the COVID-19 pandemic sweeping through an already weakened country. A hectic real estate market driven by neoliberal and sectarian guidelines has contributed to soaring housing insecurities and a rise in the prices of basic services.[113] With precipitous financial downfalls and a dysfunctional public welfare system, the socio-economic conditions of many Lebanese have been in steep decline, making them more dependent on different forms of clientelism for physical and social survival. On top of that, the explosion has radically marked the fragility of their bodies in the face of corrupt and failing governmental structures. This precariousness of existence has instilled in many Lebanese a feeling of being devoid of options to change their predicament. A popular mood across many of my discussions was one of being stuck in a temporality defined by life in a "constant and immediate present," with no chance of long-term prospects.[114] In the words of Rita, a Rum Orthodox friend from Beirut, "We feel stranded. Never felt like this, [not] even during the war. Worst days ever."[115] The swirl of social experiences defined by uncertain outcomes at this particular time in history has driven Beirutis like Rita to vent their frustration on the immediacy of existence through expressions that encompass both jest and anger. Colloquial phrases like living "day by day" (*kill yawm bi-yawmu*) or "second by second" (*kill lahza bi-lahzeta*) often punctuated daily conversations on the surge in food costs, scarcity of public services, pandemic-related regimes of isolation, and violent upheavals in the streets.

At the same time, the experience of a precarious *now* and the vulnerabilities it brought coexisted with different degrees of hope in God's presence and divine management (*al-tadbir al-ilahi*). This was often the case at the *mustawsaf* (socio-medical center), where God was part of its day-to-day workings, interceding both symbolically and materially. A young girl's surgery was paid for through the intercession of a donor unaware of her particular case. Donations from the Lebanese diaspora arrived right when the socio-medical center was struggling financially. Young

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[113] *See* Bou Akar, "Constructing Sectarian Geographies," chap. 1 in *For the War Yet to Come*; Monroe, *The Insecure City*, esp. chap. 1; *The Plight of Housing in Lebanon: Annual Report Submitted to the UN Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing*," Public Works Studio, April 2023, https://publicworksstudio.com/en/the-plight-of-housing-in-lebanon/.

[114] Manpreet K. Janeja and Andreas Bandak, eds., introduction to *Ethnographies of Waiting: Doubt, Hope and Uncertainty* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 7.

[115] Rita, WhatsApp message to author, Beirut, July 9, 2020.

members of MJO flooded the center to give a helping hand to the overwhelmed personnel after the August 4 explosion. These stories of an efficient God intervening at the optimal time through human mediation punctuated life at the mustawsaf. Intertwined with bitter laments over the dollar rate, scarcity of public services, and food costs, they were told over coffee, shared among the center's beneficiaries, and distributed on social media. In their functional diversity, these stories would lift spirits up, authorize the center's activity, reinforce Orthodox beliefs, but also replicate sect- and class-based hierarchies. Concurrently, the potential of these divine interventions existed side by side with high uncertainty and general feelings of defeat, such as the one expressed by Patricia and Rita.

Along these incongruous degrees of hope, God was present at the mustawsaf not as individual experience of an otherworld, but as a material provider whose low-key interventions addressed immediate and concrete needs. While the lives of Rum practitioners[116] were not devoid of miracles and divine interventions as arresting subjective experiences, here "real presence" manifested as pragmatic mediations of social togetherness and material consequences in this world. [117] While seemingly contradictory or part of inconsistent patterns of popular belief, the coexistence of these divine intercessions and the lingering anxieties of livelihood were part of an Orthodox culture of service defined at the intersection of God as the ultimate *mudabbir* (manager, organizer, provider) and the immediacy of securing and making sense of one's life.

It was this coexistence that made the focus of my field notes while volunteering and conducting research at the MJO mustawsaf between December 2019 and November 2020. The center's activity spans back to the 1960s, when it was founded by a group of MJO members from Beirut. For close to sixty years, it has provided a wide range of social and medical services to households in the Ashrafiyeh district and its surrounding areas. Its work did not stop during the fifteen-year civil war and its series of protracted domestic conflicts among sectarian political factions and militia groups, which reshaped Beirut's urban geography.[118] These services generally included weekly medical consultations, supplies of medicine, empowerment programs

[116] While the public of the mustawsaf was mixed, it comprised a majority from the Rum community. Members of this majority knew each other not only through neighborly relations but also through parish connections.
[117] Robert A. Orsi, *History and Presence* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016), 1–11.
[118] For comprehensive accounts on the war, *see* Robert Fisk, *Pity the Nation: Lebanon at War*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Ahmad Beydoun, *Le Liban: itinéraires dans une guerre incivile* [Lebanon, itineraries in an uncivil war] (Paris: Karthala, 1993); Samir Kassir, *La guerre du Liban: de la dissension nationale au conflit régional (1975–1982)* [The war in Lebanon: from national dissension to regional conflict (1975–1982)] (Paris: Karthala, 1994).

for vulnerable groups, and regular distribution of financial support and in-kind donations (i.e., food, clothing, money). Taking part in its daily activities and interacting with personnel, donors, and beneficiaries allowed me to investigate the variegated ways in which pastoral theology,[119] sectarian practices, and community welfare intersected at the center. Along sect-based and humanitarian incentives, I argue that the center's work and identity were defined by a call to civic and social activism grounded in Orthodox models where heaven starts from "here and now." These models trace their origins back to the twentieth century Antiochian *nahda* (revival) and are institutionalized within the organizational structures of MJO, the parent organization of the mustawsaf. They advocate an engagement with the divine through immersion into history and earthly affairs, where Orthodox practitioners are called to act as a driving force for social and political change, along the secular aspirations of national unity in Lebanon.[120] As part of this worldview infused by an Orthodox ethos of social activism, the center became the scene for Christian practice as embodied social responsibility.[121]

In my analytical approach to this worldview, I align with Joel Robbins's call to look at the theoretical potentials of key theological concepts within the anthropology of Christianity, yet I ground these concepts within the "messiness" of everyday social interactions.[122] I look into the negotiations of these concepts on the ground, where they gained embodied expressions and social centrality in relation to the activity of the mustawsaf. A polysemantic Orthodox term that my conversation partners often mentioned, both within and outside the liturgical framework, was *sharikeh.* With translations raging from communion to partnership or association, the inherent corporate feature of this notion translates into different yet interconnected understandings and potencies of communal expressions. One such expression was predicated on a worldview promoted by MJO, wherein the meaning of communion was refracted unto the entire society, as

[119] Pastoral theology promotes Orthodox models where the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church goes hand in hand with social and community engagements within an economy of Incarnation. This fusion was at the core of the twentieth century Antiochian revival and has been central to the work of MJO. For more on this concept, *see* Razvan Porumb, "An Orthodox Model of Practical/Pastoral Theology," *International Journal of Practical Theology* 21, no. 1 (2017): 127–54, https://doi.org/10.1515/ijpt-2017-0006.
[120] For example, *see* Bendaly, *Iman wa tahrir* [Faith and liberation].
[121] For an analysis of Christian practice as social and political activism, *see* Kevin Lewis O'Neill, *City of God: Christian Citizenship in Postwar Guatemala* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).
[122] Joel Robbins, "Conclusion: Anthropology, the Secular, and Transformative Dialogue," in *Theology and the Anthropology of Christian Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 152–68.

spiritual betterment required reflecting Christ and seeing Christ reflected in others.[123] In the particular case of the mustawsaf, instantiations of this Christian becoming were expressed through practices of giving and receiving as embodied habitations of Christ. In this model of divine economy, reflections of an incarnated God became ethical incentives for contributing to the social and material networks of the mustawsaf.

Recent anthropological studies on Christianity have highlighted the dynamic processes involved in the formation of religious and ethical subjects, albeit with a spotlight on Protestant and Catholic communities.[124] Yet, while anthropology accepts conceptual frames from Christianity, it often rejects the system as a whole. The economies of knowledge production in the anthropological study of religion are still driven by particular fundamental regimes of truth. One such case is the centrality of Man, where dominant ways of knowing serve the sovereign human subject and cross God out. My engagement with the notion of sharikeh and the social world of the mustawsaf disrupts a dyadic approach of human-to-human interactions by compelling us to account for God as a third party in ontological processes of human and environmental becoming. Through a focus on Orthodox welfare practices, I highlight situations where human will and divine agency fold into each other; where contingency and a temporality of crisis interweave with divine management. In this triadic approach, the lives of my interlocutors are embedded in spiritual hierarchies spearheaded by God as the ultimate source of provision and grace.[125] These hierarchies are also populated by numerous other entities, including angels, saints, or the Virgin Mary, who not only serve as standards of correctness and aspirational figures but also function as tools in sectarian power struggles.[126]

My focus on sharikeh enables a critical engagement with the rich and insightful scholarship on sectarianism (*taʾifiyya*) in Lebanon as well. This scholarship has persuasively depicted sectarianism as a pervasive ordering structure in Lebanon, with legal, socio-political, and spatial dimensions. Historically steeped in imperial ideologies and reworked in the post-war neoliberal context of Lebanon, its pervasiveness stretches from sect-based consociationalism as a

[123] Raymond Rizk, "Al-kanisa tashmul al-ʿalam" [The Church includes the world], in *Antakiya tatajaddad* [Antioch in revival], 273–76.
[124] For example, *see* Robbins, *Becoming Sinners*; Webb Keane, *Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).
[125] These hierarchies are materialized and historicized in the Orthodox tradition and ecclesial structures as prime sources of authority. *See also* Bandak and Boylston, "The 'Orthodoxy' of Orthodoxy," 25–46.
[126] Bandak, "Exemplary Series and Christian Typology," 47–63.

political model of governance to dynamic quotidian negotiations of sect and sectarian affiliations.[127] This, toppled with labor market deregulation under neoliberalism, makes sect-based infrastructures among the few alternatives to secure livelihood in the country.[128] While aligning with this scholarship, I also argue that its focus on these infrastructures has overshadowed other incentives and practices of welfare provision. Among these, paradoxically, the religious ones. However, the aim is not to think of sharikeh as an analytical alternative to sect, but to emphasize their overlapping roles in shaping the lived terms of Christian life, national unity, and sectarian tensions on the ground.[129] Thinking through the concept of sharikeh within the microcosm of the MJO center opens the possibility of imagining forms of "being together" and "being apart" that cross and go beyond sect as the paradigm for delivering welfare services in Beirut.[130] These different forms are shaped by complex, overlapping, and even contradictory actions on the part of my interlocutors. For instance, a Rum could emulate the good Samaritan, yet also argue that God is Rum (*Allah rum*).[131] Another could criticize the *zuʿamaʾ* (political and communal leaders), yet expect their sect to help them.

This chapter highlights the creativity of lived religious practice, while also underscoring its grounding in the Orthodox tradition. It slips through the institutional bounds of the church, with its common understandings of devotional practice, and descends into the inconsistencies of precarious daily life. Here, religious and social practices entail varied configurations of human-divine relations that challenge insistent distinctions such as sacred-profane, religious-secular, or sect-church. My discussants negotiate Orthodox guidelines for living through the lens of everyday concerns and "the quotidian doubts and anxiety of the human condition."[132] These guidelines come to mediate the ability to carry on with one's life in times of uncertainty and arbitrariness. In turn, they are intimately shaped by the larger social and political shifts that those residing in Lebanon have been compelled to deal with. At the same time, this approach sheds

[127] Deeb, Nalbantian, and Sbaiti, introduction to *Practicing Sectarianism,* 1–13.
[128] Majed, "Sectarian Neoliberalism," in Karam and Majed, *The Lebanon Uprising of 2019*, 76–79.
[129] *See also* Angie Heo, "Saints, Media, and Minority Culture: On Coptic Cults of Egyptian Revolution from Alexandria to Maspero," in Bandak and Bille, *Politics of Worship in the Contemporary Middle East*, 53–71.
[130] *See also* Mittermaier, "Revolutions Don't Stop Charity," in *Giving to God.*
[131] Part of radical discourses of differentiation, this colloquial phrase confines God to a sectarian identity as understood and practiced in the context of Lebanon. It is also used in jest to hint at the uncompromising adherence of Lebanese Rum Orthodox to religious and sectarian beliefs and practices.
[132] Orsi, *History and Presence*, 8. *See also* Schielke, *Egypt in the Future Tense*, 1–26.

light on the dynamic relation between the proximate, immediate needs triggered by the crises and the futures advertised by particular Orthodox aspirations for a civil society. [133]

**God Provides at the Right Time**


**Figure 2** – 1.2. The entrance of the mustawsaf and a direction sign pointing to its location. June 8, 2022, Ashrafiyeh, Beirut. Photos by author.

The mustawsaf was located five minutes away from Sassine Square, a politically charged Christian landmark in Ashrafiyeh.[134] Out of sight, in a dead-end street, the center's modest

[133] Arjun Appadurai, *The Future as Cultural Fact: Essays on the Global Condition* (London: Verso, 2013), 210–14.
[134] Ashrafiyeh, a district on the east side of Beirut, has often been depicted as a stronghold of Christian political and religious presence. This portrayal is built upon sectarian geographies, shaped during the civil war, and their lasting influence on social imaginaries and urban cartographies of Beirut. Within Ashrafiyeh, Sassine Square stands out as a well-known commercial hub and a Christian landmark with political significance. The square is strongly associated with Bashir Gemayel, leader of the Lebanese Forces and president-elect of Lebanon, who was assassinated in the vicinity of the square in 1982. A memorial in the square honors him in a manner reminiscent of a martyr. In October 2022, a sizable white statue of the Virgin Mary—referred to as *Sayyidat al-Ashrafiyeh* (Lady of Ashrafiyeh)—was placed in the square. The project was financed by a Beiruti connected to the Lebanese Forces. Even though its installation was not without debate, the statue further contributed to the "Christian" aesthetic of the square, adding to the regular festive decorations for Easter and Christmas. Beyond its confessionalized urban landscape, the square is also a common meeting point and patrolling area for the Lebanese Forces.

presence was signaled by a white and blue sign pinned at one end of the narrow street. While located in the heart of the district, the state of the center did not fit the occasionally misleading depictions of Ashrafiyeh as high-end Christian. The modest indoor area and its inadequate segmentation added a sense of inefficiency to the ever-increasing undertakings of the center. Its location at the semi-basement of an old five-story building made natural light scarce. Mobile coverage was scant, the humidity levels were high. Yet, what the center lacked in housing, it compensated through its activity and social reputation. On busy days, it was teeming with people. Most looked for "Madame" Rouba[135] – the director of the mustawsaf – to confide, ask for help, or simply greet her. Others had doctor's appointments. Many came to buy or pick up their discounted medication, subsidized either by the center or by the Lebanese Ministry of Health, through YMCA Lebanon. Even more passed by to collect or inquire about food items or coupons. Boxes and plastics bags filled with produce laid on the floor, on kitchen counters, or in Rouba's office. By contrast, medicine boxes were neatly organized and stacked in white cabinets with glass doors. Less busy days were scarce. Yet, when they did happen, the typical working schedule from 8:00 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. was punctuated by regular breaks for conversations over Arabic coffee.

As the overall situation was rapidly deteriorating across the country, the center's activity accelerated, with long queues and buzzing traffic of people coming and going on a regular basis. While the need for comprehensive assistance increased considerably, the center's material and human resources were noticeably affected. The mustawsaf was featured more and more in online media, yet its amplified digital visibility was hardly matched by its workforce capacity comprising of two full-time employees: Rouba, a tenacious but overworked social worker and director, and Patricia, an energetic nurse overseeing the dispensary. There was also Fadia, a bookkeeper who was seldom present at the center. This was also the case with the members of the center's committee, known as *lajnat al-ʿamal al-ijtimaʿi* (the social work committee). Informally referred to as *lijnet es-sayyidet* (the ladies' committee), it comprised mostly women from higher middle-class families, who supervised and contributed financially to the activities of the mustawsaf, yet rarely dealt with the nitty-gritty of work on the ground. This was left to

[135] Here, the French term "Madame" is not only a gendered reference to marital status, but also an index of social hierarchies. At the mustawsaf, the title was predominantly used when addressing the director and the women on the committee. Also, given the confessional markers of language in Lebanon, one could make a case for a Christian undertone in this French form of address, yet this aspect requires further comparative research.

Rouba, Patricia, and the many volunteers, benefactors, and beneficiaries of the center. Given these variables, my contributions were need-based. I wrapped Christmas presents, did secretary work, ran errands, worked as a translator, and distributed food kits according to Rouba's instructions, "One bottle of oil, one bag of sugar, two bags of pasta, one mortadella, and one can of tuna." The availability and quantity of these food staples depended on the inflow of donations, stringency of need, and the affinities of the staff towards certain beneficiaries.

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May 11, 2020. I had just returned to the center after collecting an in-kind donation for the food assistance program. Rouba instructed me to accompany the truck driver she had hired to pick up the promised packages of food items. According to Rouba, the driver was a Rum with limited financial means and a family to support so she was trying to find him some work. She also informed me that the donation came from the owner of a food company who was Rum and wanted to make a contribution in the memory of her late husband. Her informative tone was mixed with surprise at the fact that Orthodox organizations were included in the charity plan, given that her late husband was Maronite. Apparently, a connection from *L'Orient-Le Jour*, a leading French-language newspaper with a Christian leaning, mediated the contact with the donor. However, the outcome of this networking with sectarian undertones left Rouba rather disappointed. The amount of food, which barely took a quarter of the truck's payload capacity, fell short of what she expected. It also fell short of the number of families that she had hoped to help. A few days after, as we were discussing on how to readjust our expectations, Rouba informed me that someone came to donate a sum of money for her to spend as she saw fit. Turning towards me, she added,"*Laykeh, shefteh kif Allah byeshteghil?*" (Look, did you see how God works?). I smiled and we continued our work.

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For Rouba, the second donation was pinned in a narrative where God provided for the needs of the mustawsaf through the unplanned donation of a benefactor. Unpredicted yet somehow expected intercessions like this one do not fit the profile of arresting divine interventions that have the power to disrupt historical time with their excess of meaning. Instead, they are low-key mediations at the right time, allowing for everyday life to carry on amid the

disastrous structural failures of a dysfunctional Lebanese state. From this perspective, God is efficacious at the ground level, in the challenging daily lives of my interlocutors. They experience and reflect on their relationship with God as "tied in with more mundane effects of social life and structural power."[136] Anthony Shenoda, in his research on the miraculous as moral imaginary in Egypt, drew attention to these "modest" interventions in the lives of Coptic practitioners. Advocating for their ethnographic potential, he highlighted the implicit bias in the assessment of miracles as solely infringements on the laws of nature. Traced back to David Hume's take on miracles as transgressions of natural laws, this bias limits the possibilities of divine intervention in the world.[137] It also overshadows episodes like the one described above, where an efficient God intervened in the center's day-to-day activities.

This ordinary dimension of the miraculous intersects with an *extra-* dimension of the ordinary. Divine interventions at the mustawsaf did not necessarily follow canonical religious celebrations or liturgical calendars. Neither did they happen in a sacred place like a church or a pilgrimage site. Instead, they were tied to the environment of the socio-medical center, where God worked according to a temporality of immediate need, and in mysterious yet somewhat recognizable ways. This convergence of anticipation and wonder was persuasively described by Michael Gilsenan in his work on Sufism in Egypt. "Though the miraculous, by definition, is extraordinary, it is also incorporated into the potentials of everyday life. It may happen at any time. People expect and look for it. And when it does occur, they are amazed but not surprised!"[138] Along these lines, Rouba's surprise at the inclusion of the center in the donation plan despite sect-based inconsistencies is different from her reaction to the second donation. In the former case, her response is an embodied reaction to widespread, common practices of distributing services and goods through sect-based networks.[139] In fact, the story of how the donation was acquired in the first-place hints at these networks that function across public and private institutions, and among individuals with *wasta* (connections).[140] In the latter case, the

[136] Bandak and Bille, introduction to *Politics of Worship in the Contemporary Middle East,* 3.
[137] Anthony Shenoda, "Cultivating Mystery: Miracles and the Coptic Moral Imaginary" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2010), 32–41.
[138] Michael Gilsenan, *Recognizing Islam: An Anthropologist's Introduction* (1982; repr., New York: Routledge, 2013), 80. Citations refer to the Routledge edition.
[139] Nucho, *Everyday Sectarianism,* 1–29.
[140] *wasta* is a multifaceted colloquial term in Arabic that typically denotes social and monetary capital of influence. For more on this, *see* Suad Joseph, "Working-Class Women's Networks in a Sectarian State: A Political Paradox," *American Ethnologist* 10, no. 1 (1983): 10–11, https://www.jstor.org/stable/644701.

donation was not planned by Rouba, yet she was not as surprised as I was. As an index of God's way of working, the financial contribution came to confirm what she already knew, that God always takes care/manages (*Allah bidabbir*). Through its spontaneity, the second contribution did not, seemingly, subscribe to the sectarian genealogy of the first one. Yet, similarly, it had material and social consequences for the center. It changed Rouba's mood and allowed for the full implementation of the food assistance program. In turn, fulfilling the program's quota highlighted her competence as a social worker and added to the social reputation of the center and of MJO.

Here it is worth dwelling on the phrase *Allah bidabbir,* which also makes the focus of the snapshot introducing this chapter. Written in both Arabic and Latin scripts, the phrase was engraved on wooden plates that were strategically placed along the old coastal road connecting Beirut to Jbeil. The plates were part of an annual campaign organized by Mar Takla Maronite Church in Buwar, wherein colloquial expressions with a religious message were placed in the vicinity of the church to inspire and uplift the community.[141] This material presence of *Allah bidabbir* echoes in quotidian discursive practices, albeit its inscription conceals a constitutive ambiguity of usage and meaning. Heard in casual street conversations, meant as a mode of encouragement or consolation, employed as a deferral to a higher power, the expression is characterized by several inherent tensions. First, *Allah bidabbir* entails elements of hope, trust, constraint, and defeat. On the one hand, the speaker surrenders to God as the ultimate *mudabbir* (manager, organizer) in times of hardships, troubles, and difficult situations. On the other hand, this surrender comes from recognizing the inherent limitations of humanity and nature as created components of a divine economy (*al-tadbir al-ilahi*).[142] Retrospectively, the phrase can function as a confirmation of divine provision, such as in Rouba's interpretation of the financial donation. Prospectively, it acts as a comforting trust in divine provision when all hope is gone. Yet this trust also comes from a place of defeat, similar to Patricia's state in the introductory episode.

[141] On a subsequent visit to the area, one of the community members told me that the chosen phrase for the following year (2024) was "*el-muʾmin niyyelu*," a Lebanese colloquial phrase that could translate as "blessed is the faithful."

[142] *al-tadbir al-ilahi* is a phrase that can be translated both as "divine management" and "divine economy." In the former case, it emphasizes divine agency and God as the ultimate *mudabbir* (manager, organizer) in planning, organizing and providing to the world. The latter, references the inner workings of the divine plan in place since eternity, incomprehensible to the human mind but glimpsed at through the Incarnation. This plan incorporates hierarchical assemblages of divine, human, and natural elements that become meaningful in relation and final union with God.

Second, the God invoked in this phrase oscillates between a more ecumenical, sometimes vague, figure and a more antagonistic agent. For instance, Patricia's remark hinted at a confessionally encompassing image of God, tied to the predicament of all Lebanese. At the same time, she referenced Lebanon as *ard el-qiddisin* (land of the saints), a Christian expression indexing Christian sacred hierarchies and discourses of territorial appropriations, often tied to sectarian geographies in the country. Moreover, this phrase was part of an array of Arabic colloquial phrases appealing to the divine and populating the soundscape of the socio-medical center. From divine invocations (*ya ʿadra, ya Yasuʿ* - Oh Virgin, Oh Jesus) and calls for holy intercession (*ya ʿadra ishfaʿi fina* - Oh Virgin intervene for us) to delegating responsibility (*ittikil ʿala Allah* - Surrender to God) and showing gratitude (*Allah ykhallileh yekun* - May God keep you for me), these idioms index a public discourse populated by God and saints as interceding agents, yet steeply grounded in everyday socio-economic realities. Approaching them as mere cultural paraphernalia of the Arabic language and excluding them from the religious worlds and hierarchies that they are part of overlooks their role in the public performance of piety and communal affiliation.

In the daily interactions at the mustawsaf*,* personnel, benefactors, and beneficiaries employed these idioms according to unspoken rules of social propriety. Reactionary to the rippling effects of the multilayered crises engulfing Lebanon, they were part of discursive practices of balancing between frustration, despair, and hopelessness, on one side, and public commitment, hope, and submission to the will of God, on the other. For instance, the center's personnel reacted to the grateful remarks of beneficiaries with a deflection of agency to God and his provisions. Desperate accounts on the skyrocketing prices of food and medication were accompanied by the comfort of subsidized produce and services from the center. The defeating anger of a crumbling corrupt state found solace in a just God who provided materially and spiritually. Yet, beyond their role in performing piety publicly, these idioms also index communal affiliation. The most popular otherworldly agents invoked in the center's social environment are part of the Christian, predominately Orthodox, world. Their invocation grounds the speaker in an Orthodox tradition that defines social relations between heaven and earth,[143] while also being a public performance tied to a confessional identity. This grounding can gain centrality and have social and material consequences in intercommunal interactions.

[143] Orsi, introduction to *Between Heaven and Earth,* 1–18.

After hours spent at the center preparing customized gifts for *Shaʿnineh* (Palm Sunday), we started distributing them to children after their appointments with the pediatrician. The gifts included mostly sweets, but also a pocket-size icon and a branch of olive tree symbolizing the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. As I was putting together the gifts for the next family coming out of the dispensary, Rouba stopped me. Upon asking her why, she replied that the family was Muslim so they did not celebrate Palm Sunday. This story adds a confessional dimension to an invocation of God with universal undertones. Here, giving and receiving were tied to religious distinctions of practice and temporality. The family did not receive a gift because they did not celebrate Palm Sunday, but also because it contained objects associated with a rite they did not subscribe to. At the same time, this short story comes to show that the presence of the Muslim "other" is not always sectarian in nature, and religious difference is not always part of sectarian ideologies. Communal difference can exist beyond the sectarian-universalist framework, tied to religious practice and highlighted situationally. Had it not been for the celebration of Palm Sunday, the Christian-Muslim differentiation would have subsumed to doctor-patient relation.[144]

Returning to Rouba's rhetorical question—"*Laykeh, shefteh kif Allah byeshteghil?*"—an intrinsic answer is that God works through people. Many exemplary yet ordinary individuals populated narratives of optimal divine interventions, acting as media for God's gifts. Whether social benefactors, medical collaborators, or "friends" of the mustawsaf, their contributions are often experienced and interpreted as proof of God working through individuals. Not symbolically, but in concrete and material ways. This aspect of human mediation promotes an Orthodox way of living (*tariqat ʿaish*) and giving that is negotiated at the ambiguous convergence of human will and divine agency. The provision of medical and social services at the center does not rely only on the kindness and willingness of individuals to give, but also on God's intervention through their actions and forms of service (*khidmeh*). In her work on Islamic practices of giving, Amira Mittermaier highlighted this ambiguity of human agency and divine intercession, not aiming to clarify uncertainty but rather to emphasize it.[145] It is God who gives. It is the human who gives.

[144] However, this does not mean that different religious ways of living do not intersect. Given Lebanon's multi-confessional environment, religious beliefs and practices are exchanged, adopted, or guarded as markers of differentiation.
[145] Mittermaier, *Giving to God*, 50–54.

Ambiguity also defines the concept of sharikeh, both in its social expression at the mustawsaf and its semantic field derived from the Arabic root *sh-r-k.* The term encompasses an agentive dimension, where it denotes an active participation in something, and a relational dimension, which entails sharing or cooperating. It can translate as partnership, association, or company. Simultaneously, it can be understood as communion, referencing the physical and spiritual participation in the Eucharist, together with the forms of human-divine relationality inherent in this church sacrament. In the case of the mustawsaf and its welfare practices, sharikeh as analytical lens and lived experience brings together all these dimensions in forms of relationality grounded in Christian ontologies and a culture of charity. God partners with people by working with them and through them to address immediate and concrete needs. People partner with each other through different practices of giving and receiving as embodied habitations of Christ, which are grounded in institutionalized associations like the mustawsaf and MJO. These partnerships account for God as a *sharik* (participant, partner). They function under temporalities of contingency and immediacy of need, but also under eschatological hopes of provision. They are shaped by economic inequalities and sectarian differentiations, but also by human limitations and divine management (*al-tadbir al-ilahi*). Understanding these intersections demands attention to how individuals relate to the mustawsaf from the perspective of the "religious conditioning of their everyday lives."[146]

Sharikeh enables seemingly incongruent modes of action to coexist. For instance, Rouba's trust in the inevitability of God's provision when human efforts had been exhausted seemed to run counter to her professional formation as a social worker. Yet, in her case, and in the case of the center as a whole, the pragmatics of professionalism and the hope in divine intervention did not exclude each other. Despite her confidence in God's provision, Rouba planned ahead. She made inventories of financial and in-kind donations, compiled meticulous lists of names, phone numbers, and addresses, while also extending her social network of potential donors and collaborators. A relevant example of this mix between pragmatism and hope comes from a 2020 discussion I had with Rouba around Easter, when the influx of donations increased visibly. As I sat in her office, working on what seemed to be endless variations of lists with names and contacts of beneficiaries, she was preparing meat coupons. These were stamped handwritten vouchers that the center distributed to a selected few, intended to be exchanged for

[146] Bandak and Boylston, "The 'Orthodoxy' of Orthodoxy," 37.

meat at a predetermined supermarket. I noticed that Rouba was not distributing all the tickets, so I asked the reason for her refrain. She looked at me and smiled. She was ready, once again, to assume her role as my mentor. Emphasizing her experience and professionalism as a social worker, she reminded me that everyone donated during Easter. The influx of donations and distributions resulted in beneficiaries quickly spending what they had received. Instead, she would wait two weeks for the hype of the festive season to settle down. Then, she would resume distributing coupons. Here, even though God might have provided at a chosen divine time, Rouba's pragmatic thinking and professional experience as a social worker changed the temporality of distribution according to what she perceived to be a sustainable plan. However, it is worth mentioning that Rouba's actions were also driven by an underlying assumption that the center's beneficiaries did not have the ability or the willingness to plan on a long-term basis.

Narratives on these concrete situations do not focus on God as a transcendental entity experienced through introspection, but on God as a social and relational presence, actively mediating in the everyday environment of the center. Paying attention to these mediations and their discursive surround answers the recent call of several anthropologists to bring back God into our ethnographic endeavors. Samuli Schielke's 2019 programmatic article – "The Power of God: Four Proposals for an Anthropological Engagement" – puts forward four ways of engaging with God and its various manifestations in Islam and, by extension, in the other two Abrahamic traditions.[147] In her astute and empathetic ethnography on Islamic practices of giving (*zakat*), Mittermaier disrupts liberal and neoliberal perspectives on charity and humanitarianism by including God in triadic (giver-God-receiver) formats of gift exchanges.[148]

In my attempt to include God in the disenchanted narratives of anthropology,[149] I approach the religious worldviews of my interlocutors as assemblages that place humans, God, and the surrounding world in particular relational networks in time and space. This approach challenges a bias towards transcendence and asceticism flagged by scholars like Fennella Cannell in her criticism of anthropological approaches to Christianity.[150] While her remark is

[147] Samuli Schielke, "The Power of God: Four Proposals for an Anthropological Engagement," *ZMO Programmatic Texts* 13 (2019): 1–20, https://d-nb.info/1175974781/34.
[148] Mittermaier, *Giving to God*, 5–8.
[149] Here I align with Dipesh Chakrabarty and his perspective on the disenchanted narratives of history and the European assumptions they carry regarding secularity and modernity. For more, *see* Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Translating Life-Worlds into Labor and History," chap. 3 in *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).
[150] Cannell, introduction to *The Anthropology of Christianity*, 1–50.

based on an implicit equation of orthodoxy (normativity) with Western Christian models, her meritorious criticism caters to the Orthodox tradition as well. Orthodoxy is a lot about correct management of relations across ontological levels.[151] This requires an engagement with Christian anthropology and its implicit definitions of the human in hierarchical relations with God and with each other. Particular divine manifestations shaped and transformed how my interlocutors inhabited and made sense of the world around them. At the same time, different power relations among humans and historical circumstances called for particular divine expressions. In the service culture of the socio-medical center, it was a down-to-earth God who catered to the immediate material and social needs identified by the center. These mediated divine interventions were anchored in Orthodox worldviews advertised by MJO as an organization with origins in the Antiochian *nahda* (revival).

**Communion (Sharikeh) as a Model for Social Life**

By engaging with Orthodox tradition, I approach these mediated divine interventions within the service culture of the center through the Orthodox concept of sharikeh. As the overall situation in Lebanon rapidly deteriorated, this concept become more and more prevalent within the Lebanese Orthodox community. It transpired through Sunday sermons, MJO conferences, Zoom fellowships, and charity work carried out by parishes and socio-religious structures like MJO. Encompassing the polyvalent character of sharikeh and its relation to emulating Christ requires an engagement with Christian anthropology. After all, to take God seriously implies to take seriously the ontological disruptions that theology brings to understandings of personhood framed within the disciplinary borders of anthropology. One such disruption challenges engrained Western-based ideals of personhood as self-contained and autonomous. In Orthodoxy, the concept of human cannot be explained in terms of itself, but requires grounding in the revelations of Christ incarnated.[152] The creation of Man in the image and likeness of God, coupled with Man's subsequent fall, are part of a Christian ontological order centered on a

[151] Bandak and Boylston, "The 'Orthodoxy' of Orthodoxy," 26; Hann and Goltz, introduction to *Eastern Christians in Anthropological Perspective*, 1–29.
[152] For a similar engagement with Islamic anthropology, *see* Yasmin Moll, "Can there be a Godly ethnography? Islamic Anthropology, Epistemic Decolonization, and the Ethnographic Stance," *American Anthropologist* 125, no 4 (2023): 746–60, https://doi.org/10.1111/aman.13911. For an engagement with personhood and human agency as relational, *see* Paul Christopher Johnson, "Modes and Moods of 'Slave Anastácia,' Afro-Brazilian Saint," *Journal de la Société des américanistes* 104, no. 1 (2018): 27–73, https://doi.org/10.4000/jsa.15584.

metamorphosis of the whole being and the entire world. The end goal is *theosis*, meaning a deified humanity.[153] The Church Father Athanasius the Great famously articulated this goal by writing that the Word (Son of God) became human so that humans may become divine.[154]

This metamorphosis can only have a corporate character, underscoring a communion between God, humans, and the whole universe. Maximus the Confessor, a seventh-century theologian and Church Father, argued that humans are inherently connected to the entirety of creation. In his cosmic theological vision, the transfiguration of the world implies a sacramental experience of communion of all creation with the Creator. Echoing Platonic philosophy and building on his Christian predecessors, Maximus explored the implications of this communion through the Greek word "logos," a polysemantic term that can translate as word, reason, principle, and meaning. In brief terms, all created beings possess a "logos" that originates from the divine "Logos," making them part of a divine economy where the created order becomes meaningful in relation to God. Thus, human fulfillment is not outside God and nature, but it is realized as an integral part of a project where divine wills and intentions are in synergy with humanity's pastoral ministry over a cosmos that longs for union in God.[155] In this ministry, humanity is called to fulfill its vocation of elevating and transfiguring the world it inhabits.[156] This call is central to the social doctrine of MJO, where it translates into different yet interconnected understandings and potencies of communion. One such understanding extends

[153] Rizk, *Al-qudusat li-l-qiddisin* [The holy ones for those holy], 21. The doctrine of *theosis* (deification or divinization) of the human being is central to Orthodox theology and spirituality. It references the redemptive potential of humans as they strive for divine synergy, made possible through Christ's incarnation and his atoning work. The arenas for working towards the ultimate goal of salvation, which is communion with God, include sacramental practice and the life of the Church in its diverse forms. While the doctrine is often associated with the writings of Athanasius the Great, various elaborations on *theosis* are present across patristic literature, including the mystical writings of Gregory Palamas and Symeon the New Theologian. For more insights into this doctrine, *see* Mary B. Cunningham and Elizabeth Theokritoff, *The Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology*, chaps. 6, 7, and 10.

[154] *Saint Athanasius On the Incarnation* 54.3., translated by Archibald Robertson (London: D. Nutt, 1891), 93. *See also* Clément, "The Person in the Image of God," chap. 2 in *On Human Being*.

[155] Elizabeth Theokritoff, "Creator and Creation," in Theokritoff and Cunningham, *Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology*, 66–67.

[156] This call was recently emphasized in the 2020 statement on the social doctrine of the Orthodox Christian Church commissioned by the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, which read, "We are dependent creatures, creatures ever in communion, and hence we are also morally responsible not only for ourselves or for those whom we immediately influence or affect, but for the whole of the created order—the whole city of the cosmos, so to speak." *For the Life of the World: Towards a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church*, ed. David Bentley Hart and John Chryssavgis, (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2020), 103.

beyond liturgical confinement and into the world at large.[157] Predicated on a worldview where the meaning of eucharistic community is refracted unto the entire society, each Orthodox practitioner is called to reflect Christ and see Christ reflected in others.[158] In this context, social life and the world at large become the scenes for Christian life and practice, where living Christ is an embodied responsibility.[159] A 1988 statement delivered on the forty-sixth anniversary of MJO's founding reads,

> Our testimony is not in heaven, but it is looking forward to it trying to elevate the universe. Our testimony springs from the soil, from history, from the earth. So, beware from despising these things because we would thus despise what the Lord has redeemed with his blood and what is called to be his manifestation.[160]

The same sense of responsibility was conveyed during a Zoom fellowship session of the MJO Beirut group (*firqa)*.[161] Its members were involved, to different degrees, in the activities of the mustawsaf. One of them was Georges, an established doctor who regularly provided medical services to low-income patients in exchange for symbolic financial compensation. Thematically focused on the early Christian communities (*al-masihiyun al-awwalun*), the discussion leader opened the session by asking about the difference between prayer (*sala*) and worship (*ʿibada*). The answers of the attending members coalesced around prayer as an intimate and personal engagement with God and the manifold saints of the Orthodox Church through the recitation of authorized texts. Conversely, worship entailed a collective and public dimension, comprising liturgical celebrations but also extending to a variety of social and community services.

This definition of sharikeh as social togetherness with tangible consequences in the material world was integral to the culture of the mustawsaf. Distributing food after the explosion, providing access to oxygen machines during the pandemic, and offering low-cost medical services were seen as both community work and expressions of sharikeh predicated on modeling after Christ and seeing Christ in others. In other words, divine intimacy was social. Religious

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[157] Clément, *On Human Being*, 43–45. Other two manifestations are the ontological and the liturgical. In the former case, Clément writes about a Christian "we" that encompasses a unity of human essence in a multitude of persons. In the latter case, the eucharistic mystery is the most intimate embodied habit of corporate unity and a visceral foretaste of the eschatological kingdom.
[158] Rizk, "Al-kanisa tashmul al-ʿalam" [The church includes the world], 273–76.
[159] Simion Pop, "Orthodox Revivals: Prayer, Charisma, and Liturgical Religion," in Luehrmann, *Praying with the Senses*, 221–27.
[160] Haidar, "Al-Haraka wa-l-qadiyya al-ijtimaʿiyya" [The Movement and the social cause], 495–96.
[161] As a predominantly Syrian-Lebanese Orthodox organization, MJO is structurally divided into interconnected regional and local cells that are organized along and across the ecclesiastical structures of the Antiochian Orthodox Church. This particular group meeting took place on June 23, 2022.

commitments were not much about intimate relations and prayers in a room with closed doors (Mathew 6:6), but about activist engagement and social service to the community.[162] It was not about separation from the worldly context but about grounding in the historical reality of a country in crisis.

This grounding made the focus of a discussion I had with Rouba in December of 2019, during one of our many food deliveries. After unloading bulky food kits from her car to *Beit el-Harakeh* (House of the Movement), a space that acts as an administrative headquarter and a social center for MJO Beirut, we started conversing on her work at the mustawsaf. Flashing back to one of her past statements on seeing Christ in the eyes of the people she interacted with, I asked Rouba if she considered her work at the center as *khidmeh* (service). She replied by saying that there are different types of service that Christians engage in. "Maybe they do not go to church every Sunday, but they help the needy. To be honest, Sunday morning I prefer to sleep because I work so much during the week." Hinting at her overworked demeanor, I remarked on the unequal distribution of responsibilities and assignments across the center's infrastructure. I specifically referenced committee members who seldom allocate time for on-the-ground activities during hectic and busy days. Rouba gently scolded me and added that the ladies (*es-sayyidet*) of the committee "have their own ways of doing *khidmeh* and helping the center." A few weeks later, we tackled the same subject over coffee at the center. This time, Patricia was present. To Rouba's remark on missing the Sunday liturgy, Patricia was rather critical, adding that the church community was an essential part of what it meant to be Rum. She stated that, "as a family, we go to church every Sunday, even though this means we cannot hang out with friends afterwards. You cannot go outside Beirut after 1 p.m. because you get stuck in heavy traffic on your way back." Trying to add a lighter tone to what turned into a tense conversation, Rouba replied jokingly that she grew up in "heaven" since her native village had more than ten Orthodox churches.

Here two seemingly contrasting visions of Orthodox practice are exemplified by Patricia and Rouba. While both would agree that orientation towards God required orientation towards

[162] Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern*. In her work on Islamic pious practices within a Shiʿi Muslim community in Beirut, Deeb also highlights a shift in Muslim devotion from saintly intercession and communal belonging to emphasis on moral knowledge and activist commitment.

the others, Rouba downplayed ecclesiastical and liturgical structures, while Patricia limited the corporate aspect to the liturgical community. However, these two positions are cohesively intertwined within the doctrinal and institutional foundations of MJO. Promoting a robust community-based approach, the organization inspired a wave of intellectuals and laypersons in the 1960s and 1970s to produce engaging work on the centrality of civic engagement and piety renewal.[163] The writings and public personas of MJO members such as Georges Khodr (former Metropolitan of Byblos and Botris (Mount Lebanon) and lay professionals like Raymond Rizk and Costi Bendaly are read and revered today within the movement and the larger Antiochian Orthodox community. Like them, lay congregants are called to cultivate Orthodox awareness by being active members in society and active religious practitioners. They are called to emulate Christ in life and death. Yet, this emulation is not necessarily through heroic acts like martyrdom or wonderworking, but through ordinary concrete deeds like engaging in civic work.[164]

Take, for example, the statement issued following the 12th MJO conference, on December 29, 1970. Entitled "Fi iltizam shuʾun al-ard" (On the commitment to worldly matters), it draws upon theological reasoning to advocate for an active engagement in the world.

> The Movement, since its beginning, has been a movement of love for God and his Church, and therefore for the world; because Christianity knows that heaven and earth were adjoined in the Incarnation. So, heaven does not distract [us] from earth and, whoever works for heaven, is actually working for earth, because there is no difference between what is to come and what is now. The Kingdom starts from here if prosperity and bliss fill the earth and it [the earth] is covered by happiness and joy.[165]

In this passage, as in many others, idioms of faith translate into duties, responsibilities, and commitments to public issues and worldly affairs. Grounded in an economy of Incarnation, the concern for public and social issues connected to communities and the homeland (*al-watan*) is a must for Rum practitioners whose lives are driven by an authentic Christian spirit (*al-ruh al-masihi al-asli*) that assures the historical, spiritual, and dialogical continuity of the Orthodox Church.[166] At the same time, the commitment to worldly affairs is grounded in an Orthodox

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[163] Farid El-Khazen, *The Breakdown of the State in Lebanon, 1967–1976* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2000), 81.
[164] Albert Laham, "Masuʾuliat al-nahda wa muqtadayatuha" [The responsibilities of the nahda and its requirements], 1950, in *Antakiya tatajaddad* [Antioch in revival], 56–58.
[165] "Fi iltizam shuʾun al-ard" [On the commitment to worldly matters], document following the 12th conference of MJO at the University of Balamand, December 26–29, 1970, in *Antakiya tatajaddad* [Antioch in revival], 294.
[166] Georges Florovsky, "The Ethos of the Orthodox Church," *The Ecumenical Review* 12, no. 2 (1960): 186, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-6623.1960.tb00759.x. The submission to the ecclesiastical authority of the Orthodox Church and its authorized discourses was vividly emphasized in a passage from Haidar, "Al-Haraka wa-l-qadiyya

model of the world where Christians are called to act as agents of Christ in history. The interesting element here is the interplay of different temporalities—namely, the historical and the eschatological. The road to the eschaton starts in history, and the road to heaven starts from earth. This interflow can translate into a tense relation between an immediate present of need and a future-oriented gaze on salvation, each engendering different modalities of hope/hopelessness and being in the world. At the same time, it can translate into potential for action. This aspect was emphasized by the MJO member and prolific writer Raymond Rizk in his call to activism. "Let us know that work is prayer and that the translation of Christ in the circumstances of my life happens at two levels, one individual and the other public since He [Christ] is both offering and sacrifice."[167] Continuing with a retake on the biblical story of Martha and Mary, he challenges the typological preference for Mary, who decided to sit at the feet of Jesus in contemplation, over Martha, who worried herself with household trivia and worldly matters. Rizk calls readers to be both Mary and Martha, to both stay in contemplation and act.[168] He himself practiced what he preached since he was a driving force in the establishment of the mustawsaf.

This model of service as embodied habitations of Christ has been sympathetic to the socio-historical context of Lebanon. Its supporters have aimed to provide an alternative to the networks of clientelism engendered by political and sectarian affiliations. During the Lebanese civil war, they called for work on public life and a fight against sectarian social structures based on a "commitment to the cause of Christ on this land."[169] They have called for a secular government out of a commitment to the homeland (*al-watan*) that must surpass the aspirations of political representation for the Orthodox sect (*taʾifa*).[170] The reverberations of these calls intensified in the post-2019 context. The current world for my interlocutors, like for most Lebanese, was framed within a highly unstable historical period that has plagued the country.[171] In these critical circumstances, their striving for a sane life did not require an active disposition towards social change or an outlook towards an eschatology devoid of history. "Rather, it was

al-ijtimaʿiyya" [The Movement and the social cause - ecclesial vision], 497. "The Orthodox Youth Movement, independent of the Church of Christ, has no taste, smell, thought, or existence. Its existence derives from the Church, its flavor is taken from the Church, its thought is the thought of Christ."

[167] Rizk, "Al-kanisa tashmul al-ʿalam" [The church includes the world], 275.

[168] Rizk, "Al-kanisa tashmul al-ʿalam" [The church includes the world], 275.

[169] Haidar, "Al-Haraka wa-l-qadiyya al-ijtimaʿiyya" [The Movement and the social cause], 495; *See also* "Fi iltizam shuʾun al-ard" [On the commitment to worldly matters], 296–97.

[170] Georges Khodr and S. Troitsky, *Al-kanisa wa al-dawla* [The church and the state] (Beirut: An-Nour Publications, 1982), 40–43.

[171] For a similar context, see Schielke, *Egypt in the Future Tense*, 1–26.

the attempt to live acceptably both for oneself and for others, and to do so within the world in which one finds oneself."[172] This temporality of contingency brought back vivid memories of the civil war, embodied and materialized through deficient communication, congested traffic, food insecurities, and emigration.[173] Simultaneously, it framed the context for these narratives of practical divine interventions, and incentivized their circulation among the public of the center. In these narratives, looking forwards to heaven meant being down to earth.

This model of service as embodied habitations of Christ also acts as a critical commentary to the weak welfare provisions offered by the Lebanese state. For instance, the presence of the state at the mustawsaf was materialized or, better said, dematerialized, through the gradual decrease of subsidized medication distributed by the Ministry of Health. The white cabinets with glass doors where Patricia orderly stored medication became emptier and emptier with the increase in demand and the decrease in supply. The hopelessness and anger towards governmental deception and repression escalated further once with the unfolding economic and financial crises. Public indignation shone through colloquial expressions of criticism towards the state. Colloquial expressions such as "*wayn ed-dawleh*" (Where is the state?) or "*dawleh feshleh*" (failed state) were a staple in everyday discourse. The blatant shortcomings of governmental welfare programs led to social and moral alternatives that weaved themselves into the intimacy of everyday life. For scholars familiar with the Lebanese context, the first alternative to welfare services that comes to mind is sect-based networking. While this is a legitimate contender for a failed neoliberal state in Lebanon, the microcosm of the center reveals an alternative social order where the miraculous becomes more ordinary than the workings of the state. For my interlocutors, the probability of these intercessions and provisions was higher than the one of government-run welfare programs. *For them, God was more present than the State*.

**From Social Model to Reality on the Ground**

It was a regular weekday in January 2020. The activity at the mustawsaf was less hectic so Rouba and I had the opportunity to engage in longer conversations with those stopping by. Souad, a regular elderly beneficiary of aid, was sitting on a chair facing us. Breathing heavily

[172] Jarrett Zigon, "Hope and Waiting in Post-Soviet Moscow," in Janeja and Bandak, *Ethnographies of Waiting*, 72.
[173] Samir Khalaf, "The Scares and Scars of War," chap. 2 in *From Time to Time: Discursive Essays of a Lebanese Sociologist* (Beirut: Dar An-Nahar, 2016).

and distraught, she lamented the accelerated plunge of the country into financial and economic turmoil. Lebanese were reminiscing the days of the civil war and dreading their assumed inevitable return.[174] Longer electricity cuts and panic-buying indexed everyday lives enveloped in contingency. Yet, our discussion was also punctuated by the hope or modest certainty that God would always provide despite hardships. After a deep sigh, Souad continued by adding that God worked through the center and those working there, particularly Madame Rouba. At this point, the door chime was activated, indicating that someone else had arrived. A head peeked through the opened door and asked for Madame Rouba. As soon as Souad realized who the new visitor was, her face mimicked disapproval and discontent. Spotting her mood change, Rouba asked the newcomer, also an elderly recipient of aid, to sit in the waiting room. Then, in a lower voice, she asked Souad if she knew the second visitor and why she did not like her.

> R: You are neighbors. You live in the same neighborhood. You know each other, right?
>
> S: Yes, I know her. Everybody knows that she wears a cross so she can receive help.
>
> R: Is she Muslim?
>
> S: Yes, she is a Muslim wearing a cross on her neck to receive help.
>
> R: You do not really like it, right?
>
> S: No, the center should help Christians. It is Christian and meant to help Christians and not Muslims.

***

Like any systematic project of social order, the Orthodox worldview advocated by MJO comes with its own restrictive and normative elements. Its potential for inclusion also excludes. Orthodoxy, like other religious traditions, is grounded in a number of universalist claims and assertions on what is true, right, or just.[175] The idea of God as relational and mediating in the local world through individuals who strive towards reflecting Christ raises questions on the limitations related to the presence of "the other," in its various instantiations. Reflecting on these issues, this ethnographic episode shows how Orthodox beliefs, sectarian sensibilities, and precarious living overlap. It provides insights into how the Orthodox notion of sharikeh is negotiated at the intersection of its inherent universal aspirations and its social limitations within

[174] For the specter of the Lebanese war as a metaphor for high uncertainty, *see* Hermez, "'At the Gates of War:' Time, Space, and the Anticipation of Political Violence," chap. 3 in *War is Coming.*
[175] Joel Robbins, "What is a Christian? Notes Toward an Anthropology of Christianity," *Religion* 33, no. 3 (2003): 192–93, https://doi.org/10.1016/S0048-721X(03)00060-5.

relational realities on the ground. These negotiations include unresolved tensions between God who dispenses for all and God whose provisions come on a sect-based affiliation, between divine giving at the right time, but sometimes unequally.

Much research has been devoted to the widespread clientelist infrastructures that manipulate sectarian loyalties by providing basic needs, resources, and privileges. Besides sect, these infrastructures also uphold class, kin, and gender hierarchies, materializing a legal and civic pluralism that makes it difficult to imagine a unitary national body in Lebanon.[176] This culture of clientelism and personal brokerage is entangled in the everyday lives of Lebanese up to the point where its varied forms are expected, assumed, and even normalized. The same culture extends to transnational social and material networks where diasporic communities trade services, resources, and knowledge both along and beyond sect-based networks.[177] In the case of the center, a scan through the personal data of beneficiaries showed a mostly Orthodox and Christian public. If it was not the explicit nomination of the sect, it was the implicit reference to family names, residence, and the records of each *cas social* (social case).[178] Besides this paper-trail, a sect-based consistency characterized the organizational structure, where the committee members and the main donors for social programs, both locally and abroad, were mostly Rum.

Souad grounded the center in these communal infrastructures by highlighting the Christian profile of the center and the ensuing normative vision of serving Christians only. Here, sect did not necessarily reference religious practice or legal categorization, but a socio-political identity used as a tool to authorize access to basic needs. By projecting a public image as a member of the Christian community, Souad authorized her presence at the center and her access to its social and material networks. For her, being a Christian was a precondition for seeking help from the center. By contrast, her Muslim neighbor was not entitled to the same benefits. In Souad's vision, God provided through the center and its personnel, but more to some than to others. Even though both women had similar financial and medical hardships and even though the center's activity extended to the neighborhood where both of them lived, being a Muslim did not fit as a precondition to access welfare services. Here, need and hope in God's *tadbir* were

[176] Joseph, "Working-Class Women's Networks in a Sectarian State," 1–22.
[177] *See* Nucho, *Everyday Sectarianism*, esp. chaps. 3 and 4.
[178] On one occasion, when I was asked to retrieve the medical file of a patient, I expressed my surprise that the sect affiliation was registered in the file. Both Rouba and Patricia made a point to empathize that this was a practice of the past, both for social and medical files.

necessary but not sufficient, as sect affiliation came to differentiate between those who should and those who should not benefit.

At the same time, the mustawsaf mapped Ashrafiyeh according to a "geography of need,"[179] where the social landscape was not determined by high-end Christian landmarks but by low-income neighborhoods inhabited by families experiencing economic and housing instability. Given Rouba's professional commitment as a social worker, the evaluations of individuals and families as *cas médicaux et sociaux* (social and medical cases) remained undisclosed due to sensitive data. Yet, in our private conversations, she would share limited details with me and Patricia, while we also picked up information from conversations with the center's visitors. Regarding this episode, it remained unclear if the Muslim neighbor indeed engaged in confessional appropriations. Irrespective, both Souad and her neighbor were persons in need, a statement that Rouba would have easily agreed with since she knew their social and medical background. Thus, they were both within the purview of the center's activity and within God's provision for the needy.

The communal differentiation signaled by Souad is also tied to embodied public representations of poverty and piety at the center. In their interactions with personnel or committee members, visitors would show scars of surgeries or wounds. They would come with empty drug packaging as an evidence of need and lack. Often, their bodies would act as proof. In the particular case of old patients, sitting down and standing up was often accompanied by heavy breathing and religious colloquial phrases indexing pious character (e.g., *ya ʿadra, ya Yasuʿ* - Oh Virgin, Oh Jesus). For instance, Souad praised Madame Rouba at the center, exhibited pious modesty through a public submission to the will of God, engaged in casual conversation with the personnel, and provided evidence of her misfortune by displaying her empty medication boxes. Conversely, she contrasted her social propriety with the alleged deceiving performance of her Muslim neighbor, discrediting her need and request for help.

What is more, Souad's allegation against her neighbor misappropriating the cross in order to access networks critical to physical and social survival underscored sensibilities grounded in sect-based welfare structures. By accessing what she was not entitled to, she was taking from those who should have been the legitimate beneficiaries, namely Christians like Souad. Her personal animosity replicates a sectarian typology of the encroaching Muslim, most often Shiʿa,

[179] Mittermaier, *Giving to God*, 122.

others.[180] Her reaction is part of larger existential and social anxiety patterns, reminiscent of civil-war discourses where Christian political leaders would frame demographic changes as the intrusion of Muslims over Christian territories and livelihoods.[181] These anxieties manifest in demographic and territorial concerns. For instance, the possibility of a new census (the last comprehensive official census was conducted in 1932) evokes apprehension among Lebanese Christians. A confirmation of Muslim demographic dominance could potentially necessitate a restructuring of the confessional power-sharing system in Lebanon.[182] Nevertheless, the center's work on the ground did not function solely along sect defined in strict ethno-religious terms. The very presence of the "Muslim neighbor" at the mustawsaf spoke to this. Rouba's concealed disagreement and subsequent frustration with Souad's words spoke to this. While it is true that members of other sects and non-Lebanese citizens were not the center's primary focus, other social forms besides sect contributed to who should be part of a protected group.[183] For instance, a Maronite from Ashrafiyeh was more likely to access the center's services than an Orthodox from Mazraʿa, a middle and lower-middle-class district in "West Beirut."[184] Even a Muslim from Ashrafiyeh had higher chances of accessing these services than Christians from Mazraʿa. Here, neighborhood proximity, intimate knowledge of the social composition of the area, and social work assessments were factors contributing to differential access along and beyond sect.

While these sectarian exclusionary expectations could be approached as a shortcoming for the inclusiveness of sharikeh, another way is to look at how the borders of sect and sharikeh are negotiated under the canopy of a complex theology around God's *tadbir.* In Souad's expectations, God catered to and through people from her own community, along existing sect-based geographies of service provision. Rouba, in her role as a social worker, filtered her religious sensibilities of seeing Christ in others through professional standards of need assessment and assistance. Then there are cases when God's provision or its lack thereof ran against the needs of the needy. A case in point, Souad and her neighbor continued living under harsh circumstances, which made them recurrently dependent on external help. All these

[180] Bou Akar, *For the War Yet to Come*, 24–27.
[181] Joseph, "Working-Class Women's Networks in a Sectarian State," 11–14.
[182] Bou Akar, *For the War Yet to Come,* 23–27. *See also* Rania Maktabi, "The Lebanese Census of 1932 Revisited. Who Are the Lebanese?" *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 26, no. 2 (1999): 219–41, https://doi.org/10.1080/13530199908705684.
[183] Melani Cammett, *Compassionate Communalism: Welfare and Sectarianism in Lebanon* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), 8.
[184] *See also* page 63.

instances reflect different instantiations and expectations of divine provision, all under a divine management that cannot be fully known, but hoped in.

At the same time, the sectarian sensibilities of Souad coexisted alongside her hope that God always provides and along the fear for her day-to-day survival. While this hope was materialized in sect-based infrastructures of services, where "God was Rum," it also hinted at a religious sensibility towards divine intercessions when no other solution was in sight. Even though part of Orthodox registers of belief and practice, these intercessions were not integrated into regulated Orthodox rituals and point to Orthodoxy far beyond its ecclesiastical presence.[185] Also, their nature was surrounded by a precarious tenability, but it was precisely this feature that instilled a sense of hope in both the center's employees and its beneficiaries. This hope was not necessarily a hope for a better future, but a trust that waiting was not in vain. [186] The act of waiting materialized in food coupons for Easter and Christmas, discounts for prescription drugs, free doctor's appointments, or food ingredients to cook for a week—all items to help the center's beneficiaries persevere through life. Yet can this hope go beyond sectarian borders?

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> Today, after more than 48 hours, during which we have been looking for a blood donor for *teta* [old lady, grandmother] Jamileh, the old single lady who fell a couple of days ago and dislocated her hip, abuna moved her to the public hospital. . . . Surgery? Sure, this is what is required. A considerable cost which is a burden on ordinary people, let alone on those who do not have anyone. In the absence of the state, whose role is to secure the basic needs of the citizens—In any case, this is not my topic. My topic is humanitarian by excellence. Jamileh needs blood so that she can undergo surgery on Monday. I cannot tell you how difficult it is with the strict rules in place since the Covid pandemic. For three days we have been looking and Jamileh, who is hurting, is waiting for a solution. A little while ago, we received the following message from Alaa, a young Syrian, unemployed, who came walking on foot from *el-gharbieh* [West Beirut] to donate in Spears [street name]. He refused to take the fees for the taxi, while explaining to me that Jamileh needs the money more than him. I told you my topic is humanitarian and humanitarian by excellence.[187]

***

The human element involved in these divine intercessions was not limited solely to the performative act of donating at the appropriate moment. It encompassed bearing witness to these events, discerning their significance, and providing testimony. The accounts given by those who

[185] Schielke and Debevec, introduction to *Ordinary Lives and Grand Schemes,* 1–16.
[186] Zigon, "Hope and Waiting," in Janeja and Bandak, *Ethnographies of Waiting*, 65–86.
[187] Rouba, Facebook post, February 7, 2022.

witnessed them served as compelling evidence, rendering credible and possible a version of reality shaped by a divine management that surpassed human comprehension and control.[188] The narratives shared by the center's staff and the beneficiaries who experienced tangible material and financial provisions served as substantiation, affirming God's workings in and through the center. Additionally, these stories served as promotional material for the mustawsaf, boosting donations, enhancing its social standing, and expanding the coverage of its welfare programs. In this frame, divine intercessions at the center were not internalized subjective experiences, but events grounded in social networks of evidence and faith. They were defined not only by their unpredictable yet opportune temporality, but also by a temporality of storytelling as a social act of authentication and distribution. Whether through online platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp or through informal channels like networking and word-of-mouth, a timely divine provision was "not just a miracle by mere chance but as much by its reinvigoration in the form of both individual and communal practices of retelling."[189]

The story of *teta* Jamileh was distributed by Rouba on her Facebook page, which often acted as a platform for advertising the center's activity. Screenshots of the WhatsApp conversation between the anonymous abuna and Alaa were attached to the post. In them, Alaa let the priest know beforehand that he was Muslim, in the attempt to ward off potential sect-based sensibilities. In this narrative, the solution for yet another imminent crisis did not come from the state, the antagonist of the narrative that recurrently failed its citizens in securing basic needs. Instead, it was provided through the mediation of yet another ordinary and exemplary person. The difference is that Alaa, a Syrian Muslim, is outside the confined borders of Orthodoxy as an imagined confessional community. Yet, he came to embody the very Orthodox social ethos advertised by MJO and the center. Through the example of Alaa, Rouba strategically laid out the opposing relation between the state, representative for sectarian and inefficient political structures, and society on the ground, defined by relations that go beyond sectarian and racial biases towards the core of humanity. While exerting a didactic tone and subtly promoting the mustawsaf and its work across communal borders, Rouba's story does hint at the diversity of inter-confessional interactions on the ground. It reveals that "communities in Lebanon, in reality,

[188] *See also* Andreas Bandak, *Exemplary Life: Modelling Sainthood in Christian Syria* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2022), 125–30.
[189] Bandak, *Exemplary Life*, 125.

have been lived as sets of specific relationships which shifted with needs and circumstances."[190] In their everyday lives, Lebanese create and sustain myriad of relationships and networks that cross, intersect, run across, or clash with imagined borders of sect-based, linguistic, religious, or ethnic communities. This is even more the case in situations like the ones of *teta* Jamileh, where survival depended on a Syrian Muslim young man.

At the same time, this narrative is not devoid of sectarian undertones. The insertion of Muslim-Christian divisions in a conversation about blood donation hints at recurrent practices where sect becomes strongly intertwined with race and gender, even up to the point where their connections are naturalized.[191] Then there is the spatial dimension of the narrative. Rouba mentions that Alaa came on foot from *el-gharbieh.* This is a colloquial Arabic word that references civil war geographies and can be loosely translated as West Beirut. The East-West cardinal directions reference the fragmentation of the city during the civil war into West Beirut, predominately Muslim, and East Beirut, largely Christian. Albeit reduced, these categories persist in the daily discourses of Beirutis and their practices of navigating the city.

Yet, the MJO credo calls for Orthodox Christians to "mobilize and to act in transformative mediation of one's political community."[192] The fourth (out of six) guiding principles of the movement states that "the movement addresses social issues related to general Christian principles."[193] This general call to activism applies to the particular case of Lebanon, where it translates into an urging for ecumenical dialogue and a public stance against political sectarianism. In this sense, the fifth guiding principle "denounces blind fanaticism and political sectarianism, but considers that conscious adherence to Orthodox principles is an essential condition to strengthening faith and to find brotherly bonds among all Christian churches."[194] Furthermore, the ethos of these principles permeated the historical records of the movement. In 1961, in an overview of the movement in its nineteenth year, Marcel Bendaly writes, "It was a must for Christian teachings to be embodied in works because 'faith without works is dead' [reference to James 2:26]. Christ must be translated for we are his witnesses in the world. This is

[190] Suad Joseph, "The Public/Private: The Imagined Boundary in the Imagined Nation/State/Community: The Lebanese Case," *Feminist Review* 57 (Autumn 1997): 84, https://doi.org/10.1080/014177897339669.
[191] For an engaging analysis on naturalized representations of sect in Lebanon, *see* Bou Akar, *For the War Yet to Come*, 20–24.
[192] "Mabadiʾ Harakat al-Shabiba al-Urthudhuksiyya" [Principles of the Orthodox Youth Movement], in *Antakiya tatajaddad* [Antioch in revival], 26.
[193] "Mabadiʾ Harakat al-Shabiba al-Urthudhuksiyya" [Principles of the Orthodox Youth Movement], 26.
[194] "Mabadiʾ Harakat al-Shabiba al-Urthudhuksiyya" [Principles of the Orthodox Youth Movement], 26.

how organized social work appeared, especially in the Tripoli [city in Lebanon] center."[195] This commitment to social welfare took political dimensions as well. In 1968, Raymond Rizk writes,

> Let us accept that we are both Lebanese and Arab, in order to destroy the alienation that exists or is wanted to exist between Arab and Christian aspirations. Let us live up to the hopes of our people; to struggle in order to achieve justice; to expose compromises, lies, and manifestations of rootedness. Let us be aware of the Israeli danger and open eyes and minds to it. Let us fight sectarianism and its tails with all our capabilities. Let us participate in thought and action in the revival of this country, in changing its foundations and in anchoring it on healthier, more knowledgeable, and more humane pillars.[196]

Across MJO's historical texts, the call to involvement in worldly affairs according to an authentic Christian spirit translates into several configurations: education on religious matters and the Orthodox tradition, welfare services through social and medical centers, and work against social structures that perpetuate injustice, such as sectarianism. In this context, can stories like the one mentioned by Rouba act as a force for social and political change in Lebanon? Put differently, what are the possibilities of an Orthodox-infused worldview to act as an alternative force to sectarian welfare networks ? What I ask here as questions some of my interlocutors lived as hopes during the initial stages of the 2019 revolutionary uprisings, in the aftermath of the Beirut explosion, and during the on-going crises and its precarious normal. At the same time, they did not shy away from pointing the practicalities of giving. It was more convenient to give to someone from your parish, since one could easily assess their needs. The center could cater more efficiently to households in its proximity, irrespective of the area being predominately Christian. Also, sometimes giving only to Christians, whether by convenience or intention, was just "good enough" in a context where need was prevalent.

These ethnographic and historic insights can also contribute to new analytical frames of approaching practices of giving in Lebanon. Echoing the work of Angie Heo on martyrdom in Egypt, research on religion as a form of resistance against sectarian discourse and practices could challenge a long-term paradigm of religion as a tool to enshrine sectarian patriarchal power structures. [197] By challenge I do not mean denying the politicization of religion, but actually paying attention to the complexities of social realities on the ground, characterized by shifting

[195] Marcel Bendaly, "Al-Haraka fi ʿamiha al-tasiʿ ʿashar" [The Movement on its ninetieth year], March 1961, in *Antakiya tatajaddad* [Antioch in revival], 90.
[196] Rizk, "Al-kanisa tashmul al-ʿalam" [The church includes the world], 274–75. The reference to the "Israeli danger" trances back to the 1967 Arab-Israeli War and its consequences.
[197] Heo, "Saints, Media, and Minority Culture," in Bandak and Bille, *Politics of Worship in the Contemporary Middle East*, 53–71.

and overlapping interactions between sect and religion. Religious affiliation can enforce sectarian differentiation, but not every religious difference or similarity is sectarian in nature. While acknowledging the widespread culture of clientelism based on allegiances to *zuʿamaʾ* (political and communal leaders), a sole focus on the sectarian aspect of these networks overshadows the larger social and religious infrastructures that contribute to or challenge these networks. *Sometimes allegiances are pledged to God and not to the zuʿamaʾ.*

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Each year around Easter, the mustawsaf prepared and sold *maʿamul* as part of its fundraising programs.[198] Madame Haddad, a member of the center's committee prepared this type of traditional Middle Eastern sweet in her home in Ashrafiyeh. While Madame Haddad did not charge for labor, the center covered the expenses for the ingredients and sold the sweets through its extensive networks of donors. For Easter 2020, it was my turn to collect forty kilograms of *maʿamul* from her house and deliver them to the mustawsaf. Upon delivery, I remarked to Rouba and Patricia that I barely saw or interacted with Madame Haddad since our communication was done through her Philippine housemaid. The same housemaid would spend hours working with her employer on preparing the *maʿamul*. As soon as I mentioned my limited direct communication with Madame Haddad, Patricia got visibly annoyed. She voiced her irritation by recounting her interaction with a member of the Haddad family in an exasperated tone. As part of an errand for the center, Patricia had to deliver a certain amount of money as a payment to the Haddad family. However, upon meeting with the family member, the woman declined to take the money from Patricia's hand. This left Patricia with no other option but to give the money over to the family's housemaid.

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For Patricia, most of the women who were part of the ladies' committee (*lijnet es-sayyidet*) fell under the category of "*tantet el-Ashrafiyeh,*" loosely translated as "ladies/aunties of Ashrafiyeh." This term has a pejorative allure to it, denoting a social typology. It often references middle-aged and older Christian women, who are part of higher middle-class circles and are French-educated. Living in high-end Christian areas like Ashrafiyeh, the *tantet* are often

[198] *Maʿamul* is a shortbread-style dessert made with flour or semolina, and stuffed with dates, pistachios, almonds or walnuts. It is very popular in Lebanon and prepared on both Christian (especially Easter) and Muslim festivities.

criticized for their engagement in charity and social projects for the sake of social prestige. The women forming the center's committee were part of traditional Lebanese and Syrian families. They had social and financial capital that they activated to ensure the functioning of the mustawsaf. While the financial support did not come entirely from them, they were part of large networks, locally and abroad, that secured an influx of donations. Within the framework of these social structures, several of God's provisions at the center were channeled through networks sustaining and replicating social hierarchies. In this context, the concept of sharikeh and its pursuit of an egalitarian communion grapples with the same logic of the sect as a social formation. The aspirational inclusivity of sharikeh clashes with a divine management that provides but also replicates social inequalities. Sometimes allegiances are pledged to God and not to the *zuʿamaʾ*. Yet, this does not mean that the outcome is necessarily different.

Patricia's experience and words expressed class sensitivity, triggered by her awareness of social hierarchies. She was a nurse who lived in Mazraʿa, a predominately middle-class and lower-middle-class area, reputed for recurrent clashes between Sunni and Shiʿi factions. Reminiscent of Suad Joseph's notion of a "relational self,"[199] Patricia's relation with these women and to the Orthodox community at large shifted based on her needs and the circumstances she encountered. She might have thought of herself as Rum in relation to her Muslim neighbors in Mazraʿa. Yet, in relation to her fellow Rum from the committee, she often saw herself as part of a different class. In relation to the Philippine domestic worker as a migrant, she was a national of Lebanon.[200] In relation to God and her parish in Mazraʿa, she most often thought of herself as Christian. In relation to the real estate properties owned by the church where she practiced, she saw herself as a Rum entitled to rent on the *waqf* (religious endowment) at discounted prices. Here, intra-sectarian hierarchies challenge essentialized and homogenous representations of the "Orthodox" individual and the "Orthodox" sect. These networks of unequal relations of power hint at Orthodoxy as a category of discourse and practice that is not homogeneous. On the contrary, it is riddled with repertoires of differentiation and exclusion, power imbalances, socioeconomic and racial discrimination.

[199] Suad Joseph, "Theories and Dynamics of Gender, Self, and Identity in Arab Families," in *Intimate Selving in Arab Families: Gender, Self, and Identity*, ed. Suad Joseph (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1999), 1–17.
[200] In Lebanon, migrant workers from various African and Southeast Asian countries are enmeshed in a workforce market at the borders of legality, where cheap labor force is brought into the country through the *kafala* system.

## Conclusion

The microcosm of the MJO mustawsaf in Beirut provides insightful knowledge on the reverberations of large-scale political and economic events at the ground level. Existential anxiety, hope, food insecurity, miracles, donations, sectarian entitlement, and a failing state—all factors that regulated the rhythms of a precarious ordinary, defined by exceptional circumstances and ordinary lives. The day-to-day negotiations of my interlocutors as they struggled to cope with their increasingly disrupted lives were punctuated by divine interventions at the right time and the right place. For them, God was not present through intimate introspection, but socially, through material consequences. By approaching these interventions through the prism of the pastoral theology promoted by MJO as the parent organization of the center, both my interlocutors and I argue for the potential of religion as a mobilizing force towards social transformation. In its pragmatic and discursive expressions, an Orthodox ethos inherent in the concept of sharikeh can act as a material and ethical alternative to a failed neoliberal state. However, this alternative does not eliminate exclusionary practices rooted in sect, class, and communal sensibilities, but rather intersects with them in non-mutually exclusive ways.

Moreover, this attention to pastoral theology requires an openness to explore human-divine relations that are steeply grounded in both social realities and eschatological hopes. It also promotes definitions of personhood and God as relational entities, both socially and ontologically. At the same time, historical circumstances and different power relations among humans call for particular divine manifestations. In the mustawsaf's case, it was a down-to-earth God who catered to immediate material and social needs. It was a God more real and present than the Lebanese state, absent through its failed and corrupt welfare infrastructures. It was a God made present relationally, defined through ideals of becoming as Christ. It was a God grounded in hierarchies of class and sect. It was a God who sometimes forgot and excluded. In light of these ethnographic and theoretical approaches, the center became the place where different expressions of Orthodox views, sectarian sensibilities, and precarious hope intersected.

## Chapter 2 Orthodoxy in the Time of Pandemic: Sacrament and Right Practice

**Figure 3** – 2.1. A sixteenth century icon depicting Saint Mary of Egypt receiving communion from Saint Zosimus. The Monastery of Saint Barbara or Roussanou, Meteora, Greece.[201]

Saint Mary of Egypt was a fifth/sixth century hermit who lived a long life of penitence. Her hagiography recounts that after a miraculous interaction with an iconic apparition of Virgin Mary, she renounced her debauched life and became a hermit in the desert across the Jordan river. She lived in solitude for forty-seven years, unable to receive communion. Her relief came through a monk called Zosimus, who came across Mary in the desert during Lent. She asked him to return on the Holy Thursday of the following year so she could commune with the body and blood of Christ. Mary received the Eucharist a year later. The hermit requested that the monk return to the banks of the Jordan river the following year to once again administer the Holy

[201] Father Silouan Justiniano, "A New Icon of St. Mary of Egypt and St. Zosimas. Notes on Form and Symbolism," *Orthodox Art Journal,* April 14, 2016, https://orthodoxartsjournal.org/a-new-icon-of-st-mary-of-egypt-and-st-zosimas-notes-on-form-symbolism/.

Communion to her. Upon his return, Zosimus discovered Mary's intact corpse, who had died the same night she received the Eucharist.[202]

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Saint Mary of Egypt embodies an ideal of patience and repentance, being celebrated as a saint in the Orthodox Church on the Fifth Sunday of the Lent. As the start of the Lent in 2020 overlapped with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Lebanon, the story of this ascetic virtuoso was central to online sermons, online MJO events, and everyday casual conversations. Given the inability to congregate in person and partake in communion during the pandemic, her story advertised a way of life suitable for both past and present. The desert as a trial was reflected in the tribulations of a global health crisis that fractured Orthodox rhythms of worship and everyday life.[203] However, in between the saintly typologies of an authoritative tradition and the experiences of Rum practitioners grappling with an intractable existence lies a plethora of idiosyncrasies, doubts, and failures. These took center stage starting 2020, when the angst and danger sown by the outbreak reinforced the vulnerabilities of an already weakened country, to the brink of economic meltdown, and in the middle of anti-establishment protests.[204]

Amid pervasive waves of uncertainty and fear mixed with cautious hope for a return to a previous "normal" (*mitl ma ken*), the Antiochian Orthodox Church in Lebanon did, to different degrees and gradually, comply with official public health requirements. Soon after March 16, 2020, under the guidance of the Patriarchate, the Archdiocese of Beirut announced the foregoing of all in-person social and religious activities, including the Sunday liturgy.[205] Live streaming alternatives were instituted, provided that priests performed religious services without the physical presence of congregants.[206] These decisions triggered a plethora of reactions and

[202] Benedicta Ward, "St. Mary of Egypt; the Liturgical Icon of Repentance," chap. 3 in *Harlots of the Desert: A Study of Repentance in Early Monastic Sources* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1987).
[203] On Christian saints as role models, *see* Bandak, "Exemplary Series and Christian Typology," 47–63; Peter Brown, "The Saint as Exemplar In Late Antiquity," *Representations* 1, no. 2 (1983): 1–25, https://doi.org/10.2307/2928382.
[204] Bandak and Bille, "Introduction: Sainthood in Fragile States," in Bandak and Bille, *Politics of Worship in Contemporary Middle East*, 2–8. For the particular case of Lebanon, *see* Mohamad Zbeeb, "Lebanon's Postwar Political Economy: From Reconstruction to Collapse," in Karam and Majed, *The Lebanon Uprising of 2019*, 28–42.
[205] "Al-hayat hiya hiba muqaddasa min Allah: bayan sadir ʿan Patriarkiyyat Antakiya wa saʾir al-mashriq li-l-rum al-urthudhuks" [Life is God's Sacred Gift: A Statement Issued by the Rum Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East], Damascus, March 16, 2020, https://www.antiochpatriarchate.org/ar/page/2367/.
[206] This exclusion did not include chanters and altar caretakers, whose attendance was required for the dialogical performance of the liturgy.

questions within the Rum Orthodox community. Should we take communion during the pandemic? How can we live the Great Lent from home? What is the liturgy without the Eucharist? Can the spoon or the consecrated gifts transmit infection? Is online worship a viable alternative? Answers to these questions were distributed across Zoom, Facebook, and WhatsApp, under the form of miraculous stories, anecdotes, hearsay, and accounts of decisions taken by different Orthodox churches around the world. Local media covered the effects of the pandemic on religious activity, featuring images of empty places of worship.[207] This commotion around the religious mingled with debates on weekly counts of COVID-19 cases, shortages of oxygen machines and medication, and the effectiveness of public health guidelines.

Among the challenges to customary Orthodox worship, none were more fervent than those around the Holy Communion (*al-munawala al-muqaddasa*). On the backdrop of highly contingent religious and medical circumstances, the doctrinal and practical challenges of taking communion further complicated the already precarious lives of my interlocutors. When in-person gatherings were restricted or the country was under lockdown, Rum could no longer partake in the Eucharist. When restrictions were partially lifted, communion was punctuated by materialities and instructions that had not been previously there. This chapter focuses on the Holy Communion – as ritual and church sacrament (*sirr kanasi*) – and the intense debates around its "right practice" triggered by the turn to virtual worship. As the seemingly inconspicuous yet constitutive material and sensorial dimensions of communion were limited and even absent, I look into how Rum practitioners in Beirut sensed and made sense of this foundational Christian praxis. I do this through the lens of what I call "right-Orthodoxy," which brings together theology, religious practice, and public health. On the one hand, the term positions Orthodoxy in line with other religious communities whose ordinary rituals were upended during the global health crisis, triggering similar debates on right practice, civic responsibilities, and worship alternatives. On the other hand, it references the particularities of Orthodoxy, (self)defined at the intersection of a unifying reality as a Eucharistic Church and its various national, linguistic, and regional instantiations.[208] Here, the key role played by corporate liturgical practice and the

[207] Michel Hallaq, "Muʾminun yahtafilun bi-ʿid al-fusuh fi Akkar raghma korona" [Believers celebrate Easter in Akkar despite Corona"], *An-Nahar,* April 12, 2020, https://tinyurl.com/yyqjwwyy; Tony Frangieh, "Qadadis al-fusuh fi Zgharta min dun muʾminin . . . Al-buyut tahawwalat kanaʾis saghira" [Eastern masses in Zgharta without believers . . . The houses turned into small churches], *An-Nahar*, April 12, 2020, https://tinyurl.com/y3wa4ov8.
[208] Douglas Rogers, "Epilogue: Ex Oriente Lux, *Once Again*," in Hann and Goltz, *Eastern Christians in Anthropological Perspective,* 355.

specificity of the Eucharist as church sacrament differentiate Orthodoxy from other religious traditions.[209]

In between the risks of contagion with an infectious disease and the "pre-taste" of eternal life through communion, Rum practitioners had to navigate between public health restrictions, intensified Lenten activity, mental exhaustion, and doubt. While the plausibility of the transfiguration of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ was never questioned by those I interacted with, tense debates and discursive evasions emerged on the constitutive infrastructure of the Holy Communion in relation to liturgical practice and the epidemiological profile of COVID-19. At every level of the Antiochian Orthodox community, competing claims and arguments on appropriate ways of engagement with the sacrament ranged from personal, to theological, and scientific. This abundance of polyphonic voices, spanning hierarchies of power and reactive to contingencies of everyday life, is not foreign to Orthodoxy. The Orthodox tradition (*al-taqlid al-sharif*) is grounded in an aspirational faithfulness to apostolic genealogies and patristic heritage, but also riddled with controversy as "fundamental to the formation and maintenance of religious and other forms of faith."[210] Only, in this instance, the latter was on fast-forward. The sense of emergency in response to an imminent threat intertwined with the liturgical temporality of Lent and Easter as the pinnacle of the Christian year. The inconsistent and sometimes erratic governmental requirements for isolation were met by ecclesial structures ill equipped on how to best inform and advise their communities. The novelty of the SARS-CoV-2 virus and its aggressive virulence found medical and governmental authorities scrambling over public policies and health services that could counter its biomedical and social impact.

The fast-paced change and the enduring uncertain outlook triggered an abundance of meaning(lessness) that oriented the Orthodox community towards itself and its relationship with the outside world. This meaning(lessness) was further enhanced in the case of the Eucharist. Characterized by an unshakable authority emerging from its institutionalization as a sacrament and from its experience as an intimate and corporate act of being in God's presence, this rarely questioned pillar of Orthodox worship took the spotlight during the pandemic. In the words of Zeina, an active member of MJO and a good friend, "It is the first time that I have to think about

[209] While the literal translation for the Arabic term "*sirr*" is "mystery," I use the English term "sacrament" as it conveys better the institutionalized and structural aspects of the Eucharistic mystery.
[210] Anthony Shenoda, "The Politics of Faith: On Faith, Skepticism, and Miracles among Coptic Christians in Egypt," *Ethnos* 77, no. 4 (2012): 482, https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2011.609941.

communion. I never had to question and was never put in the position to question. I would just take it." Under the existential pressures of an epidemiological threat, the aura of the mystery no longer provided unquestioned certainties, but demanded interrogation. Questions were asked and fell short of answers. Answers were given to questions that were never asked. Official opinions were issues by clergymen, while miracles and hearsay were debated online. While the attention to crisis as a time when deeply held beliefs are activated aligns with anthropological sensibilities (Van Gennep 1909, Turner 1974, Geertz 1973), the context of the pandemic afforded a privileged ethnographic perspective on Orthodox debates that may pass unnoticed.

### *Al-qudusat li-l-qiddisin* (The Holy Ones for Those Holy)

At the center of Orthodox semiotic ideologies, the sacraments (*al-asrar al-kanasiyya*)[211] ground the Church and its tradition. They are institutionalized formats of God-human encounters, where practitioners apprehend divine revelation through highly regulated praxis and embodied ways of knowing.[212] Within the corporate celebration of the liturgy, the Eucharist has a historic dimension, commemorating the Last Supper, and an eschatological feature, (re)living the sacrificial and redemptive act of Christ.[213] Echoes of this celebration go beyond the liturgical frame to define everyday life as a continuous experience of sacramental fellowship.[214] More than any other counterpart, this sacrament implies a thoroughly visceral experience since the consecrated gifts of bread and wine are ingested as the mystical body and blood of Christ. Yet, the exegesis of this multivocal event cannot exhaust the possibilities of meaning since the mystery always stays beyond full comprehension. Despite human modes of apprehension perfected by regular liturgical practice, divine presence is defined by a fluctuating tension between revelation and concealment.[215] This tension has caught the attention of several scholars

[211] The contemporary Orthodox Church recognizes seven conventional sacraments (baptism, chrismation, the Eucharist, confession, marriage, ordination, and holy unction), yet it also acknowledges other services as having "sacramental quality."
[212] Jeffers Engelhardt, "Listening and the Sacramental Life: Degrees of Mediation in Greek Orthodox Christianity," in Luehrmann, *Praying with the* Senses, 62; Naumescu, "Becoming Orthodox," 31–41.
[213] Derek Krueger, *Liturgical Subjects: Christian Ritual, Biblical Narrative, and the Formation of the Self in Byzantium* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 112–14; "Madkhal ila al-liturgia" [Introduction to the liturgy] (course support, Department of Christian Education, Orthodox Archdiocese of Beirut, Ashrafiyeh, Beirut, 2019), 36–37.
[214] For an excellent theological approach to sacramental fellowship along and beyond the liturgy, *see* Schmemann, *For the life of the World.*
[215] Engelhardt, "Listening and the Sacramental Life," in Luehrmann, *Praying with the Senses,* 62.

in the anthropology of religion, where it translated into explorations of doubt, hope, and uncertainty. Matthew Engelke (2007) focuses on the uncertainties of divine presence and the materiality of language, while Anthony Shenoda (2012) highlights the role of skepticism in miracles. Deirdre de la Cruz's work on Filipino Christianity (2016) explores matters of referential silences and speech acts in formations of devotional publics, while Angie Heo's work in Egypt (2018) sheds light on otherworldly intercessions that cut across Christian-Muslim divisions.

In this frame, the Eucharist as a sacrament implies a "semiotic fog"[216] extending across different ontological planes: between the physicality of the consecrated gifts and the mystical body of Christ, between the congregation as an aggregate of individuals and a Eucharistic community, as well as between historical remembrance and eschatological reenactment. These blurred entanglements and the (un)certainties they entail are conditioned by constant tensions between material and mystical, individual and collective, bodily and spiritual, silence and recitation. These tensions are appeased through an institutionalized and highly ordered ritual, where knowing the do's and don'ts of liturgical engagement makes the mystery more approachable. However, the sacramental infrastructure no longer worked as intended during the pandemic. Fraught with contestation, its fundamental pieces were dismembered and puzzled back together in search for lost certainties. Intense debates around issues of materiality, public health, and ritual correctness triggered a search for certainties in both religious and medical registers. For instance, organic and inorganic matter was not only conducive to ritualized God-human encounters but also to human-pathogen ones. The materiality of the cup and the spoon got entangled in debates on both ritual propriety and epidemiological variables. The biodegradable nature of the bread and wine was discussed in relation to both infection and divine agency over nature and human bodies.

Moreover, the commotion around communion was enhanced not only by the critical period of the Lent, but also by the larger socioeconomic and medical conditions in the country. At the time I conducted my research, there was no prospect of a vaccine in sight. A crisis in medication supply and an overloaded health-care system triggered a shortage of potentially life-saving treatments, with Lebanese making use of informal global networks to get essential

[216] Maria José A. de Abreu, interview by Alana Sá Leitão, *Entangled Worlds*, May 28, 2021, https://entangledworlds.utoronto.ca/index.php/interview-with-maria-jose-de-abreu/.

medicine. The shortage of oxygen machines for severe cases was daunting, while the frequent power outages challenged the proper functioning of these machines. The costs of food and essential items surged, and the lack of basic public services made it difficult for people to follow public health recommendations of isolation. The social inequalities and uncertainties created and intensified by these structural failures intermingled with the biological vulnerabilities of the pandemic.[217] Together, these religious, medical, and social dimensions speak to the in-betweenness of relational existence, challenging imaginations of a human "autonomous existence," separated from God, nature, and social others.[218]

### *The Polyvalent "Good Orthodox"*

On March 10, 2020, I attended the weekly MJO meeting in Dekwaneh. I had been with this group (*firqa*) for more than four months when Covid-19 started to wreak havoc all around Beirut. After the evening Lent prayer (*salat al-nawm al-kubra* – great compline), the group met at the usual place, an annex of Our Lady of Saydnaya Church (*kanisat sayyidat Saydnaya li-l-rum al-urthudhuks*). Discussions revolved around the pressing topic of the outbreak. Seated on a table facing each other, the participants engaged in a heated debate before the arrival of abuna Ghassan, the group's *murshid* (spiritual mentor, leader). The debate, centered on the relation between the Holy Communion and the virus, was triggered by an online story of a Romanian Orthodox priest who had used plastic spoons to commune. The conflicting standpoints of Jad and Paul stood out. They were two outspoken personalities and leaders of the group, albeit the former led in his social involvement and the later in his theological knowledge. Jad stated that the essence of the Communion stayed the same, while it was just the format that required change. He proceeded to argue for his point historically, reminding us that the Christian way of taking communion had changed several times across centuries of practice. Paul intervened swiftly and argued against changing the format of the ritual, invoking ecclesiastical authority and laying the blame on frailty of faith. In his words, "If the change is because of fear, then it becomes an issue of faith."

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[217] On the relation between socioeconomic status and medical vulnerability, *see* Sherine Hamdy, "Principles We Can't Afford? Ethics and Pragmatism in Kidney Sales," chap. 7 in *Our Bodies Belong to God: Organ Transplants, Islam, and the Struggle for Human Dignity in Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).
[218] Elizabeth F. S. Roberts, "Gods, Germs, and Petri Dishes: Toward a Nonsecular Medical Anthropology, *Medical Anthropology* 35, no. 3 (2016): 209–19, https://doi.org/10.1080/01459740.2015.1118100.

At this point, Sandra, one of the more outspoken women in the group, joined the conversation. For her, the objects used in the Eucharistic celebration and, to a larger extent, the entire materiality of Orthodox worship, should be a crucial point of discussion. "Even though they become the body and blood of Christ, they still preserve their material nature (*tabiʿa meddiyyeh*). Her words fell short of reactions as abuna Ghassan joined the meeting and all eyes and ears shifted to him as the source of authorized knowledge. As Jad was retelling the story, abuna dismissed it by invoking sacramental propriety. The consecrated gifts must be consumed entirely and nothing that had touched the consecrated gifts could be discarded afterwards.[219] As the discussion got increasingly intense, I asked the theology student sitting next to me, "If you have Corona and you know you have it, would you commune?" His emphatic affirmative answer was followed by Paul's declarative tone, "If the person taking communion in front of me has Corona, I and my children will go and take communion." Trying to appease the spirits, abuna said that the issue remained a personal matter between God and each believer, unless the Antiochian Holy Synod convened to decide on the matter.

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In the "religious messiness"[220] that the pandemic engendered, places of worship shifted between total closure and restrictive public activity, trying to meet both public health requirements and spiritual needs. Emphasizing the enduring materiality of religious objects and their corporate responsibilities as religious subjects or citizens, some practitioners refrained from taking communion. Others made sure to be first in line at the invitation, "In the fear of God, and with faith and love, draw near."[221] A few closed their mouth on the silver spoon despite repeated recommendations to open wide for the priest to quickly slip the communion. Others refused to wear masks while in church. Pious hands caressed holy icons before approaching communion. The same hands would use sanitizer when exiting the church. For many, ethical questions were answered by deferral to religious or medical authorities. This eclectic array of reactions reflects different, overlapping, and even contradictory articulations of what it means to be a "good

[219] As a counter example, he mentioned an unverified story from the 1980s, when Philip (Saliba), the Lebanese-born Antiochian Orthodox Metropolitan of North America, used wooden spoons to commune during the HIV epidemic. Employed as a provisional measure of protection, the spoons were later burnt.
[220] Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 167.
[221] This phrase is part of the standardized scripts of the Saint Basil the Great and Saint John Chrysostom divine liturgies, stated right before the priest distributes the Eucharist.

Orthodox" in times of crisis. In this sense, the ethnographic episode above is not meant to highlight particular individual opinions, but to emphasize the diversity of voices within the narrative, illustrative of the various attitudes and practices that emerged around this foundational Orthodox ritual. This diversity found ground not only across groups, but also as dispositions within individuals. As such, the opinions of Jad, abuna, Sandra, and Paul may have changed, strengthened, or softened beyond the suspended temporality of this narrative. For them and other practicing Rum, the pandemic opened spaces to question habitual religious performance and to experiment with alternative modes of worship.

Channeling Paul's contention that the Eucharist cannot spread disease, public engagement, or lack thereof, in the usual practice of communion became an issue of faith (*iman*). His stance was not without echo among other members of the Orthodox community, for whom taking communion the "right way" meant subscribing to the format that was standardized and authorized by tradition and the whole Orthodox Church. Failure to properly engage in this format, be it out of fear, uncertainty, sickness, or personal convictions, was tied to a lack of *iman*. Faith here is not understood in terms of internal experience, but in terms of external social expressions.[222] It is a matter of praxis more than an introspective act, where right belief is defined in relation to controversies around right and wrong ways of worship.[223] However, this idea of ortho-praxy (right practice) must not be approached through the conventional dichotomy of inner faith and outward forms. "Ortho-" here references both word and action.[224]

The Eucharistic act, together with its material and aesthetic surround, is not only an external manifestation of inward propositional convictions that make the Orthodox tradition. It *is* the tradition, imparting embodied knowledge in the sacrament.[225] "Sacramental signs have a *heuristic* function; they are not just illustrative or metaphorical. They prompt us to new thought and guide us into deeper modes of meditation because they contain a surplus that thought can never fully fathom."[226] Beyond discursive and reflective processes, the Eucharist has a hands-on character, where the mystery is not something to be debated, but physically engaged with. In this

[222] Shenoda, "The Politics of Faith," 490.
[223] *See* Naumescu, "Becoming Orthodox," 29–53.
[224] For more on this, *see* Bandak and Boylston, "The 'Orthodoxy' of Orthodoxy," 25–46.
[225] Charles Hirschkind, "Media, Mediation, Religion," *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale* 19, no. 1 (2011): 92–93, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-8676.2010.00140_1.x.
[226] C. J. C. Pickstock, "Liturgy and the Senses," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 109, no. 4 (2010): 721, https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-2010-014.

frame, religious experience is constituted from and within the performance of liturgical order. Prescriptive actions, materialities, and ritual hierarchies are all part of a dialogical performance that culminates in the encounter with the mystical body of Christ.[227] This experiential dimension within structured formats of Orthodox worship creates particular sensibilities towards the right ways of taking part in the Eucharist. Moreover, the cultivation of these sensibilities has a temporal dimension tied to the regularity of communion. While the frequency of taking the Eucharist has not been without debate in the Orthodox Church,[228] receiving it every Sunday was an embodied habit for the majority of my interlocutors. It was a hopeful expectation for those who attended the liturgy.

This vision on regular communion is tied to both liturgical tenets and local expressions of Orthodoxy. In the former case, the liturgy as structured collective worship replicates an Orthodox prototype of the Church as an assembly of redeemable penitent subjects. The idea of the penitent subject is reminiscent of Michel Foucault's historical excavations on the formation of the modern self. Ascribing the production of a sense of interiority to Christianity, Foucault ties this idea to the notion of the introspective self and its Western Christian genealogy in the act of confession as a disciplinary mechanism.[229] In his focus on interiority and introspection, Foucault was preceded by Marcel Mauss and his rather implicit progressive take on the emergence of the "moral person." For him, it was Christianity that had the strongest contribution to the development of "conscience as a sense of interiority connected with morality."[230] This notion of interiority became a cornerstone in studies of Protestant denominations, the most famous of which is probably Max Weber's work on Calvinism. With it, came a focus on individuality and on salvation as a personal endeavor and a private matter between God and each believer.[231]

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[227] Olivier Clément, *Corps de mort et de gloire: Petite introduction à une théopoétique du corps* [Body of Death and Glory: A Brief Introduction to a Theopoetics of the Body] (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1995), 21–34; "Madkhal ila al-liturgia" [Introduction to the liturgy] (course support), 10–15.

[228] Among the Church Fathers and theologians who argued against the idea of taking communion rarely were John Chrysostom, Basil the Great, Nicholas Cabasilas. *See also* Krueger, *Liturgical Subjects,* 127–29. For insights on frequent communion in the Catholic Church, *see* Edward Foley, "Spiritual Communion In a Digital Age: A Roman Catholic Dilemma and Tradition," *Religions* 12, no. 4 (2021): 1–12, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12040245.

[229] Jeremy R. Carrette, "Silence and Confession," chap. 2 in *Foucault and Religion: Spiritual Corporality and Political Spirituality* (London: Routledge, 2000).

[230] Cannell, introduction to *The Anthropology of Christianity*, 18.

[231] The equation of inward individuality and Western Protestantism has not been without criticism. Drawing from the Maussian concept of the gift, Simon Coleman (2004) explores extensions of inner selves in relation to other persons and objects within a conservative Swiss Protestant community. Michael Herzfeld (2002) deconstructs the idea of individualism as a European cultural product, implicitly questioning its relationship with Protestantism.

However, this train of thought risks sidetracking Eastern Christianity. While salvation is still an individual event in Orthodoxy, it cannot happen outside the church, here intended as a corporate formation. For instance, the liturgy as an act of worship is a collective story of sin, penitence, and redemption. While Orthodoxy promotes individual confession to a spiritual father, the liturgy includes collective performative (speech) acts that imply a full cycle of accusation, admission, and ultimately redemption. The Eucharist is the climax of redemption, where congregants as fallible humans are deemed worthy to partake in the sacrament.[232] In other words, it is a reminder that, despite their unworthiness and sinful nature, humans have received the grace to enter in the presence of God. The phrase "*al-qudusat li-l-qiddisin*," which gives the title to this section and is part of the liturgical script, encapsulates this worthiness.

In the latter case, to grasp the stir created around the act of taking communion during the pandemic, attention must be paid to the social and historical particularities of the Antiochian Orthodox community. During my fieldwork, I would occasionally hear stories about older generations of priests and congregants who attended liturgies where nobody or only a few communed. These stories, beyond their anecdotal character, hint at the long-lasting changes and developments incurred once with the twentieth century revival (*nahda*) within the Antiochian Orthodox Church. In response to the losses incurred by the Church during and between the two world wars (e.g., the fragmentation of its community across the political borders of the mandate system in the aftermath of World War I), this revival centered on monastic hubs and parishes, but also extended to social and political issues within the community and the region at large.[233]

Engaging work on the centrality of civic participation and piety renewal came out of a wave of Orthodox intellectuals and MJO members writing in the 1960s and 1970s.[234] Lay congregants were called to develop their Orthodox awareness by taking part in sacramental and liturgical worship, by educating themselves on religious and doctrinal matters, and by being active members in society.[235] The works and contributions of MJO, monasteries, parishes and, to

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Furthermore, the phenomenon of Prosperity Christianity, a type of Protestantism with a strong focus on immediate and material aspects, poses a challenge to this equation.

[232] Krueger, *Liturgical Subjects,* 107–10.

[233] Abou Mrad, "The Witness of the Church in a Pluralistic World," in Theokritoff and Cunningham, *Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology*, 246–60. Poujeau, "Monasteries, Politics, and Social Memory," in Hann and Goltz, *Eastern Christians*, 177–92.

[234] El-Khazen, *The Breakdown of the State in Lebanon*, 81.

[235] Laham, "Masuʾuliat al-nahda wa muqtadayatuha" [The Responsibilities of the nahda and its requirements], in *Antakiya tatajaddad* [Antioch in revival], 56–58.

a wider extent, of the entire Orthodox *nahda*, shaped particular definitions of Orthodox subjects and triggered changes in how people related to liturgical practices. These changes included the frequency of communion. For instance, Raymond Rizk writes on "the necessity of communion for all who participate in every divine liturgy, otherwise he will lose the sublime divine role, which was given to him by God, to form the church together with his brothers, and he will be depriving himself of the chance to advance on the path of deification."[236] These liturgical and historical incentives played a role in shaping frequent communion as right practice. Gradually, the act of communing every Sunday became an embodied habit within an Orthodox liturgical aesthetics that defined the encounter with the divine. In addition, ingesting the consecrated gifts was an intimate and overabundant experience that implied a corporeal sensing of the sacramental realities. Implying an experiential excess that went beyond the iconic Christ, my interlocutors experienced communion "not [as] something purely cognitive but rooted in the experience of the body in its entirety, as a complex of culturally and historically honed sensory modalities."[237] When this phenomenologically intense habit was unavailable, negotiations ensued.

### *Embodied Orthodoxy*

As soon as I opened my Zoom meeting with Salwa, the entire living room filled with her enthusiasm and outgoing personality. I first met her in 2016, when she was a teacher at the Arabic summer school organized by the American University of Beirut. We crossed paths again in 2019, after I decided to pursue long-term fieldwork in the parish where she was a member. Both her and her husband, Samer, were chanters (*murattilun*) in the Mar Mikhail and Jubrail parish in Mazraʿa. When religious services were conducted without congregants because of restrictions on public gatherings, Samer joined the parish priest in person to celebrate the liturgy.[238] Salwa stayed at home. I asked her how she felt about her husband going to church and taking communion while she stayed at home to follow the worship online. She replied,

> I told Samer, "Maybe it is a small risk of stumbling (*khatar ʿathara*) for the people who are watching from home and see that you are taking communion. All of us desire to take the body and blood of the Lord." This is what troubles me. So I told him, "Tell the person filming to shift the camera away at the time of communion." He said to me, "What, are you feeble (*sakhifeh*)?" I

[236] Rizk, *Al-qudusat li-l-qiddisin* [The holy ones for those holy], 60. *See also* footnote 153.
[237] Charles Hirschkind, "The Ethics of Listening: Cassette-Sermon Audition in Contemporary Egypt," *American Ethnologist* 28, no. 3 (2001): 638, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3095066.
[238] His presence as a *murattil* was required given the dialogical format of the liturgical script. According to him, he acted as the voice for all those who were at home isolating.

> answered, "No, but this is a cause of stumbling." The idea stuck with him. He told me that when he went to commune, he wanted to hide a piece of the body of Christ in his mouth here [proceeds to indicate a spot between her upper gums and teeth] and give it to me when he comes home. Of course, we are married so we are one body. [. . .] He said to me, "I want to give it to you." Just the idea, Roxana, it is as if I took communion.
>
> I told abuna that God gives us the communion. But also, when I have a small piece of communion, I feel guilty. Even when I get the e*rbeneh* [leavened bread that is blessed and distributed after communion], I feel guilty. There are people who cannot even get the small *erbeneh*, let alone the one given to the chanters.[239]

Within the critical circumstances of the pandemic and the restrictions over physical communion, Salwa's case affords an inward approach to the body in order "to uncover meanings enshrined in different body parts."[240] The physical act of ingesting the consecrated gifts and the role of the gastrointestinal tract in the dissolution of biodegradable matter hint at wider Orthodox registers of food and eating as both physical and spiritual nurture. Consuming sacred matter is not an act foreign to Christian sensorial practice. Seeing, touching, smelling, and ingesting different paraphernalia with an aura of sacrality have been historically recorded from the early centuries of Christianity.[241] Used for therapeutic or prophylactic purposes, items like bread, wine, water, oil, or wood have been part of a material and sensorial liturgical practice where the limits between bodies, images, and things are blurred in mediations of the sacred.[242] Yet, the Eucharist is the epitome of bodily engagement as those who commune both incorporate Christ and are incorporated into the body of Christ.[243] In this frame, Salwa's reply is a reflection of her intense sensibility to the materiality of the communion and the physical act of consuming it. For her, divine presence is mediated by the corporeal act of ingestion. To her, not taking communion felt like an embodied lack that she was ready to fill through heterodox means. She was willing to take a piece of the consecrated gifts from her husband as permissible under marriage, another church sacrament. Her husband's body would have acted as an element of mediation that was legitimized through the orthodoxy of another foundational church ritual.

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[239] Salwa, WhatsApp interview by author, April 11, 2020.
[240] Hamdy, *Our bodies belong to God,* 16.
[241] Voluntary abstinence from ingesting (i.e. fasting) is also a practice of regulating the religious body in Christianity and across different religious traditions.
[242] Finbarr Barry Flood, "Bodies and Becoming: Mimesis, Mediation, and the Ingestion of the Sacred in Christianity and Islam," in *Sensational Religion: Sensory Cultures in Material Practice*, ed. Sally M. Promey (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 459–66.
[243] Flood, "Bodies and Becoming," 466.

Scholars like Caroline Walker Bynum and Tom Boylston have explored the physicality of the Eucharist in their research on medieval Christian practices and Ethiopian Christian communities respectively.[244] While different in their cultural and historic focus, their engaging works are a reminder that the Eucharist has always had significant material and sensorial dimensions. The invitation of Jesus to "eat my flesh and drink my blood" (John 6:54) in the Last Supper is constantly renewed in the Eucharist as the prototypal meal. The mystical union in the Communion requires and implies a digestive dimension. The reenactment of the cosmic drama of Incarnation, death, and resurrection includes one of the most basic physical acts. For the participants to collectively become the Body of Christ (or a spiritual community), they must ingest the Body of Christ (bread and wine). Also, the role of biology in human and eucharistic becoming is reflected linguistically in the many metaphors that tie the Eucharist as theology and spiritual experience with food and the act of eating: hunger and thirst as metaphors for desiring Christ, Jesus as the bread of life, or the Church as the vineyard of God.[245]

Yet, a few minutes later, Salwa's heterodox alternative instilled a sense of guilt over the idea of taking communion when others continued to worship with the same embodied lack. Between ingesting and feeling guilty, her discourse shifted to emphasize a disembodied dimension of the Eucharist. When she mentioned to abuna Boulos that God imparted the communion, she hinted at a spiritual communion (*munawala ruhiyya*) that benefits those who have a burning desire to commune, but do not have access to the physical gifts consecrated during the liturgy.[246] Salwa's thoughts flowed like a stream of consciousness, reflecting the intense negotiations and ambiguities that practicing Rum had to navigate during the pandemic. They also reflect that, as Charles Stewart argues in his study of Orthodoxy and modern Greek culture, the relations between lay congregants and ecclesiastical authority are more open-ended and dialectical in nature than dichotomies of popular and authorized religiosity.[247]

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[244] Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 48–69; Boylston, "Echoes of the Host," chap. 7 in *The Stranger at the Feast.*

[245] Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 48–69.

[246] During various discussions I had with Orthodox priests and theologians in Beirut, they would acknowledge the concept of "spiritual communion" in Catholicism, yet found it difficult to provide theological or patristic references for the same concept in Eastern Christianity. For an engagement with the notion of "spiritual communion" in Catholic Christianity, *see* Ann W. Astell, *Eating Beauty: The Eucharist and the Spiritual Arts of the Middle Ages* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press), esp. chaps. 3 and 5.

[247] Charles Stewart, conclusion to *Demons and the Devil: Moral Imagination in Modern Greek Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 244–49.

Besides the above-mentioned digestive metaphors that break the distinction between "things inside" and "things outside," the inability of Salwa to commune brought into discussion communion without the act of ingesting. While the concept of spiritual communion was briefly hinted at by Salwa, her husband Samer developed on it more during our WhatsApp discussion. In his service as *murattil* (chanter), he was one the few who attended church when restrictions allowed for liturgical celebration without parishioners. Over a broken Zoom connection and shifting between Arabic and English, I asked Samer how it was for him to worship in an empty church.

> Sad. Wednesday, when we took communion, I was discussing with Salwa and she was telling me that it is not fair that I was taking communion and others were not. I said to her, "You are right." It is a dilemma. I was ready not to step and take communion because I felt really bad for the parishioners who were not able to attend. But you know, the saints said very clearly that if someone is unable to take communion, our Lord will give them communion without being present physically. Saint Nicholas Cabasilas has a text very clear on this. When you are unable to commune, God is giving communion based on the life you have been living so far. If you are unable to be present physically in church, you will be given the blessing even though not in the form of bread and wine.[248]

While reactionary to the restrictions of the pandemic and, to a certain extent, an ailment to the impossibility of taking communion, the notion of spiritual communion was not presented as something new but rather grounded and authenticated through patristic tradition and ecclesial structures. During the pandemic, this authenticating genealogy got entangled with public health discourses and their ethical requirements. With the physical dimension of expressing sacramental reality absent or in question, the creative potential of tradition offered the possibility for living communion in physical isolation. It provided a model to follow the state-recommended safety protocols and still experience the Eucharist. It also broadened access to the sacraments without delegitimizing the commemoration of the liturgy in the absence of congregants, and without denying the necessity of the liturgical act.

While not without challenges and criticism, compliance with government-imposed restrictions and adherence to the advice of public health experts were influenced by the authority of the church. As the pandemic started to wreak havoc among the Lebanese, members of the Orthodox community turned towards their parishes and priests for directions and advice. As we continued our discussion, Samer expressed his wish that Rum would increase their obedience to

[248] Samer, WhatsApp interview by author, April 10, 2020.

the church and thus, in turn, to the authority of the state. For both Salwa and Samer, inward and outward expressions of religious piety included obedience to public health and state structures, both in their status as citizens and in their allegiances to the Orthodox Church. Here it is worth noting that their alignment with public health regulations was not necessarily connected to the epidemiological hazard that the communion posed. Both Salwa and Samer argued that the Eucharist cannot infect since it was the body and blood of Christ—an unshakable truth for both of them. Yet, for Salwa and Samer, a "good Orthodox" had civil and religious obligations that resulted from their submission to church authorities and the Church's subsequent subscription to state authorities.

### *Activist Orthodoxy*

The corporate dimension implied by Salwa's feelings of guilt as she compared herself to those who did not have access even to the *erbeneh* [leavened bread] became the central focus in another rendition of a "good Orthodox" in times of crisis. This rendition underscored an Orthodox sensibility that assigned civic duties as Christian responsibilities. Also, this sensibility was not grounded in the physical act of taking communion, but rather in the fellowship entailed by the act. In this sense, my interlocutors filtered their civic obligations through an understanding of communion that transcended the physical act of ingestion and reflected unto the entire society as an eucharistic community. Being part of this community went beyond the spatial borders of the church.[249] The community at large and everyday life became the platforms for religious accomplishments.[250] In practice, this translated into dictums of following public health regulations as religious responsibility towards "thy brothers," whether in church or outside. At the same time, it translated into active community engagement within a society in crisis.

A subscriber to this relational ethics was Rami. With a brazen sense of humor and a character easily labeled as *nashit* (energetic, active), he was an active and engaged member of the MJO group (*firqa*) in Beirut, whose weekly meetings I attended for more than a year. Rami challenged those who harbored an unreasonable attachment to the physical ingestion of communion by invoking saintly models of penitence present in the history of the Church.

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[249] Raymond Rizk, "Al-kanisa tashmul al-ʿalam" [The Church Includes the World], in *Antakiya tatajaddad* [Antioch in Revival], 273–76. *See also* Chapter 3 "Your Houses Have Become Churches: Liturgy and Domestic Spaces."
[250] Pop, "Orthodox Revivals," in Luehrmann, *Praying with the Senses*, 226.

> I will stay at home not only for me. Maybe I am not afraid to die for Jesus, but I would be contaminating other people. It is not only an individual decision. It impacts other people. So they do not accept this decision [closing churches and restricting communion], but I do not think that they are right in this. In our Church, many of our saints, during fasting, used to go in the mountains and into the desert. Today, our Church celebrates Mary of Egypt, who took communion once a year, on the Thursday before Easter. The communion concerns what the individual does. It is not automatic; if I take communion, something changes in me. I understand their desire and their revolt, but I do not think they are right.[251]

While an active churchgoer, Rami vigorously argued that the sacramental value of the communion does not stop with the act of ingestion, but rather extends to "what an individual does." Act and action must come hand in hand. Moreover, in times of crisis and penitence, the act can even be omitted. For him, communion as in fellowship was not the automatic result of the individual and physical act of consuming the two consecrated elements, but a cumulation of personal effort and collective engagement. The collective dimension applied to the eucharistic mystery, where communion could only be achieved corporately. It also applied beyond the liturgy, where it translated into civic conformity and responsibility to follow public health regulations.

While conforming to these regulations, Rami also explored possibilities for social engagement and service. For instance, subscribing to a vision of MJO as an organization whose scope went beyond its religious identity, he took part in a series of social programs developed in reaction to the financial and medical impact of the pandemic. As he put it,

> I feel that the life of the Church is not only going to church. The life of the Church is ministry (*khidmeh*), learning (*taʿlim*), and helping (*museʿadeh*). We are trying to do all this mostly through the internet. In terms of going to church, most people watch prayers via live-stream but this is not very meaningful for me. Instead of going to church, Julie [his wife] and I pray at home, as much as we can because I also work from home. We try to do at home the prayers that we usually do in church. We try to read at home the Sunday epistle and the gospel that we did not listen to in church. We also try to read the Bible in a more consistent way. In the Movement [MJO], we try not to stop the meetings and do them over Zoom. I also have two youth groups in Tripoli, sixteen and eighteen years old. We continue our meetings together. Yesterday, the topic of the meeting was faith and doubt. We try not to stop the life of MJO and do it over Zoom. The same for the administrative meetings of the General Secretariat; we do them over Zoom. We do all this to ensure continuity so that people do not feel isolated. We are trying to prepare and provide effective assistance to people who have material needs like money or food. We are also trying to think of people who are alone, old people who are alone and assess their situation. . . . We are trying to replace the normal church life that we cannot live in its entirety now; and I am not talking only about going to church. We try to replace all the life of the Church—except the building that we are usually in—with the available possibilities, through the internet.

[251] Rami, WhatsApp interview by author, April 5, 2020.

Rami's mode of moral action through social engagement is not reactionary to a communal liturgical mode.[252] Rather, his vision is grounded in and legitimized by a vision of the Church as an eucharistic community, where its life and identity are grounded in service and fellowship beyond the church as physical space. For him, communion during the pandemic translated into fellowship in Christ, constituted through "ministry (*khidmeh*), learning (*taʿlim*) and helping (*museʿadeh*)." This fellowship did not resume only to religious activities such as praying together or having Zoom meetings on various religious topics. It also translated into acts of public engagement. For instance, Rami's *nashit* spirit got him involved in a project meant to raise funds from the diaspora. Right before starting our Zoom conversation, he had been in a meeting for the design of a flyer targeting donors living outside Lebanon. Since the dollar accounts of residents were frozen by the Lebanese banks, those living outside the country were called to send "fresh dollars"[253] as donations to MJO. Given the fluctuating banking practices that emerged once with the 2019 financial crisis, Rami's job in the banking sector became a valuable asset to his community service.

At this point, a more detailed explanation of the "eucharistic community" is due. In Orthodox liturgical theology, the Eucharist is not self-sufficient as a sacrament. Its meaning cannot be fully grasped outside the larger framework of the liturgy, which introduces believers to the tenets of the church as they become part of its foundational sacraments. In other words, the liturgy is the "backbone" of the Eucharistic sacrament.[254] This ascribes a thoroughly social character to the Holy Communion, where "the authority of the Eucharistic prayer does not lie in its internal semantic structure as sacramental formula but in its specific ritual enactment by the entire community led by the priest."[255] Together, congregants actively engage in a series of prescriptive collaborative actions that are meaningful in relation to scripts, biblical narratives, and chants that recount, in a synthesized form, the entire history of salvation.[256] Among the

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[252] For a historical approach to different modes of moral action within the Orthodox Church, *see* Scott Kenworthy, "To Save the World or to Renounce It: Modes of Moral Action in Russian Orthodoxy," in *Religion, Morality, and Community in Post-Soviet Societies*, ed. Mark D. Steinberg and Catherine Wanner (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 24–28.

[253] In Lebanon, the term "fresh dollars" became widespread in 2019, once with the outbreak of the on-going financial breakdown. It refers to foreign currency (particularly US dollars) that has entered the Lebanese banking system from abroad either in cash or via international wire transfers after October 17, 2019.

[254] John D. Zizioulas, *The Eucharistic Communion and the World*, ed. Luke Ben Tallon (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 75.

[255] Pop, "Orthodox Revivals," 234.

[256] *See* Krueger, "Eucharistic Prayers: Compunction and the History of Salvation," in *Liturgical Subjects*, 106–29.

religious scholars emphasizing this communal aspect was the influential Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemann. He argued for the entire liturgy as a progressive fulfillment of the Church, which means "to make present the One in whom all things are at their *end,* and all things are at their *beginning*."[257] In other words, a group of people work towards (re)becoming the Eucharistic Body of Christ or the Church in the Kingdom. The liturgy, and more particularly the Eucharistic liturgy, mediates a new understanding of community, beyond just an aggregation of individuals. Schmemann emphasizes this transformative aspect by connecting it to the original meaning of the Greek *leitourgia,* which he translates as "an action by which a group of people become something corporately which they had not been as a mere collection of individuals – a whole greater than the sum of its parts."[258] Thus, by bringing rite and history together, the liturgy reenacts an entire history of salvation while producing the people whose history it becomes.[259]

The emerging communal identity and worldview extend outside liturgical rituals and acquire an ethical dimension that translates into community service and civic commitments as ministry, carried out through the organizational networks of MJO.[260] In other words, the Church *becomes* through "service, learning, and helping." It *becomes* through social and material needs that are met in a precarious period.[261] For Rami, the alternative to attending liturgies in crowded churches during the pandemic was catering to the financial and personal needs of people affected by the compounding crises in Lebanon. At the same time, Rami *becomes* in the image of Christ by designing funding strategies, engaging in charity programs, and organizing online support groups, all while abiding by public healthcare regulations. As a member of the General Secretariat of MJO, Rami was actively involved in assessing and catering to the financial and mental needs of those affected by the pandemic, albeit starting with MJO members and those within close Orthodox circles. As a native of Tripoli, a city in the North of Lebanon, he made sure to continue his role as a *murshid* (spiritual guide) for young MJO members there by setting Zoom meetings every week.

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[257] Schmemann, *For the life of the World*, 27.
[258] Schmemann, *For the life of the World*, 25.
[259] *See* Krueger, "Eucharistic Prayers," 123.
[260] The political, sectarian, and social tensions that accompany this understanding of Orthodoxy in Lebanon are further developed in Chapter 4 "In Search for Futures Lost: Waqf, Parish, and Locality."
[261] For another account where the charitable aspect becomes the "speaker" for the religious community, *see* Melissa L. Caldwell, "Social Welfare and Christian Welfare: Who Gets Saved in Post-Soviet Russian Charity Work," in *Religion, Morality, and Community in Post-Soviet Societies*, 179–214.

## The Eucharist – Between Religious and Scientific Registers

The examples of Rami, Salwa, and Samer are instantiations of personal negotiations of religious practice, as well as representations of the wide variety of reactions to the impossibility of taking communion during the pandemic. Yet, despite its historical exceptionality, this biosocial phenomenon is not the first one to have challenged the integrity of the Eucharist. Down throughout centuries, the sacrament has been riddled with instabilities and ambiguities across the spectrum of Christian traditions.[262] Its physical, historical, and cosmic features have stirred the logic and imagination of theologians, clergymen, and laypersons going as far back as the ninth century.[263] For instance, the idea of the *real* presence of God in the consecrated gifts has raised questions of both theological and practical nature. How can the fullness of Christ become present in the biodegradable nature of the bread and the wine? How can the timelessness of God be expressed through the historicity of the ritual?

Along these lines, the ontological tensions of God-in-things and things becoming in God have been intrinsic to the Eucharist as sacrament.[264] The points of instability within these tensions get accentuated in critical moments when the separation rather than the fusion between the sacramental components is magnified. This has been the case during the pandemic. Public attention shifted to the material features that are supposed to pass seamlessly in a ritual that assures the immediacy of God's presence. These features gained centrality as the object of widespread reflection, sharpening the engagement with issues of religious objects, ritual structure, and public health.[265] Another magnifying lens on materiality came from the field of epidemiology as the pandemic created the conditions for the potential intrusion of a pathogen in the many mediations of the Eucharist. As a zoonotic agent, the SARS-CoV-2 virus bridges

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[262] For a comprehensive approach to liturgical developments across Christian traditions, *see* Paul F. Bradshaw and Maxwell E. Johnson, eds, *The Eucharistic Liturgies: Their Evolution and Interpretation* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2012); Cheslyn Jones et al., *The Study of Liturgy,* rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), esp. "The Eucharist."

[263] Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 48–69.

[264] In their theologies and devotional practices, different Christian denominations address these tensions in different ways; from Protestant denominations celebrating the Eucharist as a symbolic remembrance of the Last Supper, to the Eucharist as an object of adoration in the Catholic Church, to the allegory of the Eucharist as a cosmic liturgical drama in Eastern Orthodoxy.

[265] *See also* Jonathan D. Riddle, "Christianity and the COVID-19 Pandemic in the United States," in *The Routledge Handbook of Religion, Medicine, and Health*, ed. Dorothea Lüddeckens et al. (New York: Routledge, 2022), 509–14; R. Drew Smith, Stephanie C. Boddie, Bertis D. English, eds., *Racialized Health, COVID-19, and Religious Responses: Black Atlantic Contexts and Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2022).

between species. Also, its molecular structure—core of nucleic acid surrounded by proteins—partly determines its ambiguous status in between organic and inorganic.[266] Though much to differ, both divine and pathological mediations blurred ontological borders and brought human exceptionalism and bodily autonomy into questioning. The anxiety around these mediations and their material consequences in the lives of my conversation partners were expressed through intense debates about whether parts of the sacrament can transmit infection or not. Religious and scientific registers overlapped in these debates, resulting in hybrid accounts of what counts as truth and possible.

The call for a more-than-human approach in the humanities and social sciences has had traction in recent years, albeit its potential has been shaped by disciplinary divisions. In the anthropology of religion, the attention to gods, spirits, and other entities has ranged from accounting for nonhuman actors as agents of consequence in history to advocating for a fully-fledged post-secular paradigm.[267] Concurrently, transdisciplinary studies on the Anthropocene – as the epoch of human activity impacting large-scale earthly transformations – have embedded the *anthropos* in complex and interactive global ecosystems. The social and biological existence of humans has been entwined within complex multi-species networks.[268]

While both these research fields have argued against Western inspired ideals of humans as autonomous and sovereign units, the former tends to omit nature beyond its status as stewarded creation, while the latter's vision of relational material ontology excludes the place of the super-natural. The former, Man separated from Nature. The latter, Nature separated from God. However, attempts have been made to overcome these divisions. In medical anthropology, calls have been made for a post-secular approach that accounts for deities and religious worldviews when they are part of medical practice. Anthropologists like Scott Stonington, Elizabeth Roberts, and Sherine Hamdy have looked into how religiosity and the biomedical – as both experience and expertise – are codependent and contingent on material realities and

[266] Sahra Gibbon et al. "Biosocial Medical Anthropology in the Time of Covid-19. New Challenges and Opportunities," *Medical Anthropology at UCL* (blog), April 29, 2020, https://medanthucl.com/2020/04/29/biosocial-medical-anthropology-in-the-time-of-covid-19-new-challenges-and-opportunities/.
[267] Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*; Angie Heo, *The Political Lives of Saints: Christian-Muslim Mediation in Egypt* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018); Philip Fountain, "Toward a Post-Secular Anthropology," in "Anthropological Theologies: Engagements and Encounters," ed. Philip Fountain and Sin Wen Lau, special issue, *Australian Journal of Anthropology* 24, no. 3 (2013): 310–28, https://doi.org/10.1111/taja.12053.
[268] Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer, "The 'Anthropocene'," in *The Future of Nature: Documents of Global Change,* ed. Libby Robin, Sverker Sörlin and Paul Warde (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 479–90.

political economies.[269] Their scholarship has reflected ethnographic and analytical sensibilities towards the hybridity of the biomedical and the religious in experiences of life and death.

Building on this research, the following section highlights the overlapping of the religious and the medical as authoritative regimes of knowledge in the debates on the Eucharist as practice and mystery during the pandemic. The crisis of the Eucharistic infrastructure created an ethnographic moment to think along enlarged socioecological assemblages of divine, human, and natural. Engagements with the materiality of the consecrated gifts opened them to regimes of interpretation that went beyond liturgical logic. Their potential for mediating both divine and pathological brought into dialogue scientific knowledge and Orthodox theology. This section brings together a doctor and a pharmacist, who are also active members within the Beiruti Rum community. It explores two different ways that religious and medical discourses intersected to produce particular understandings of what was true and ethically acceptable. In turn, these understandings acted as guidelines in their practice as both public health professionals and Orthodox practitioners. While this section argues that science and religion are not bounded categories, it also emphasizes the diverse outcomes of their interaction. For instance, the allegiance of my two interlocutors to similar Orthodox and medical codes did not necessarily lead to the same understandings of what counted as right practice.

### *Medical Questions, Theological Answers*

As places of worship challenged or complied to the regulations and recommendations of the Lebanese Ministry of Health, my interlocutors invoked clergymen, lay religious authorities, and medical specialists interchangeably as sources of authority. One such source was Georges, a practicing Rum Orthodox and a physician. As a respected MJO member with extensive religious knowledge, people turned to him not only for medical advice, but also for guidance on spiritual matters. As a healthcare provider, he was approached to deliver informative presentations on the virus and to lecture on holistic coping mechanism during the crisis.[270] In his status as both

[269] Scott Stonington, *The Spirit Ambulance: Choreographing the End of Life in Thailand* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press. 2020); Ian Whitmarsh and Elizabeth F. S. Roberts, "Nonsecular Medical Anthropology," *Medical Anthropology* 35, no. 3 (2016): 203–8, https://doi.org/10.1080/01459740.2015.1118099; Hamdy, *Our Bodies Belong to God*.

[270] During nationwide lockdowns and curfews, a series of online conferences and meetings were organized within the Orthodox community. Such was the case of the Zoom series called "MJO Live." Broadcasted on the official

medical and religious practitioner, I wanted to have his impressions on the pandemic and how it impacted his habitual Orthodox practice. As Georges and I started our Zoom interview, his soft-paced voice echoed through an intermittent internet connection affected by recurrent electricity cuts.

When the ritual materialities of the Eucharist came into discussion, he expressed frustration at people focusing obsessively on their potential to infect. After emphasizing the airborne transmission of the virus and calling for a redirection of focus on public gatherings, Georges proceeded to engage in a more elaborate theological argumentation for why Rum should not give course to this obsession. He started by emphasizing the co-constitutive manifestations of matter within the Holy Communion, stressing the physicality of the human body and the organic nature of the consecrated gifts. The bread and the wine as products of human labor become the Body of Christ, while practitioners as eucharistic community become the Body of Christ.[271] Georges did not undermine the materiality of the communion, but further authorized it by bringing into discussion the eschatological vision of the Church Father Maximus the Confessor, a seventh century theologian.

> Maximus the Confessor says that in the last days, in the Second Coming, all the Cosmos will be a burning bush, referring to the burning bush where God appeared to Moses; in the sense that there will be a transfiguration of all creation. The Eucharist is a pre-taste of the last days. That is why, in this logic, I am a bit annoyed when people talk about the communion transmitting infection or not. Medically, I understand that they must take care of themselves, but why do they do this obsession that can destroy their religious feeling? [chuckles] It is delicate. You end up having extreme reactions. Also, it is a great fear and I understand. I know there are people who want to disinfect all things that come into their house. It is too much. Even if the virus lives on surfaces, in medicine we talk about *charge virale* (viral load), it will not be so much as to get infected. Truly there is an unimaginable obsession among people.[272]

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Facebook page of the MJO General Secretariat, it brought together professionals and clergy to speak on topics related to the unfolding crises in Lebanon. For instance, on May 14, 2020, Jacques Mokhbat, a doctor of infectious diseases, met Saba (Esper), the Metropolitan of Bosra, Hauran and Jabal al-Arab, to discuss the topic of the pandemic from medical and religious perspectives. On June 18, 2020, Melhem Khalaf, a lawyer who was then the president of the Beirut Bar Association, met Antonios (al-Soury), Metropolitan of Zahleh, Baalbek and Dependencies, to discuss about the sectarian regime in Lebanon and visions of a civil state.

[271] Hugh Wybrew, "Liturgies and the Fathers," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Patristics*, ed. Ken Parry (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 385–88. Eucharistic liturgies, in particular eucharistic prayers (anaphoras), often bear the names of theologians and saints venerated in the Orthodox Church. The Eucharistic prayers of Saint Basil the Great and Saint John Chrysostom are usually used in Eastern Orthodox churches, with the one of Saint Basil being celebrated during Lent.

[272] Georges, Zoom interview by author, May 29, 2020.

Prefacing what could be called an ecology of transfiguration,[273] Georges' words point directly to the ontological paradox of the Holy Communion. A foundational principle most often associated with the Eucharist is transfiguration, i.e. the mediation of the mystical body and blood of Christ by the biological bread and wine, through a synergy of liturgical procedures, authorized scripts, and divine revelation. From an anthropological lens, this approach of dematerializing the material and materializing the immaterial is reminiscent of Webb Keane's notion of "transduction," where changes across semiotic forms authorize engagements across ontological levels, rendering them realistic within different religious traditions.[274] However, Orthodox liturgical hermeneutics and the larger cosmogonic epistemologies of Eastern Christianity underscore a more complex approach. As a sacrament, the Eucharist harbors a tense coexistence of physical and divine forms. This coexistence is engendered and centered on the notion of Incarnation, where the dual nature of Christ—God and Man—made possible the coexistence of the physical and the mystical in a restored world.[275] Here, the focus is on *restored*, as the reference to the bread and the wine as the body and blood of Christ does not imply an ontological rupture, but rather a restoration of the broken world that humans inhabit and a pre-taste of what is to come.[276]

From this perspective, the physicality of bread and wine gets its meaning within "a much larger schematic vision of the world in which time and experience are comprehensible through their connection to foundational religious events."[277] Consequently, the potential of the Eucharistic materiality to transmit infection is not negated but reworked in theological terms, more particularly in the lexicon of Maximian cosmic theology. An eschatological transfiguration

[273] John Chryssavgis and Bruce V. Foltz, "Introduction. 'The Sweetness of Heaven Overflows onto the Earth:' Orthodox Christianity and Environmental Thought," in *Toward an Ecology of Transfiguration: Orthodox Christian Perspectives on Environment, Nature, and Creation*, ed. John Chryssavgis and Bruce V. Foltz (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 1–6.
[274] Webb Keane, "On Spirit Writing: Materialities of Language and the Religious Work of Transduction," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19, no.1 (2013): 1–17, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.12000.
[275] Sergey Horujy, "Hermeneutics of the Human Body According to Hesychast Anthropology," in *Thinking Modernity: Towards a Reconfiguration of the Relationship Between Orthodox Theology and Modern Culture*, ed. Assaad E. Kattan and Fadi A. Georgi (Tripoli, Lebanon: University of Balamand, 2010), 93–104; George Theokritoff, "The Cosmology of the Eucharist," in Chryssavgis and Foltz, *Toward and Ecology of Transfiguration*, 131–35.
[276] Schmemann, *For the Life of the World*, 42. The Eucharist does not reference "an 'other world,' different from the one God has created and given to us. It is our same world, *already* perfected in Christ, but *not yet* in us. It is our same world, redeemed and restored, in which Christ 'fills all things with himself'."
[277] Boylston, *The Stranger at the Feast*, 37.

of the world implies that the divisions characterizing material reality are not resolved,[278] but transcended and made meaningful in the frame of a created world in union with its creator.[279] In this frame, the tangible and immediate physical nature of bread and wine signify *in* and *beyond* their materiality as they point to somewhere else and to someone else. Also, the temporality that frames Georges' arguments is not necessarily centered on the present but rather projected into an eschatological beyond, where the world restored will burn like a "living fire." In focusing on the physical nature of the gifts as cut from their source in the divine Logos,[280] the material media becomes the end in a presentism that impacts delicate "religious feelings."

Given what he called the "s*urinvesti*" (over-invested) nature of the sacrament, Georges argued that the focus on whether the Eucharist could transmit or not the virus was misplaced. He described it as an obsession, and compared it to more mundane, almost irrational behaviors triggered by the pandemic, such as the need of many people to clean, wash, and disinfect everything that enters their houses. Reiterating the airborne transmission of the virus, he called for an approach similar to Rami's, namely a religious and social focus on taking care of each other. In his reaction to the closing of churches, he stated, "I know that people are very upset because it is the period of the Great Lent, but individuals are responsible for the people around them, especially because of their faith." His call made use of Christian ethics to call for civic engagement, prayer, and ministry within the limits of governmental and public health regulations. He himself continued participating in the online meetings of the MJO group in Beirut. Mindful of the strain experienced by everyone in isolation, Georges made sure that these meetings did not exceed thirty minutes. He also offered his medical expertise as a regular consultant to the administrative and social activities of MJO and the MJO mustawsaf.

However, Georges' theological engagements did not stop him from engaging with the materiality of communion as a physician, subscribing to different epistemological certainties. Returning to the "*charge virale*" of the virus, the ritual materiality was cut from the liturgical context and analyzed as a potential environmental mediator to a pathogen.

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[278] What Maximus the Confessor calls "divisions of nature" are ways in which creatures differ from one another and from God. These divisions are grouped in five categories: created and uncreated, the intellectual and the sensible, heaven and earth, paradise and inhabited world, male and female.
[279] Andrew Louth, *Maximus the Confessor* (London: Routledge,1996), esp. chap. 5.
[280] Louth, "Man and Cosmos in St. Maximus the Confessor," in Chryssavgis and Foltz, *Toward and Ecology of Transfiguration*, 62–66.

> The recipient, the cup, and the spoon can theoretically transmit diseases. . . . I researched the subject because we are making scientific assumptions that the communion transmits infection. But we are in an era of evidence-based medicine so I researched if studies on this subject have been done before. I found a study on Protestants in the 90s. They have a ritual called the "common cup." I did not know exactly how much this common cup resembles our cup. I thought it would be a good start. Then I found an article written not so long ago. It is a literature review on all religious rituals and what diseases they can transmit. There was a paragraph on communion and they are quoting the same study I found on Protestants. So there are not many others [studies]. It was either a doctor or a biologist who observed 600 persons who took communion from the common cup, and compared them to 600 persons who did not take communion from the common cup. I do not remember how long she observed them but she found that there were no differences in the diseases between the two groups. This study is a good start, but one must read it critically because there was no epidemic at that time. I found a CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) statement from 1998, where they indicate that there is no evidence that the cup spreads the disease as long as no one who is unwell, has a runny nose or mouth outbreaks, takes communion. But again, at that time, there was no epidemic context. . . .
>
> . . . in the studies done by CDC and others, they found that even if there is a small load of bacteria, it is not highly contagious, at least in the case of airborne organisms. This is my interpretation. So the evidence-based approach finds there is no contagion (*ʿadwa*). If the disease is airborne, it would contaminate through the air. So, for this reason, I considered it [the materiality of the cup and the spoon] a false problem.

In this case, medical questions were made sense of theologically as the materiality of the Eucharist was worked in a scientific register. Subscribed to a research-based discourse, the material and biological features of Communion took center, highlighting their affordances as polluting agents. Unlike the often-served argument that "never in the history of the Church have we heard of someone dying because of taking communion," Georges looked at medical research on several religious rituals and their epidemiological potential. His stance was not as divisive as Paul's and some of my other interlocutors, for whom even questioning the transmissibility of the virus implied a lack of faith. Instead, to appease doubt, he went beyond the religious and the theological, and searched for certainties by subscribing to an alternative system of interpretation reliant on empirical findings and evidence-based practice. Thus, faith was rephrased from a religious register of dispositions to an external scientific register of infection probabilities. The religious ritual was tied to protocols and techniques of experimentation where the sensibilities and affects of practitioners such as Salwa and Samer towards God as agentive entity were set aside.[281] Yet, these studies do not account for the relational networks of power that people are part of and the constraints and possibilities they afford.[282] People's beliefs in divine presence,

[281] Whitmarsh and Roberts, "Introduction: Nonsecular Medical Anthropology," 205–6.
[282] Hamdy, *Our Bodies Belong to God*, 9.

peer-pressure, ecclesial authority, and the manifold uncertainties in a materially insecure world are just a few of the variables that also impacted the material reality of infection for the Rum I interacted with.[283]

Nevertheless, in Georges' case, the segmented existence of pathological agents and the science-based argumentation regarding their virulence came to argue for the integrity of the Eucharist. The approach to this religious ritual through an "extra-theological" reasoning allowed Georges to argue for the airborne character of the virus and thus defer questioning the sacrament. Thus, the certainty and rationality of the medical discourse further reinforced the opaqueness of the sacrament when it came to the relation between the physical and the spiritual. By navigating between theological and scientific registers, Georges acted as a mediator between public health regulations and religious practice. In his roles as physician, public servant, and religious mentor, he mitigated for public health directives and regulations by advocating and translating them in theological registers. He also approached religious practices by honing in medical knowledge, calling for adherence to official public health protocols and church directives concerning the distribution of the Eucharist. His example reflects the intertwinement of medical and religious possibilities and constraints at different relational levels: self, communal, natural, and super-natural.[284]

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[283] For more on this, *see* Chapter 3 "Your Houses Have Become Churches: Liturgy and Domestic Spaces."
[284] Sheryl Reimer-Kirkham, "Nurses On The Frontline Of Secular And Religious Knowledges," in Dorothea Lüddeckens et al., *The Routledge Handbook of Religion, Medicine, and Health*, 435–49.

**Figure 4** – 2.2. Snapshots from the 2020 video produced by AOMC (Antiochian Orthodox Media Center).

In 2020, the Antiochian Patriarchate published a video produced by AOMC (the Antiochian Orthodox Media Center) on its official Facebook page. The video was slightly over one minute long, featuring lurid music in the background. [285] It employed an aesthetic reminiscent of breaking news formats, overlaying a series of rhetorical questions on a blend of visuals that included people communing, icons, priests, laboratories, churches, and doctors in medical attire. "Are you afraid that communion by spoon will transmit Corona virus to you?" "If things were as such, do you know that the first ones who are supposed to be infected are the priests and the deacons who take the cup [finish what remains in the cup] at the end of the liturgy?" "Do you know that no such infection had ever been recorded throughout the history of the Church?" "Do you know that what we are taking are the holy body and blood of the Lord, not bread and wine?" "Do you know that many doctors, medical professionals, and researchers commune by spoon, including bishops, priests and deacons?" The video ended with a Biblical quote from John 6:54, "He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him."

The visuals of doctors in clinical attire, sanitized surgery facilities, and materialities of empirical research were extended into the religious sphere to infer an ostensibly scientific endorsement of the impenetrable mystery of the Eucharist. At the same time, images of icons, priests distributing communion, and the depiction of the Antiochian Patriarch, John X, officiating the Eucharist served as institutional symbols of authority that hold sway over permissible and impermissible attitudes regarding communion.

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[285] Video [in Arabic] produced by AOMC (the Antiochian Orthodox Media Center), uploaded on Facebook on March 7, 2020, https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=195136878487801. AOMC is a patriarchal institution established in 2013, with the aim to establish and manage the official media presence of the Antiochian Church.

### *God-Sensitive Epidemiology*

Another insightful discussion was with Dany, a pharmacist and Lebanese Rum with family roots in Mazraʿa. I conducted my interview with him inside the pharmacy he owned in Sin el-Fil. With a confident allure that sometimes passed as arrogance, his imposing body posture was in harmony with his strong convictions. We sat face-to-face surrounded by stacks of medicine whose dwindled availability indexed the pharmaceutical crisis the country was succumbing to. The sharp smell of cleanliness mingled with the sugary aroma of Nescafe that I was offered. Tucked behind the transparent plexiglass wall, our conversation swayed towards his experience of online worship and restricted communion.

> D: I was against closing churches and against the idea of depriving people from communion. What do people take during communion? . . . Salvation (*el-khalas*) of self, spirit, and body. So communion is healing for soul and body. If I do not believe that communion is always healing, why am I even taking it? If I do not believe that whatever sicknesses and problems in the world are erased when I take communion, why am I taking it?
>
> R: I understand that the communion is the body and blood of Christ but there are also material things, such as the cup.
>
> D: I take precautions. The communion is always given in a gold-plated cup and a spoon because we know that gold does not transmit bacteria or viruses so I am protected.
>
> R: But do you not feel any tension between you as a pharmacist and—
>
> D: None at all. Because I am a pharmacist and I have a scientific approach. I know that when medicine fails, God saves and heals us. Sometimes I do not go to mass and I do not take communion; but if someone takes me away from communion for this kind of reason, well no. That is why I am with the monks in monasteries like Kura or Hammatura, who refused this order.
>
> R: I know someone at church who said, "If someone in front of me has Corona and I know, I and my children will take communion after him."
>
> D: Yes, correct. Now it is Corona occupying our minds. What if, on an ordinary day at church, someone in front of you has salmonella and takes communion? If you are after him, you might get it and kill you—salmonella or pneumonia. There are viruses worse than Corona. There are people who will not take communion if before them is an Ethiopian or a Filipina. . . . When we go on a trip, some persons come with their Filipina or Sri Lankan maids, who sit next to us during lunch. Other people present there refuse to eat next to them [the maids]. I tell you from my experience.—I say that God is the protector. All the pandemic passed and I did not put a mask. In the pharmacy, I am the most exposed person because anyone coming in can have Corona. God says, "Not a hair from your head falls without an order from me" [reference to Luke 21:18]. Nothing will happen to me unless God wills it.
>
> R: Is this not tempting God? One takes precautions.
>
> D: I take precautions, put in the plastic window, wash my hands, disinfect, but that is it.[286]

[286] Dany, interview by author, June 19, 2020, pharmacy in Sin el-Fil, Beirut.

Dany's dissatisfaction with the restrictions imposed on the administration of the Eucharist and on corporate religious practice at large provides insights into a more-than-human vision where the medical, religious, and social registers coexist.[287] From the start, Dany, just like Georges, did not deny either the biological existence of the pathogen or its potential of infection and transmission inside religious spaces. What is more, he activated his knowledge and authority as a pharmacist to reference the existence of other microscopic pathogens that may lead to infections such as salmonella and pneumonia. Dany also reinforced the materiality of the liturgical space, through both the biodegradability of bread and wine, and the existence of various microbiological entities. However, his acknowledgment of natural processes and biological explanatory models came hand in hand with divine agency as the ultimate source of enacted reality. Shifting between his engagement with the Eucharist and his everyday life during the pandemic, Dany expressed his conviction in not getting sick if God did not will so. For him, the integrity of the body was tied to an ontology where all creation belonged to God.

In *Our Bodies Belong to God*, Sherine Hamdy highlighted a tendency in the social sciences to interpret religious practice in opposition to science, a tendency enhanced by the challenges in recognizing what she called the "hybrid nature" of the two fields.[288] An outcome of this tendency is an overpowering presence of autonomous existence as both concept and embodied state, where God, human, and nature are separate entities. Moreover, in her call for a non-secular medical anthropology, Elizabeth Roberts persuasively traced the genealogy of different regimes of autonomy and their impact on medical and religious ontologies and material realities. Nature separated from God, where the empiricist worldviews of the late nineteenth century life sciences discarded the supernatural and reified a physiological approach to health and disease.[289] Man separated from Nature, where the "othering" of nature as a distinct entity positions human agency outside biosocial contexts.[290] Man separated from God, where the agency of a modern secular self ushered in narratives on religiosity exiled from political subjectivity and ideals of citizenship.[291] These regimes of autonomy and their sustaining infrastructures have been questioned and criticized from different angles. From critical

[287] For an engagement with the role of God and religiosity in medical practice, *see* Elizabeth F. S. Roberts, "Gods, Germs, and Petri Dishes," 209–19.
[288] Hamdy, *Our Bodies Belong to God*, 244–47.
[289] Roberts, "Gods, Germs, and Petri Dishes," 209–16.
[290] Scott D. Stonington, "Whose Autonomy?" *JAMA* 323, no. 17 (2020): 1686–87, doi:10.1001/jama.2020.2873.
[291] Whitmarsh and Roberts, "Introduction: Nonsecular Medical Anthropology," 205–6.

engagements with different delineations of the secular and its implicit Western epistemologies and colonial histories,[292] to the Anthropocene and its paradoxical "reification and refusal of human exceptionalism,"[293] to acknowledging the uncanny others that populate religious worlds and the "secular" field of medicine[294]—these approaches open the possibility to build narratives that accommodate viruses, humans, and the divine.

Unlike the evidence-based scientific studies on contagion and measurable probabilities of infection that Georges appealed to, God was not set aside in Dany's science-based register. In the frame of what could be called a God-sensitive epidemiology, the material reality of infection and its dependency on God were not contradictory. The laws of nature were reinforced by the measures of protection that Dany took, yet they were not unsettled by the invocation of God.[295] At the same time, neither Dany nor Georges denied the materiality of communion or interpret the pathogen in a Christian moral lexicon of "punishment" or "evil." Instead, they acknowledged the biological processes of decomposition and decay of organic matter within the Holy Communion. This acknowledgment is not unique to them or to the circumstances of the pandemic. The awareness and embodied sensibilities towards this "earthly" dimension have always been part of the Eucharistic infrastructure, from ingesting the Eucharist to the Incarnation. In a 2022 booklet on communion during the pandemic, published by An-Nour Orthodox Cooperative, abuna Michael Debs wrote that, contrary to the Catholic notion of transubstantiation inspired by Aristotelian metaphysics, the Orthodox Church promotes a transformation that "does not affect any natural component of the materialities of this sacrament (*ayy mukawwin tabiʿi li-mawadd hadha al-sirr*) because this revocation is not necessary."[296] Along these lines, he continued,

> denying the potential of infection through the eucharistic materialities implied denying their enduring organic and inorganic status.[297] Hence, we would have excluded the natural laws and matter from the economy of salvation [*al-tadbir al-khalasi*], and consecrated an antagonistic

[292] Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003); Keane, *Christian Moderns*; Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).
[293] Gibbon et al. "Biosocial Medical Anthropology in the Time of Covid-19."
[294] Chakrabarty, "Translating Life-Worlds into Labor and History," chap. 3 in *Provincializing Europe*; Whitmarsh and Roberts, "Introduction: Nonsecular Medical Anthropology," 205–6.
[295] Elizabeth F. S. Roberts, "Assisted Existence: An Ethnography of Being in Ecuador," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19, no. 3 (2013): 572.
[296] Metropolitan Silouan Moussi, Michael Debs, and Raymond Rizk, *Al-munawala al-muqaddasa fi zaman korona* [Holy Communion in the time of Corona] (Beirut: An-Nour Orthodox Cooperative, 2022), 73.
[297] This theological dimension is supported by a series of practical expressions in ritual practice that take into consideration biological processes of organic matter. For instance, after the communion of the celebrants, the priest must make sure that there is nothing left unconsumed and thus exposed to decay.

> dualism between matter and spirit, between the good God and the evil creation, between the loving God and God the creator of evil.[298]

Both Georges and Dany resorted to medical and Orthodox registers to negotiate the intersection of their roles as health providers and religious practitioners. Yet, their conclusions and courses of action differed. On the one hand, Georges' scientific lexicon and engagement with epidemiological studies were meant to emphasize the respiratory nature of the virus and shift focus from the "sensitive" issue of the Eucharist to regulating in-person congregation. On the other hand, Dany acknowledged the same virus etiology, yet the secular aspirations of the scientific episteme he invoked did not waver the involvement of God as the ultimate power.

Moreover, their discursive articulations engendered different understandings of "right practice," both inside and outside the church. While Georges isolated and subscribed to governmental and church-regulated restrictions, Dany sided with the stance of several Rum monasteries across Lebanon. As churches in Beirut were gradually conforming to the official restrictions and the ecclesial regulations of the Orthodox Archdiocese in Beirut, several monasteries across the country became indexes of civil disobedience or models of piety by refusing to close their doors and continuing to administer communion with minimal or no measures of precaution. The partial lifting of restrictions on public gatherings at different intervals during the state of emergency, allowed me to accompany a few of my interlocutors to monasteries (*adyira*) such as the Holy Archangel Michael (Deir Mar Mikhail) in Baskinta and Saint John the Baptist (Deir Mar Youhanna) in Duma. I heard stories of miraculous defiance when public officials tried to shut down their activities with the public. I saw nuns asking children to remove their masks "in the house of the Lord". Visitors followed measures of precaution (e.g., wearing masks and disinfecting) up until the entrance to the monastery. The social and pious capital of monasteries as sacred spaces and Orthodox centers of authority influenced how practitioners understood and embodied a material reality where the sacred ruled over the pathological.[299]

[298] Moussi, Debs, and Rizk, *al-munawala al-muqaddasa fi zaman korona,* 74.
[299] Poujeau, "Monasteries, Politics, and Social Memory," in Hann and Goltz, *Eastern Christians*, 177–92.

## Conclusion

In the commotion of opinions, uncertainties, and frustrations within the Orthodox community in Beirut, habitual patterns of liturgical praxis were reworked and redefined. Trying to make sense of the extraordinary of the pandemic within their ordinary lives, practitioners looked within the tenets of tradition and science to authorize and account for their (re)actions to the impossibility of taking communion. In this context, the entangled ontologies of the Orthodox concept of "sacrament" (*sirr*) were decoded and recoded in order to address social, medical, and ethical conundrums in critical circumstances. Its constitutive categories pushed the fluid, malleable borders of its structure, while also finding creative potential for meaning from within it. Yet, more often than not, these negotiations were not under the auspices of innovation and change, but rather aimed at "clarifying communally affirmed articulations of the living tradition of Orthodoxy that reorient the church toward its own truth."[300]

Along these lines, "right Orthodoxy" does not subscribe to an *a priori* set of beliefs and practices labelled "in case of emergency" and mapped unto social realities.[301] In the particular case of the Eucharist, heterogeneous expressions of the "good Orthodox" emerged at the intersection of biological processes, public health regulations, and the interactive creativity and constrains of the Orthodox tradition. These expressions varied from embodied desires to consume the sacred to civic commitments as members of the eucharistic communion, from following public health regulations as committed citizens to arguing for the sacrament in scientific registers. Moreover, Orthodoxy as a way of living (*tariqat ʿaish*) has within itself the potential to address matters of any time and place not because it has an atemporal quality but because of its embeddedness into "socio-ecological assemblages"[302] that shape and are shaped by entanglements of God, humans, and viruses. It was out of these entanglements that various understandings of the real and the possible emerged around the Eucharist as a sacrament whose authority is rarely questioned. Moving between personal and institutional levels, my approach on these understandings highlighted (re)configurations of materiality and mediation according to theological and medical epistemologies grounded in structures of authority.

[300] Engelhardt, "Listening and the Sacramental Life," in Luehrmann, *Praying with the Senses,* 63.
[301] Hamdy, *Our Bodies Belong to God*, 246–47.
[302] Gibbon et al. "Biosocial Medical Anthropology in the Time of Covid-19."

Moreover, the exceptional circumstances of the pandemic afforded an approach to Holy Communion as a biosocial experience. The examples of Salwa and Samer speak to the intertwining of the corporeal dimension of communion with the social dimension of the liturgical becoming. Rami's case went beyond the liturgical space to highlight civic engagement with those in need as an example of communion in physical isolation. Dany built a narrative thread between viruses as submicroscopic entities, on the one hand, and racial and social discrimination as "social viruses," on the other hand. His remarks to the latter referenced legal systems and social practices of discrimination predominately tied to the *kafala* (sponsorship) system.[303] Georges also contextualized the pandemic in a wider frame. In between the social as a source of contagion and as a medium of eucharistic becoming, he hinted at the larger precarious existence engendered by the pandemic and its impact on religious sensibilities. His remark acted as a reminder that the sacramental infrastructure was not the only structural instability in the lives of Rum practitioners. The majority of my interlocutors lived what Elizabeth Roberts called an "assisted existence,"[304] as they looked for as much support as possible from various sources available, be it doctors, God, saints, *zuʿamaʾ* (political and communal leaders), or family.

Finally, by putting theology, anthropology, and public health in dialogue, I argued for the Eucharist as more than just a black or white issue; whether from a religious point of view, where it became an issue of faith, or from the medical perspective, where it was assessed as a source of contagion. I stressed the *in-between*s of a sacrament grounded in both complementary and contrasting systems of knowledge. Against secular genealogies in both Western medicine and anthropology, I account for more-than-human perspectives on the Holy Communion, which require an engagement with the many entanglements of God, humans, and nature. Against medical narratives that cast affliction solely to mechanistic laws and autonomous variables, and against anthropological narratives of illness treated culturally, a more-than-human approach is required to understand the world and reality of my interlocutors.

[303] Delineating the relation between migrant workers and their employers in several countries around the Middle East, this system is conducive to situations of human trafficking, forced labor, exploitation, and racial discrimination. For more, *see* Dalia Zein, "Embodied Placemaking: Filipina Migrant Domestic Workers' Neighborhood in Beirut," *Mashriq and Mahjar: Journal of Middle East and North African Migration Studies* 7, no. 2 (2020): 70–101.
[304] Roberts, "Assisted Existence: An Ethnography of Being in Ecuador," 562–80.

## Chapter 3 Your Houses Have Become Churches: Liturgy and Domestic Spaces

[. . .] his prayer be soundly Orthodox.[305]

On February 21, 2020, Lebanon registered its first known case of COVID-19. Within a week, the authorities issued a series of domestic restrictions on social gatherings, including public religious services. On March 2, Orthodox practitioners around the world entered the penitent and introspective period of the Great Lent.[306] On March 8, Rum celebrated the first Sunday of Lent, which commemorates the triumph of the Church over the iconoclasm heresy. By March 11, the World Health Organization (WHO) had declared the COVID-19 outbreak a pandemic. Soon after, a nationwide state of general mobilization was decreed in Lebanon.[307] March 18 marked the last flight out of Beirut, before all transportation on sea, land, and air was canceled. It took just a few weeks for the entire country to enter into lockdown.

This overlap between the liturgical calendar and the critical temporality of a pandemic ushered in a convolution of debates on the imperatives of public safety, core concepts of liturgical tradition, and the limitations placed on in-person religious practice. All these issues reverberated across the global Orthodox community; from local to national and international, from individual to communal and ecclesial, from practice to belief and ethics. While characterized by rigid ecclesial hierarchies, the Orthodox Church does not have a centralized transnational structure, nor a single center with overarching authority to issue a coherent and unified response in times of crisis.[308] Given its several autocephalous jurisdictions, the actions

[305] *Apostolic Tradition* 9, ed. Bernard Botte (Paris: Cerf, 1968), quoted in Krueger, *Liturgical Subjects*, 116.
[306] In 2020, the Great Lent started on March 2 and culminated with the Orthodox Easter Sunday on April 19.
[307] Decree No. 6198/2020, published in the Official Gazette on March 19, 2020.
[308] Luehrmann, introduction to *Praying with the Senses,* 13; The Eastern Orthodox Church characterizes itself as maintaining unity in the Spirit, while embracing diverse cultural expressions and different degrees of independence and self-governance. Its ecclesiastical organization comprises independent but connected national and transnational patriarchates, which are self-sufficient in terms of canonical and administrative matters. Additionally, it encompasses autonomous churches with restricted self-governance that fall under the jurisdiction of one of the patriarchates.

taken to address the spiritual and pastoral needs of Orthodox communities during the pandemic varied across countries, regions, patriarchates, and even parishes. This lack of cohesion translated into idiosyncratic reactions shaped by local sociohistorical formations of Orthodoxy and national public policies. Moreover, the repercussions of decisions and actions taken by different jurisdictions worldwide reverberated within the Lebanese community via digital networks, giving rise to comparisons, critiques, or praises.

In the context of a highly contingent daily existence, the doctrinal and practical challenges of traditional corporate worship further complicated the lives of my interlocutors. Churches, alongside other places of worship, laid empty as congregants turned to online alternatives for in-person attendance.[309] When restrictions were gradually lifted, religious practice was punctuated by materialities and safety instructions that had not been present previously. Within the Rum Orthodox community in Beirut, the restrictions on in-person worship and the rise of online infrastructures for devotional activities triggered a range of ambiguities and doubts on ritual performance and efficacy. Negotiations on adequate practice were interspersed with individual aesthetic preferences and anxieties arising from the pandemic. While the usage of online media within the Antiochian Orthodox Church was by no means a new phenomenon, the pandemic highlighted the online as a strong public medium for diverse religious and social (re)articulations.[310] At the same time, the reconfigured expressions of Orthodoxy in the digital sphere revealed that "divine parameters of permissibility and prohibition [were] neither irrelevant nor indifferent to creative media."[311]

This chapter looks at online worship to explore how Orthodox religious and social practices were negotiated outside the confined spaces of churches, yet in relation with what was considered to be a coherent Orthodox tradition. It explores the negotiations around online

[309] On March 16, 2020, the Antiochian Patriarchate released a statement calling the institutions and communities under its jurisdiction to adhere to a set of measures in response to the pandemic. One of these measures involved parishes live streaming their Lenten prayers and liturgies. Priests would conduct the prayers alongside chanters and altar caretakers, without preventing the attendance of any of the believers. *See also* footnote 205.
[310] For investigations into the relation between Christianity and the digital, *see* Amy Slagle, "Pixelating the Sacred: Digital and Mechanical Reproduction and the Orthodox Christian Icon in the United States," *Material Religion* 15, no. 3 (2019): 293–321, https://doi.org/10.1080/17432200.2019.1603068; Heidi A. Campbell, *Digital Ecclesiology: A Global Conversation* (College Station, TX: Digital Religion Publications, 2020), online, https://doi.org/10.21423/digitalecclesiology; Antonio Spadaro, *Cybertheology: Thinking Christianity in the Era of the Internet*, trans. Maria Way (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014).
[311] Yasmin Moll, "Televised Tears: Artifice and Ambivalence in Islamic Preaching," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 41, no. 2 (2021): 153, muse.jhu.edu/article/803875.

Orthodox practices during the pandemic through the lens of liturgical theology, digital mediation, and domestication of worship.[312] The chapter's focus is twofold. First, it investigates how Rum practitioners sensed and made sense of digitally-mediated liturgies in their own homes. Here, I approach the online sphere in relation to domestic environments and to churches as sanctioned liturgical spaces. As Orthodox practices were de-localized from the church to the online, they were also re-localized in private homes. The spatial affordances of online worship were relational to the physicality of household settings and the normative visions of worship in sanctioned spaces. Second, it investigates the religious imprint of domestic environments through "homemade" rituals. I analyze how my interlocutors navigated the integration of new and conventional media into their customized devotional practices. Here, my engagement with digitally-mediated worship is grounded within a wider framework of Orthodox modes of relationality. An exclusive focus on digital technologies and their potential to enable specific modes of communication would fail to acknowledge that technology never "comes in a 'purely' instrumental or material form – as sheer technological possibility at the service of the religious imagination."[313]

As the reality of the pandemic was settling in rapidly and violently, I adapted my research methodology to include remote yet participatory digital ethnography. This approach implied conducting Zoom and WhatsApp interviews with Rum practitioners, taking part in religious webinars, prayers, and digital devotions, but also attending in-person worship when restrictions were eased or lifted. Throughout my research, a call that gradually gained saliency was the engagement with private houses as churches. The expression *buyutkun sarit kanaʾis* (your houses have become churches) kept surfacing in Sunday sermons, clerical statements, and religious multimedia distributed online.[314] Arising from an Orthodox culture of worship and the contingencies of a pandemic, this expression urged believers to persist in their devotional practices even if churches were closed. It advertised a scenario where non-church spaces became

[312] In this context, domestication refers to the relocation and adjustment of corporate worship practices to domestic settings as a response to pandemic-related isolation and restrictions.
[313] Mattijs van de Port, "Visualizing the Sacred: Video Technology, 'Televisual' Style, and the Religious Imagination in Bahian Candomblé," 2006, 455, quoted in Meyer, "Mediation and Immediacy," 314.
[314] I first encountered the expression *buyutkun sarit kanaʾis* (your houses have become churches) during a Zoom webinar discussing the theme of Christians in times of crisis, with the Metropolitan of Zahleh, Baalbek, and Dependencies, Antonios (al-Soury). The webinar was organized by MJO on March 29, 2020.

religiously vibrant and liturgical practices were shaped to fit domestic spaces.[315] Simultaneously, these practices remained grounded in authorized modes and techniques of binding the ecclesial community and getting in touch with the divine.[316] After all, houses were not turned into any type of devotional space, but a church, a standard space of Orthodox worship. As a synecdoche for a polyvocal tradition, the apparent homogeneity of the expression *buyutkun sarit kana'is* hides a diversity of meanings and practices activated by Rum practitioners in a period fraught with danger and loaded with sanctity.[317] Celebrating Lent and Easter in the context of the pandemic activated a constellation of sensibilities, ideas, and beliefs that challenged Orthodoxy as taken-for-granted togetherness. Being sensitive to this diversity within the Rum community, while also accounting for the overarching structures of authority that anchor it, I ask the following questions: What does it mean for a house to be a church? What kind of religious modes of belonging does it entail? What doctrinal principles and aesthetic sensibilities does it reinforce or challenge?

The field of media and religion has primarily developed along two interconnected trends. During the 1970s and 1980s, scholars directed their attention towards the mediatization of religion and the implications of integrating mass-media technologies into various religious practices. Topics such as religious diversity, political representation, and the material aspects of media have been researched in relation to print, audio, audiovisual, and later the digital.[318] Subsequently, with the advent of what is often referred to as the "media turn," scholarly interest broadened to include processes of mediation. This prompted particular inquiries into channels of communication and interaction *between* different ontological hierarchies, religious communities, and broader public spheres.[319] Some scholars asked questions, like Eisenlohr's "What is a Medium?" while others gave definitive answers, like the Dutch philosopher Hent de Vries who

[315] Father Bassam Nassif, "Kaifa nʿish 'al-kanisa fi al-bait'?" [How do we live 'the church at home'?], Facebook post published on the official page of the Christian Orthodox Archdiocese of Mount Lebanon, April 5, 2020, https://www.facebook.com/notes/1273406739694183.
[316] Birgit Meyer, ed., *Aesthetic Formations: Media, Religion, and the* Senses (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 11–17.
[317] Despite the diversity of digital alternatives to in-person worship, these options had a circumstantial and short-lived nature. My presence in Lebanon before, during, and after the peak of the pandemic allowed me to gain a comprehensive picture of the long-term incorporation of digital media in Orthodox worship. Although liturgies were still broadcasted live in Beirut at the start of 2022, there was a gradual return to in-person worship.
[318] For a review on scholarship on media practices, *see* Patrick Eisenlohr, "Media and Religious Diversity," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 41, no. 1 (2012): 37–55, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-092611-145823.
[319] Mathew Engelke, "Religion and the Media Turn: A Review Essay," *American Ethnologist* 37, no. 2 (2010): 371–79.

argued that religion *is* basically mediation.[320] For the latter, media is not merely an instrumental vehicle of religion in the context of modern technological culture. Instead, media and the mediated fold into each other through mediation processes "without and outside of which no religion would be able to manifest or reveal itself in the first place."[321]

However, the interlocking relationship of religion and mediation implies a tacit privilege for particular Christian ontologies of difference and a preference for transcendence as a normative form of relationality. In a critical engagement with de Vries' ideas, Charles Hirschkind highlights patterns of opposition (i.e., "inner beliefs" and "outer expressions," "public" and "private") influenced by Protestant sensibilities and concepts. These patterns translate into universalizing undertones in anthropological approaches to religion as essentially transcendental and mediated.[322] In line with de Vries' ideas, anthropologist Birgit Meyer writes about an affinity between "worldwide connectivity via new technologies" and Protestant visions of "global born-again networks,"[323] which fosters a particular preference for forms of translocality and transcendence that are technologically mediated. Amid the presence and influence of Protestant and, more recently Catholic, biases in scholarship on Christianity and mediation, the pandemic and the surge in online devotional practices have compelled researchers and practitioners of Orthodoxy to address the digital.[324] Paying attention to Orthodox liturgical theology and its prescriptive sensorial and material regimes allows for more complex narratives on mediation and the impact of digital technology on customary Orthodox practice. Here I echo Patrick Eisenlohr's notion of "theologies of mediation," highlighting that the integration of new media into religious traditions is contingent upon the assumptions and beliefs of religious communities on media technologies and their potential in communicating the divine.[325]

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[320] Patrick Eisenlohr, "Introduction: What is a Medium? Theologies, Technologies, Aspirations," *Social Anthropology* 19, no. 1 (2011): 1–5, doi:10.1111/j.1469-8676.2010.00134.x.
[321] Hent de Vries, "In Media Res: Global Religion, Public Spheres, and the Task of Comparative Religious Studies," in *Religion and Media*, ed. Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 28.
[322] Hirschkind, "Media, Mediation, Religion," 90–97.
[323] Birgit Meyer, "Mediation and Immediacy: Sensational Forms, Semiotic Ideologies, and the Question of the Medium," in *A Companion to the Anthropology of Religion*, ed. Janice Boddy and Michael Lambek (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 320–23.
[324] I also contend that the scarcity of studies on Orthodoxy and the digital is not the sole result of scholarly preferences or Protestant biases. One must consider the theological and liturgical potentials of Orthodoxy as tradition and practice in relation to new media. Notably, certain Protestant and Catholic denominations have been more inclined and successful in including mass-media technology in their devotional practices.
[325] Eisenlohr, "Media and Religious Diversity," 46–47. For a different approach to this notion, where theology itself becomes an argumentative field for claims about "Islamic" media and mediation as divine revelation, *see* Moll, "Televised Tears."

Moreover, my approach goes beyond beliefs and into bodies, where I look at online devotion in relation to sensory configurations of Rum practitioners. Here I align with scholars like Birgit Meyer (2008), Maria José A. de Abreu (2009), and Charles Hirschkind (2006), who persuasively showed how the deliberative and the affective come together to shape techno-religious publics. Additionally, I account for the broader social context of post-war Lebanon. The pandemic as a global health crisis was the primary catalyst for the shift to online worship. Yet, the already scant internet access and the scarcity of basic services like electricity were further exacerbated by Lebanon's financial and economic turmoil. This infrastructural scarcity clashed with aspirations for worldwide connectivity and visions of a global Orthodox Church.

**Domestic Churches: Pedagogies of Engagement and Disengagement**

In line with a statement issued by the Antiochian Patriarchate on March 21, 2020, the Archdiocese of Beirut announced the suspension of all church services, including the Sunday liturgy. This followed an earlier decision where other communal prayers tied to Lent had been canceled. Roughly two weeks later, as the governmental mandates of shelter in-place began to ease, the same Archdiocese issued revised guidelines, permitting a restrictive reopening of churches. While the Lent liturgical program was to be carried out by priests alone or alongside chanters (*murattilun*) and altar caretakers, churches remained closed to the community at large. Alternatively, local parishes live streamed their prayers through cellphones and tablets set on tripods facing the altar. Sharing more or less the same aesthetic—frontal close-ups of the iconostasis and the royal doors (*bab al-mulki*)—audio-visual footage of liturgies echoed in empty churches and reached the living rooms, bedrooms, and kitchens of believers.[326] The footage catered to the religious sensibilities of many Rum practitioners, while also easing their frustrations and fears. Simultaneously, it advertised a normative liturgical engagement: an unfazed gaze towards the altar and an uninterrupted aural immersion in liturgical rhythms. During scripture readings, selected according to the liturgical year, and throughout the subsequent sermons (*waʿzat*), the camera focused on front-facing portraits of priests and chanters. They spoke directly in the camera, addressing absent participants.[327]

[326] The iconostasis is a wall made of wood, stone, or metal that separates sections of a church in Eastern Christian traditions. It is typically adorned with icons according to strict rules of composition.
[327] On staging practices in screen mediation of religious rituals, *see* Jenny Slatman, "Tele-vision: Between Blind Trust and Perceptual Faith," in de Vries and Weber, *Religion and Media*, 216–26.

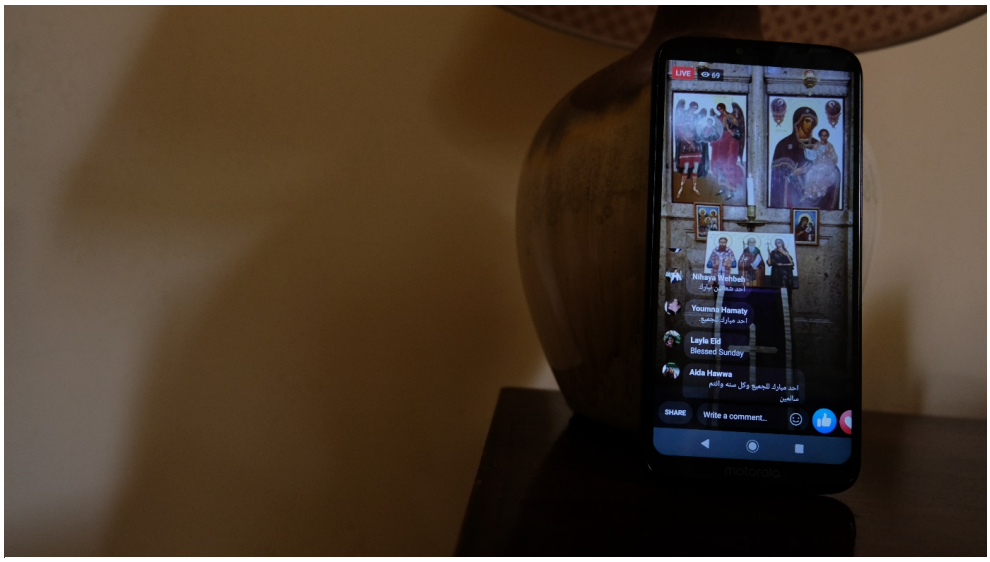


**Figure 5** – 3.1. Live Facebook broadcast of the Sunday liturgy. Mar Mikhail and Jubrail Church in Mazraʿa, 2020. Photo by author.

In addition to local parishes, various patriarchates, archdioceses, and even monasteries increased their online activity during the pandemic. Facebook pages like "*Al-Urthudhuksiyya fi zaman Corona*" (Orthodoxy in the time of Corona)[328] emerged as new directories of international broadcasting. Rum in Beirut could suddenly access and choose from a broad spectrum of live streams and recordings of liturgies and Lent prayers across the world, catering to their convenience and personal preference. Physical and political borders were digitally overcome amid new states of social immobility and isolation within domestic spaces. Lebanese Christians in the diaspora could attended the Sunday liturgy in their parishes back home. For those in Lebanon, the Patriarchate of Jerusalem was just a click away on Facebook and YouTube.[329] In the online sphere, click buttons, red hearts, and praying emojis became indexes of translocal fellowship through screens. These digitally animated icons, along with the influx of sensory stimuli they evoked, interspersed with aural performances of liturgical texts. App scripts mingled with broadcasted images of icons. Digital textuality gave rise to new forms of user-driven social interactions, where live conversations among participants overlaid recited liturgical scripts.[330]

Among the habitual Orthodox practices, the divine liturgy posed the most challenges in its online implementation during the pandemic. Besides the Eucharistic sacrament, whose

[328] The Facebook page can be accessed here: https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100063663907343.
[329] Under the Lebanese law, contact between Lebanese and Israeli nationals is criminalized. This includes mobility between the two states; Lebanese citizens cannot travel to Israel and Israeli citizens cannot enter Lebanon.
[330] Teresa Berger, *@Worship: Liturgical Practices in Digital Worlds* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 106.

physical, mystical, and practical aspects I explored in Chapter 2, the liturgy in its entirety is a primary corporate event in the Eastern Orthodox Church. Envisioned by Orthodox theologians and practitioners as more than just a gathering of individuals, the Byzantine rite liturgy is designed as a mystical encounter with the divine rooted in the economy of Incarnation. This encounter is predicated on sensorial regimes and objects of devotion that are reinforced through centuries of liturgical performance.[331] As religious subjects tune their senses and their bodies to the formative power of a shared liturgical aesthetic, they also "collectively produce this sensory experience, along with the natural materials they deploy."[332] Bodies in motion attune to recognizable liturgical rhythms, voices bring to life liturgical scripts, and objects come to signify beyond their materiality in a highly choreographed reenactment of the "cosmic drama of divine descent and human elevation."[333]

However, with the rapid changes in social and technological landscapes during the pandemic, the rhythms and body techniques of the liturgy were tested.[334] Amid rituals broadcasted online and the experience of isolation at home, the expressions of what I call "domestic churches" oscillated between new forms of digital mediation and authenticated registers of Orthodox worship. Creativity and necessity entwined with invested interests in following the Orthodox tradition. On the one side, the accelerated engagement with online technologies reshaped the religious experience of sacred space. Homes became liturgically vibrant environments, where practitioners made sensory and physical adjustments to the intense pascal preparations amidst a period of social inertia.[335] On the other side, my interlocutors often perceived these adjustments as temporary, insufficient, *less than* the original liturgy.[336]

My approach to domestic churches finds inspiration in the research of anthropologist Birgit Meyer. Operating at the intersection of sensorial anthropology, media, and religion, Meyer introduces the term "sensational forms" to highlight the performative nature of both subjective and communal formations, while not discarding the authority of religious structures. These forms

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[331] Rizk, *Al-qudusat li-l-qiddisin* [The holy ones for those holy]; Schmemann, *For the Life of the World*.
[332] Pickstock, "Liturgy and the Senses," 725.
[333] Pickstock, "Liturgy and the Senses," 723.
[334] Yet, these trajectories of engagement and their end goals carry an aspirational quality as well. Practitioners get bored and distracted, *taratil* fall on deaf ears, thoughts wonder, and bodies get disengaged. These negotiations, deviations, and failures of the liturgical ritual must be taken into consideration when emphasizing the dynamic nature of communal formations in Orthodoxy.
[335] *See also* Boylston, "The Media Landscape," chap. 8 in *The Stranger at the Feast.*
[336] They frequently expressed hope that life will return to how it was, alluding not only to the end of the pandemic but also to the return of in-person worship.

are "particular modes of address, established modes of communication, and authorized religious ideas and practices that believers are called to get in touch with the divine, and each other."[337] My work aligns with Meyer's endeavor to integrate the structured formats of sensorial and material registers with the dynamic nature of religious structures. Given the accessibility of the online and the constraints of physical bodies in isolation, coming together to enact the Church took different forms for my interlocutors. Yet, these forms were negotiated within the structural limitations and potentials of the liturgical ritual. Individual improvisations were done in relation to a liturgical habitus that was "nested within larger structures and had implications for those structures."[338] While Rum practitioners may have preferred different aspects of this ritualized experience within the intimacy of their domestic spaces, they retained a sense of mutual concern for right practice by deferring to clerical authority and to standards of liturgical devotion.

Nevertheless, Meyer's analytical approach, much like other theories on religion and mediation inspired by the influential ideas of Hent de Vries, poses certain constraints when applied to Orthodoxy. Her approach tends towards mediation as a universal and rather normative vision on relationality, thus obscuring relations that are not defined by ontologies of difference that need to be overcome. This overemphasis on mediation was highlighted by anthropologist Aisha M. Beliso-De Jesús in a critical engagement with the legacies of Christian cosmologies in social scientific thought. She contends that the concept of transcendence invokes compartmentalized modes of existence that distinguishing between self and other, heaven and earth, this-world and other-world. The copresence of these entities and planes of existence is incompatible and their encounters require hierarchical systems of mediation. Alternatively, her research of Santería—an Afro-Cuban diasporic religion—underscores forms of relationality cultivated through nontranscendental models and new media technology. Working through the notion of "copresence," Beliso-De Jesús highlights interactions between spirits, deities, and practitioners that do not require a collapse of ontological differences. The Santería ontologies afford intermingling of entities through bodily, material, and digital networks. In Santería, the

[337] Birgit Meyer, "Media and the Senses in the Making of Religious Experience: An Introduction," *Material Religion* 4, no. 2 (2008): 129, https://doi.org/10.2752/175183408X328262.
[338] Robert Wuthnow, *What Happens When We Practice Religion? Textures of Devotion in Everyday Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020), 192.

"trans-" in transcendental is challenged by the "trance" of copresence that characterizes the relations between spirit-worlds and living-worlds.[339]

While I agree with Beliso-De Jesús regarding the risk of Christianized ontologies of difference to result in oversimplified descriptions of relational experiences, I also advocate for a more nuanced approach to Christianity in relation to how religious environments are lived. Transcendence and its need for mediation is grounded in specific, sometimes simplified, Christian understandings of the incompatibility between the physicality of this world and its relation to a an *elsewhere* or an *elsewho.* While acknowledging the role of mediation in Orthodox worship, I contend that Orthodoxy does not always subscribe to these understandings.[340] For example, in the liturgy, sensorial and material media are not meant to "disappear" in the act of mediation. In the words of theologian Olivier Clément, "Man anchors himself, through the liturgy, in this living and vivifying flesh. I would say *bodily liturgy* (*charnelle liturgie*). . . . In Christ, the members of his Body become priests of the world. There is no more separation between the sacred and the profane, everything must be 'eucharistic' ('eucharistié')."[341] In the ontological ecology of the liturgy, the sacramentality of things and bodies is meant to contribute to an eschatological experience in this world of the Kingdom to come.[342] The physical world is not meant to be transcended but elevated as the divine is incarnated. For instance, most of my interlocutors did not envision digitally-mediated liturgy as a long-term option because of the physicality of the eucharistic experience and the centrality of face-to-face relationality in fostering communal intimacy. Along these lines, the rest of this section examines how Rum experienced the liturgy from home, yet in relation to others, whether humans, saints, or divine.

### *Audio-Visual Liturgical Engagements*

Online platforms brought a sense of relief for Youmna and her mother. Their lives had been bounded to their rented home in Mazraʿa, given her mother's old age and Youmna's role as

[339] Aisha M. Beliso-De Jesús, *Electric Santería: Racial and Sexual Assemblages of Transnational Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 215–20.
[340] *See also* Chapter 1 "When God Provides: Welfare Services, Hope, and Precarity."
[341] Clément, *Corps de mort et de gloire*, 25, 33.
[342] In what I term the ontological ecology of the liturgy, I stress the interdependence of material, physical, human, and divine forms. Within the structured and hierarchical environment of the liturgy, these forms derive their significance and identity relationally and corporately. Simultaneously, it is this relational and corporate dimension that works towards manifesting the ontological reality of the Church as an eucharistic community.

her sole caretaker. During our WhatsApp conversation about their experiences throughout the pandemic, she replied with a resigned tone:

> Y: We have our coffee. If there is food, we cook. Then I clean the toilet every other day. We sit, we watch TV and there is also *"Al-Urthudhuksiyya fi zaman Corona*" (Orthodoxy in the time of Corona) that Ziad opened on Facebook. We watch the liturgy, *paraklesis* (supplicatory canon), *salat al-ghurub* (vespers), *progesmena* (the liturgy of pre-sanctified gifts). I switch from one place to another, but I am very happy that I got the chance to attend the liturgy of Metropolitan Barakat from—
>
> R: Germany?
>
> Y: Yes. Incredible (*mish maqbul*). This guy is amazing. What a Metropolitan. He reminds me of Metropolitan Joseph Zahlawi. His voice resembles Zahlawi's a lot. You feel you cannot turn off and you cannot swap from him. You feel there is magic in this person. [It is] more beautiful than the liturgy of abuna Boulos, to tell you the truth. In Cologne, in Germany, imagine [how] they pray *paraklesis* (supplicatory canon), *salat al-nawm al-kubra* (great compline). I tell you, it is wonderful. You feel like you are praying in Deir el-Harf [monastery]. . . . Thanks God that they realized in Mar Mikhail [church] that the screen is small and expanded the screen. We used to see the screen small like a telephone. My mother could not attend it. She told me, "I cannot see. I want to see the whole screen." Yesterday, in *progesmena*, it was full screen. . . . My favorite is Barakat, then abuna Boulos, then Amman. In Amman is amazing; the Archdiocese of the Rum Orthodox in Amman, Demetrios Church and Nektarios Church. There are many beautiful liturgies.[343]

As religious media gained more traction in the digital public sphere, online devotion was increasingly impacted by rules of commodified consumption and entertainment. Facebook accounts were flooded with notifications from several churches that live streamed their liturgical programs for Lent. Along this increase in liturgical repertoires, choice was no longer limited to the physical confines of a church or the spatiotemporal limitations of the body. Neither was it restricted by pandemic-related regulations on social gathering and in-person contact. In this context, Youmna and her mother observed liturgies in churches they might have never had the opportunity to visit in person.

When describing her virtual worship at home, Youmna listed a series of churches and clergy spanning from Germany to Jordan and Lebanon. Her enumeration reflected a religious knowledge and an aesthetic habitus that preceded online liturgies but actively influenced Youmna's selection of what live broadcast to click on. Her digital consumption of the sacred within the confinements of her home took place within traditional configurations of the church as both ecclesiastical hierarchy and physical space.[344] The liturgy of abuna Boulos, the voice of

[343] Youmna, WhatsApp interview by author, April 9, 2020.
[344] Tom Boylston, "Sharing Space: On the Publicity of Prayer, between an Ethiopian Village and the Rest of the World," in Luehrmann, *Praying with the Senses*, 177–78.

Metropolitan Isaac Barakat, and the memory of Metropolitan Joseph Zahlawi index the social and administrative power of priestly charisma, both as an attribute of the individual and as a component of the priestly office. Moreover, Youmna's assessment of a "beautiful liturgy" was grounded in the features of particular churches and pinned in a liturgical temporality defined by prescriptive prayer formats. Quoting Teresa Berger, a scholar of liturgical studies and digital media theories, "although digitally mediated practices challenge established liturgical conceptions, these practices do not represent a 'radical revolution,' but rather the 'transformation and reconfiguration of existing practices."[345]

For Youmna and her mother, an effective experience of their "domestic church" was not necessarily a matter of active engagement.[346] From participants that enact the liturgy to spectators in front of screens, they became active consumers in a market of the sacred and passive partakers in the liturgical act.[347] Facilitated by digital technologies, their liturgical participation implied a reception of visual and aural information mediated by the digital into their domestic environment. The liturgy became a product to be looked at and listened to, less one to be materially and corporeally engaged in. The voice of Barakat was meant to be listened to rather than answered as part of a dialogical script. The liturgy of abuna Boulos was meant to be observed on a full screen rather than enacted. The liturgical socialization of Youmna and her mother was done from a spectator's distance rather than in direct ritual participation. Their bodies isolated at home were "distantly connected rather than physically present" in an inherently corporate event happening somewhere else.[348]

Along these lines, the notion of "domestic church" requires an analytical shift from physical bodies engaged in ritualized (inter)action to religious intimacy fostered through digitally mediated encounters. As this intimacy was achieved at a distance, it highlighted translocal ways of imagining religious publics. Youmna mentioned "*Al-Urthudhuksiyya fi zaman Corona*," a Facebook page created by Ziad Khairallah, an Orthodox Lebanese who owned a travel agency for religious and laic tourism. By providing national and international broadcasts of liturgies and prayers, this platform facilitated connections of liturgical bodies across vast distances. Through

[345] Berger, *@Worship: Liturgical Practices in Digital Worlds*, 16.
[346] When I use the term "effective," I mean achieving the desired worship experience in relation to structured liturgical formats and sensory engagements.
[347] *See also* Boylston, "The Media Landscape," chap. 8 in *The Stranger at the Feast.*
[348] Wuthnow, *What Happens When We Practice Religion?*, 179.

this platform, Youmna discovered Isaac Barakat, the Antiochian Metropolitan of Germany and Central Europe. His Lent celebrations triggered stronger affective reactions than the prayers in her local parish. To accentuate this contrast, Youmna compared her remote participation in the liturgy in Cologne with praying in Saint George Monastery (Deir Mar Gerges) in Deir el-Harf, a Lebanese monastery reputed for its spiritual and intellectual capital in the Ras el-Matn area.

At the same time, the expanded digital availability of religious services during the pandemic contributed to an upsurge in devotional activity for practitioners like Youmna and her mother. Since their isolation was not only a consequence of the pandemic but also linked to their household circumstances, the digital alternatives to worship increased their accessibility to public services. While sensorially reductive to video and/or audio, online worship allowed them to be more liturgically active. By active I mean the online engagement in multiple prayers throughout the day. From *paraklesis* (supplicatory canon) to *salat al-ghurub* (vespers) and *progesmena* (the liturgy of pre-sanctified gifts), these liturgical celebrations became gateways to the inaccessible social world, served as didactic tools to navigate anxieties of infection, and offered ways to alleviate boredom.[349] However, the expanded accessibility of broadcasted liturgies did not necessarily result in a broader range of sensory experiences during online participation. While Youmna had the possibility to shift from one broadcast to another, she would rarely engage in simultaneously watching and listening to more than one liturgy.[350]

### *Listening Is Necessary but Not Always Sufficient*

Other engagements assumed a more participative dimension in relation to digital mediations and their interference with authorized liturgical formats. On July 5, 2020, the attendees of the monthly gatherings with Ephrem (Kyriakos), Metropolitan of Tripoli, Al-Kura, and Dependencies, met for the last time before a pandemic-induced hiatus. Initially designed as family-oriented, these gatherings gradually evolved to include a diverse lay audience, facilitating discussions on religious subjects and their relevance in everyday life. The last pre-pandemic meeting took place in Deir Mar Mikhail (Holy Archangel Michael Monastery) in Baskinta, a

[349] For more on the formats and aims of prayer, *see* Andreas Bandak, "The Social Life of Prayers – Introduction," *Religion* 47, no. 1 (2017): 1–18, https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2016.1225904.
[350] A notable exception happened when the live broadcasting of churches in Beirut was restricted to audio. During this period, I noticed instances where audio broadcasts from local parishes were simultaneously played over muted videos of liturgies outside Beirut.

spiritual hub for many of the participants in these gatherings. Claudine was one of them. A resident of Ashrafiyeh, soft-spoken, and frequently shifting between Arabic and French, she was a regular of this group ever since their started meeting in the 1990s. At the end of the meeting, Claudine kindly offered to drive me back to Beirut. On our way, she told me that her visit to the monastery marked a rare occasion where she let her guard down. Following up on her statement, I inquired about the kinds of religious activities she was doing at home. After replying that listening to the liturgy was enough for her, she mentioned a discussion she had with abuna Youhanna, the Archimandrite of Deir Mar Mikhail. Given her knowledge of reading the books, abuna advised her to mute the online transmission during the liturgical readings and read the scriptures herself. "What is the difference?" I asked. "One feels they are participating differently. You are giving from yourself (*ʿam taʿti minnik*)," she replied.

By now, a rich scholarship on sound has researched the potential of broadcasting technologies in creating immersive devotional soundscapes. Dorothea E. Schulz and Patrick Eisenlohr focused on voice, sound reproduction, and particular theologies of listening in Islam.[351] Carolyn Ramzy investigated modes of Egyptian Christian belonging shaped through digital ministry and sound technology that "electronize God's presence into the audible."[352] Jeffers Engelhardt's work on listening practices among Orthodox practitioners in post-crisis Greece looked into the development of a "worldly Orthodox milieu" at the intersection of media technologies, religious sensorium, and everyday life.[353] Together, these studies show how media technologies expanded the aural dimension of rituals "beyond the immediate sphere of ritual action to which these aural forms of spiritual experience used to be restricted."[354]

In the urban landscape of Beirut, sound technologies have played a role in shaping Orthodox liturgical soundscapes prior to the digital adjustments prompted by the pandemic. Microphones were used to amplify the voices of priests and chanters. Sound amplifiers were installed on the façades of churches, extending the reach of liturgical sounds into public urban

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[351] Dorothea E. Schulz, "A Fractured Soundscape of the Divine: Female 'Preachers,' Radio Sermons and Religious Place-making in Urban Mali," in *Prayer in the City: The Making of Muslim Sacred Places and Urban Life* ed. Patrick A. Desplat and Dorothea E. Schulz (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2012), 239–64; Patrick Eisenlohr, "Technologies of the Spirit: Devotional Islam, Sound Reproduction, and the Dialectics of Mediation and Immediacy in Mauritius," *Anthropological Theory* 9, no. 3 (2009): 273–96, https://doi.org/10.1177/1463499609346983.
[352] Carolyn Ramzy, "Autotuned Belonging: Coptic Popular Song and the Politics of Neo-Pentecostal Pedagogies," in *Ethnomusicology* 60, no. 3 (2016): 434–58, doi:10.5406/ethnomusicology.60.3.0434.
[353] Engelhardt, "Listening and the Sacramental Life," in Luehrmann, *Praying with the Senses,* 50–58.
[354] Dorothea E. Schulz, "Soundscape," in David Morgan, ed., *Key Words in Religion, Media, and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 175.

areas. These technologies have played a role in asserting presence within a confessionally diverse environment, serving as sensorial tools in confessional branding of neighborhoods, fueling sectarian competitions over urban spaces, or simply adding to the bustling and noisy environment of Beirut.[355] Similarly, during the pandemic, the aural echoes of broadcasted liturgies extended from the confines of public church spaces and into the privacy of domestic areas. However, these digital echoes created what could be called "sanitized" sacred spaces. Here, "sanitized" had several dimensions. First, it denoted the isolation from the immersive sensorial regime of the liturgy. Second, it referenced the absence of physical bodies as potential vectors of viral transmission. Third, despite the public character of online media, the liturgical experience was privatized within domestic spaces. The liturgy was audible only to those who tuned in. These algorithms of access created a sanitized environment, devoid of encounters with confessional "otherness."

Catering to the needs of their parishioners when in-person gatherings were restricted, churches in Beirut initially began by providing audiovisual broadcasts of their prayers. However, in response to a directive from the Archdiocese of Beirut, broadcasts were restricted from audiovisual to solely audio by April 2020. While the constraints of audio broadcasting presented a challenge for many of my interlocutors, this was not the case for Claudine. For her, the act of listening was necessary for an effective and authentic liturgical experience. This necessity must be understood within wider Orthodox theologies of mediation. In the liturgy, the aural dimension inhabits a privileged position in bridging encounters with the divine. First, the absence of musical instruments emphasizes the human voice as an embodied tool of adoration and celebration. Liturgical scripts come alive through coordinated voices. Religious hymns (*taratil*) are sung testimonies of Orthodox theological dogmas.[356] Quoting from the course support of a religious class organized for lay audiences by the Archdiocese of Beirut, during the liturgy,

> the presence of God and the secret of salvation and redemption are laid before you, so you must stand with reverence and full of joy. This atmosphere is an expression of our faith in the resurrection of Christ and the deification of humanity, which constitutes the essence of worship. Thus, in order to develop this feeling and encourage full participation, these services are chanted, and the melodies that are used stem from the traditions of people according to their regions.[357]

[355] Hafeda, "Sound," in *Negotiating Conflict in Lebanon*, 158–207.
[356] Peter Bouteneff, "Christ and Salvation," in Theokritoff and Cunningham, *Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology*, 102–103; Krueger, *Liturgical Subjects*, 24.
[357] "Madkhal ila al-liturgia" [Introduction to the liturgy] (course support), 9. *See also* Clément, *Corps de mort et de gloire*, 31.

Singing as part of the larger liturgical economy of the divine acquires eschatological dimensions as well. In *Liturgical Subjects*, Krueger writes, "liturgical singing thus bridges the gap between the present and the past, allowing something more than a reenactment of the ritual drama."[358] In the aspirational celebration of the liturgy, the history of salvation is not just remembered, but authentically lived in the present.[359]

Nevertheless, the audio broadcasting of the liturgy was necessary but not always sufficient for Claudine. There were instances where digital mediation had to be cut for her to participate in the liturgical act. Instead of being a listener of the liturgy, Claudine added a participatory dimension. During the Liturgy of the Word, she was advised to mute the transmission and read herself the epistle and the gospel.[360] In this case, an effective liturgical experience at home included both technological mediations and their silencing. Claudine reduced exposure in order to increase participation. An aspect worth underscoring here is her assertion that she knew how to "read the books." This act involves more than a mere utterance of words; it requires a hymnographic deployment. To effectively read the scriptures, the reader must master the intonation, the rhythms, and the harmonious fusion of syllables and vocal tone. Also, Claudine's act of recitation was not solely about vocal expression. Her phrase "*ʿam taʿti minnik*" (you are giving from yourself) implies a giving from one's being in precarious circumstances. This self-giving is not only cognitive; it is a visceral and embodied aspect of liturgical participation.

Returning to Birgit Meyer and her approach to aesthetics as both beauty and power, I highlight the authoritative element in this ethnographic episode. Even if Claudine performed the recitation within the comfort of her house, her prayer remained anchored in a tradition of authenticated and recognizable formats of worship.[361] In addition, she did not engage in these liturgical negotiations without deferral to religious authorities. Seeking guidance and approval on how to approach online devotion, she asked the advice of abuna Youhanna. The image of the monk as a spiritual and authoritative figure (*bay ruhi*) has increased significantly in the Rum community once with the twentieth century resurgence of monastic practice in Lebanon and

[358] Krueger, *Liturgical Subjects*, 85.
[359] Matthew Steenberg, "The Church," in Theokritoff and Cunningham, *Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology*, 128.
[360] Broadly speaking, the first section of the divine liturgy is called the "Liturgy of the Word" and is built around the scriptures; the second one is called the "Liturgy of the Eucharist" and is built around the Eucharistic sacrament.
[361] Luehrmann, introduction to *Praying with the Senses,* 8–9.

Syria.[362] Claudine's reference to the monastic figure further aligned with her efforts in navigating right practice as an Orthodox. During our discussion in the car, she described her experience as Rum through genealogies of authoritative figures who profoundly shaped her life. Saints, monks, and priests continued to be pivotal in shaping and guiding her engagement in liturgical practice at home.

### *When "Somewhere Else" Is Not Enough*

For other Rum practitioners, observing a liturgy that took place *somewhere else* and was digitally mediated within their homes was not enough. For them, co-presence in liturgical communion required an active dialogic participation. This performative dimension became evident in a series of group prayers I attended during Lent in 2020. On the private initiative of a few MJO members, Zoom sessions were scheduled for prayers that followed liturgical texts. Participation was invitation-based. Our sessions started and ended with casual conversations, mostly around coping mechanisms during the pandemic, the escalating crises, and the challenges of not being able to attend church. In between these conversations, participants engaged in collective recitations of liturgical texts assigned for the Lenten and Paschal cycle—for example, *salat al-nawm al-kubra* (great compline)*, madih walidat Allah* (Akathist to the Theotokos and little compline)*, al-quddas al-ilahi* (the divine liturgy). Each took turns in reading or singing parts of the texts, with a brief pause serving as a cue for someone else to continue.

In this interactive synchronous format, the focus was on co-presence rather than co-location. The fracture between liturgical temporality and spatiality was predicated on the church being replaced by a network of modular domestic spaces. Yet, co-presence did not reference only the synchronization of "being online," but also the dialogical performance of religious scripts. In other words, collective intimacy was achieved both through technological mediations and liturgical action. To grasp this group's emphasis on the performative nature of the liturgy, one must consider the theological implications of this foundational corporate event. As worship spaces closed and physical access became limited, representations of churches as physical spaces gave way to discourses on the church as the people (*el-kniseh hiyeh el-jameʿa mish el-khashab* – the church is the community not the wood). Such discourse emphasized the collective act of

[362] Poujeau, "Monasteries, Politics, and Social Memory," in Hann and Goltz, *Eastern Christians*, 177–92.

individuals gathering together and becoming "a community whose power relies on its capacity to perform its own making, ever in motion, ever incomplete: the-community-that-exists-in-the process-of being-made."[363] In Christian anthropology, this capacity is expressed through the reality of the Church as a relational experience within a collective body signifying in Christ.

In its dialogical and participatory aspects, this group's instantiation of a domestic church closely mirrors offline or "brick and mortar" liturgies.[364] Its members had the ability and the agency to generate shared rhythms and moods at the intersection of individual subjectivity and social collectivity. Also, the group underscored the immediacy of collective action over a more autonomous, service-oriented liturgical practice where individuals could attend online prayers at their own convenience. Subscribing to an understanding of the liturgy as a scripted dialogue between God and creation, the act of coming together was the way to liturgical communion for the participants. Their active engagement aspired to create a feeling of *being together* even though spatially *far away*. Nevertheless, their togetherness was regulated and materialized through prescriptive scripts. Activating these scripts required attendees to be well-versed in corporate worship, skillful in reciting, singing, and reading them. They needed to possess the necessary knowledge to navigate liturgical books and lectionaries; what and when to read, when to stop, and when to sing hymns. This knowledge held even greater significance in the case of the divine liturgy, where sections such as the liturgy of the Eucharist cannot be carried without the presence of a priest. At the same time, enacting these practices online was not without practical hurdles, such as moments of awkward silence, muted voices, blurry cameras, slow internet connection, childcare demands, electricity cuts, or disjointed rhythms.

The continuities and disruptions between offline and online liturgical practices presented in this case and in the section at large had implications on definitions and experiences of immediacy and presence. While the impact of online infrastructures on Orthodox worship during the pandemic was evident, I argue that research should encompass not only the potential of media technologies, but also the affordances of the liturgy as theology and practice. In the words of Charles Hirschkind, who reflected on configurations of religion in relation to modern technological culture, "the questions, and challenges, posed to religious adepts by the spread of

[363] Maria José A. de Abreu, "Breath, Technology, and the Making of Community Canção Nova in Brazil," in Meyer, *Aesthetic Formations*, 181.
[364] Throughout her book, *@Worship: Liturgical Practices in Digital Worlds*, Teresa Berger uses the term "brick and mortar" to reference the physical, in-person, and material dimensions of religious practice.

new media infrastructures will be distinct in accord with the conceptual resources of their distinct traditions."[365]

A scholarly focus on Protestant variations on transcendence has led to particular "problems of presence," to borrow from Matthew Engelke's work. As reflected in his influential research on the Friday Masowe apostolics of Zimbabwe, presence in Protestant denominations is often negotiated at the tense intersection between aspirations for an immediate encounter with God and the actual dependence on different forms of mediation for this encounter to take place. Similarly, the Orthodox liturgy is predicated on an immediate encounter with the divine and with "those who have fallen asleep in the faith: ancestors, fathers, patriarchs, prophets, apostles, preachers, evangelists, martyrs, confessors, ascetics, and every righteous spirit made perfect in faith."[366] However, here immediacy and extension of presence are closely linked to Orthodox sacramental materiality. Material and sensorial engagements are emphasized in Orthodox sensational forms precisely because of their physical and bodily nature.[367] It is this particular emphasis that rendered the case of Orthodox practice during the pandemic so engaging. On one side, the inherent materiality of Orthodox rituals was emphasized through its absence. On the other side, it was this absence that allowed for spatial distances to be substituted by communal presence mediated by online technologies.[368]

At the same time, the adoption of new media in religious traditions must also be evaluated in the light of broader social structures. For instance, liturgical domestication was boosted by online technologies not only because of their usage as religious media, but also because of their embeddedness in local socio-cultural patters of media consumption.[369] Online platforms like Facebook and messaging apps like WhatsApp have been ubiquitous modes of communication in Lebanon. They facilitate commercial activities and delivery services, sustain personal and family networks, disseminate news, stir social dissent, and strengthen political

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[365] Hirschkind, "Media, Mediation, Religion," 96.
[366] This excerpt is from the script of the divine liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom. The reference is a prayer book published by the Saint Demetrios Church-Ashrafiyeh, used and available for purchase in churches across Beirut.
[367] For an engagement with the materiality of icons, saintly bodies, and veneration of holy images, *see* Deirdre de la Cruz, "The Authority of Appearances," chap. 1 in *Mother Figured: Marian Apparitions and the Making of a Filipino Universal* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015); Angie Heo, "Imagining Holy Personhood: Anthropological Thresholds of the Icon," in Luehrmann, *Praying with the Senses*, 83–101; *See also* the Subsection "Medical Questions, Theological Answers."
[368] Meyer, introduction to *Aesthetic Formations*, 3.
[369] Eisenlohr, "What is a Medium?", 12.

allegiances.[370] The pervasiveness of this online mediascape in non-religious spheres of life, together with the social intimacies that they cultivated, eased the engagement with online technologies as alternatives to in-person corporate worship. Nevertheless, the portable and open access to worship advertised by the online had its limitations in the context of the pervasive systemic failures within Lebanon. Focusing solely on the convenience of having the liturgy at one's fingertips overshadows the minutiae of adjustments and efforts that my interlocutors had to make in the absence of stable public service infrastructures.[371]

The "domesticated" schedule of liturgical practices was determined by both convenience and inconvenience. Electricity shortages and power outages forced May and her brother, two Rum from Mazraʿa, to watch the recorded version of the liturgy in the evening. "If there is no electricity, you cannot [listen to the liturgy]. If there is no wi-fi, you cannot. My brother Sami has a laptop so we listen to it in the evenings after—no, before—the news. I do not have a laptop. If there is electricity, I listen to it."[372] In a similar manner, during an online MJO meeting I attended on May 20, 2020, the everyday inconveniences of living precariously became blatantly evident. This meeting took place during a period of severely limited electricity supply, from both state-provided service and private electricity subscriptions (*ishtirak*).[373] Each participant had different degrees of lighting; some relied on portable rechargeable lamps, while others' screens were completely black. Their ability to open their camera was influenced, among other factors, by their different subscription plans. If a Zoom window closed unexpectedly, the logical conclusion was often a power outage. Participation ended as batteries of laptops, phones, and lamps depleted.

[370] Jared McCormick, "The Whispers of WhatsApp: Beyond Facebook and Twitter in the Middle East," *Jadaliyya,* December 9, 2013, https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/29913.
[371] For insights into deficient urban planning and service provision in Beirut, *see* Nucho, "The Eyes of Odars: City-to-City Collaborations and Transnational Reach," chap. 5 in *Everyday Sectarianism in Urban Lebanon.*
[372] May, interview by author, July 11, 2020, café in Mazraʿa, Beirut.
[373] In post-civil war Lebanon, a system of private generator owners who sell electricity subscriptions thrives among the electricity shortages from the national grid. This system acts as an exploitative structure that fills the void of severe shortcomings in public services, while also being a viable alternative for Lebanese to secure electricity. In colloquial Arabic, *ishtirak* can refer both to the subscription plan and to the private system as a whole.

**Homemade Rituals: Between Creativity and Tradition**


**Figure 6** – 3.2. Home altars during the COVID-19 pandemic. Source: Facebook.

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These images are snapshots of homemade altars featured in a challenge organized in March 2020 by the Dekwaneh branch (*firqa*) of MJO. In response to the inability to physically attend church, an online contest was organized by members of the branch. Participants were encouraged to submit photos of their prayer corners at home to compete in the challenge. The submitted photos were compiled into an animated collage, which was uploaded and distributed on Facebook with the hashtag "*kanisat al-bait*" (the church of the house).[374] In a steady rhythm and sequential flow, the submitted photos transitioned across the screen, accompanied by the authors' names superimposed onto the image. Collectively, they provided glimpses into private assemblages of Orthodox objects that materialized ideas of domestic altars. While diverse in their customized design and composition, these worship corners featured religious materialities commonly associated with Eastern Orthodox rituals and aesthetics. Tables and other flat surfaces

[374] The Facebook video can be accessed here: https://www.facebook.com/MJODekwaneh/videos/221003255916969.

were decorated with candles, incense, prayers books, and icons of saints, Virgin Mary, or Christ.[375] Moreover, a well-known Egyptian religious song for children accompanied the video. With a chorus that sang, "my church, my church, my church is my house, my mother, and the secret of my life's happiness," the song aligned with the attempts of practitioners to redesign part of their homes in prayer spaces and improvised altars.[376] Moreover, the choice of the song, together with the challenge's hashtag, reflected the blurred boundaries between the house as domestic space and the church as spiritual home, between the altar in a church and the prayer corner in one's house. This fusion was not solely about the physical spaces of churches and homes, but also about their places of religious formation during the pandemic.

This Facebook challenge is also indicative of online infrastructures activated during the pandemic that went beyond liturgical practices. Competitions, daily devotionals, and uplifting stories were shared through platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp. Miracles were debated and authenticated online, while conferences on different religious topics were organized over Zoom and Teams. In this context, the phrase "your houses have become churches" gained meaning not only though the domestication of liturgical practice, but also through the religious imprint of domestic spaces. In the former case, the framing of liturgical activities within the domestic space had a spatiotemporal dimension. Not only did my interlocutors have access to Lenten prayers from their homes, but they also accommodated prayer times to their daily schedules and the scarce provisions of basic services like electricity. In the latter case, they used liturgical materialities like incense, holy oil, and icons to recreate moods and modes of prayer in line with an Orthodox liturgical aesthetic within the confines of their homes. At times, the demarcation between homemade altars as sacred spaces and the rest of the household was not clearly defined. It is to these domestic rituals that this section turns to.

### *Religious Objects in Domestic Settings*

In his work among the Syriac Orthodox communities in South India, Vlad Naumescu looks into pedagogies of prayer as historicized modes of knowing based on correct performance. He shows how Orthopraxy as the way of "doing things right" was negotiated at the intersection

[375] While most of the religious items exhibited a Byzantine aesthetic, there were also rosaries, statues, and icons in the iconographic style commonly linked with Latin rites.
[376] "Kanisati, kanisati, kanisati hiya baiti, hiya ummi, hiya sirr farah hayati."

of educational reforms, missionary encounters, and ethical formation in the Oriental Orthodox faith.[377] While Naumescu traces the development of particular modes of apprehending religious knowledge through practice, I also highlight the undoing of existing forms of engagement. In the exceptional context of the pandemic, many customary practices had to be disengaged with. Icons were no longer to be touch, kissed, or caressed. Heads were to be tilted and mouths opened wide to ensure that lips would not touch the communion spoon. Practitioners were required to be physically absent from churches so as to adhere to the recommendations of social distancing. Thus, embodied experiences and the associated patterns of social engagement were significantly altered.[378] At the same time, homes became spaces of personal devotion and religious practices that both converged and challenged liturgical worship. Consider, for instance, the case of Salwa. As we were conversing over WhatsApp about her experience of observing Lent during the pandemic, she stated,

> Today I was very sad because it is Lazarus Saturday (*sabt Lazar*). We wanted to go [to church] since it is a celebratory liturgy. So what I did, I put the liturgy but I could not manage to follow the *salat al-sahar* (orthros) from the beginning. Don't think that I am a saint. *Allah yerhamni* (God have mercy on me). But I tried. For John [her youngest son], I put holy water and holy oil that I brought from Romania, from a monastery. I have many types. I burnt *bakhur* (incense) and incensed the house so I felt I created *jaw el-ʿid* (an atmosphere of celebration). I continued with the entire liturgy while doing my chores and the mobile phone was with me. I was moving around as I was chanting. It was rewarding. I did not feel that I had a temptation, *nushkur Allah* (thanks God).[379]

In her seminal work on ritual theory, Catherine Bell argues that rituals are often predicated on some form of spatial or temporal disjunction from routine and worldly activity.[380] Yet, cases like Salwa's and the exceptional circumstances of the pandemic can disrupt this rule. For Salwa, religious materialities such as holy water, oil, and incense, along with their associated sensory experience, set the necessary background for celebration within the domestic space. Salwa contrasted her experience with the exemplary ones of the saints, who embody spiritual

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[377] Naumescu, "Pedagogies of Prayer," 389–418.
[378] Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, several studies have documented its impact on religious practices spanning different traditions. A few examples include: Carola E. Lorea et al., "Religion and the COVID-19 Pandemic: Mediating Presence and Distance," *Religion* 52, no. 2 (2022): 177–98, https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2022.2061701; Heidi A. Campbell, ed., *Religion in Quarantine: The Future of Religion in a Post-Pandemic World* (College Station, TX: Digital Religion Publications, 2020), online, doi.org/10.21423/religioninquarantine; Alexander J. B. Hampton, ed., *Pandemic, Ecology and Theology: Perspectives on COVID*-19 (New York: Routledge, 2021).
[379] Salwa, WhatsApp interview by author, April 11, 2020.
[380] *See* Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), "The Practice of Ritual Theory."

proficiency. She made sure to emphasize her prayer as a form of active crafting towards a gradual embodiment of the right mood for worship. Achieving this mood was predicated on creating *jaw el-ʿid* or what is canonically deemed an atmosphere of celebration. This atmosphere was cultivated sensorially and materially, as she appealed to religious "things" that are ubiquitous to Orthodox worship. However, achieving this *jaw el-ʿid* did not exclude attending to domestic responsibilities. Devotional rhythms intertwined with household chores as the mobile phone afforded her to move around the house without constraints. The temporality of religious celebration intermingled with the temporality of everyday life for Salwa and her youngest son, John. Also, the spatial grounding of liturgical bodies within the church was replaced by a mobility of the liturgy, where it was not Salwa who "went to church" but the liturgy that "followed" her as she moved around the house.

Lazarus Saturday—the celebration (*ʿid*) that Salwa referred to—is celebrated right before Palm Sunday in the Orthodox liturgical calendar. It focuses on the miraculous resurrection of Lazarus of Bethany, the friend of Jesus and the brother of Martha and Mary.[381] Paradoxically, what is missing from Salwa's narrative is her bodily engagement in the liturgically prescribed movements. The aspiration for kenotic synchronicity within the liturgy receded and made way for an individual engagement in housework. Nevertheless, her Orthodox habitus did not fully disappear as the echoes of a disciplined liturgical self lingered on, with dispositions inculcated in the body reviving like Lazarus every time she had the chance to attend the liturgy in person. At this point, it is worth mentioning that Salwa's sensitivity to the sensory and material features of Orthodox practice was not episodic or circumstantial; rather, it was predicated on prior engagements in canonical practice, where "learning to pray was formative for [her] life as a Christian."[382] As a chanter in the Mar Mikhail and Jubrail parish in Mazraʿa, she would often draw on her experience as a chanter to channel her visual, aural, and olfactive sensibilities towards worship at home. Carola E. Lorea et al. have put forward the term "stickiness" of the religious sensorium to describe this longing of practitioners to pre-pandemic models of religious engagement and their associated guidelines of effectiveness.[383]

[381] The resurrection of Lazarus is a biblical story that appears in the Gospel of John, 11:1–44.
[382] Bandak, "The Social Life of Prayers," 3; *See also* Naumescu, "Becoming Orthodox," 29–54.
[383] Carola E. Lorea et al., "Religion and the COVID-19 Pandemic: Mediating Presence and Distance," 180, 187–88.

In my approach on homemade rituals like the one of Salwa, I draw extensive inspiration from the work of anthropologist Andreas Bandak on Christian communities in Syria. Through meticulous ethnography, he challenges a prevalent Protestant and Charismatic-centric approach to prayer as a tool for the formation of a sincere and modern ethical subject. Instead, he examines prayer, as both structure and performance, in terms of its social and socializing nature. First, the sociality of prayers comes from their linguistic patterns and repetitive rhythms, which have evolved through "the accumulated efforts of men and women over generations."[384] Second, prayers are a lens into the larger realities that people inhabit, mapping the affective and hierarchical relations with others, be them dead, alive, or divine.[385] Third, prayers are didactic tools. They act as a moral and social compass, guiding individuals on how to conduct themselves as devout practitioners within a specific tradition. Salwa's homemade rituals incorporated all these aspects. She engaged in prescriptive devotional patters and ritual rhythms that she was well-versed in. It was her accumulated past knowledge and future anticipation of Lazarus Saturday (*sabt Lazar*) that contributed to her sense of sadness over the impossibility of celebrating as usual. Also, Salwa's engagement in domestic devotional practice was both didactic and relational. Celebrating *sabt Lazar* was a collective act to be shared with others and relational to exemplary biblical scenes (i.e., the resurrection of Lazarus). Its didactic dimension was relational to John, Salwa's son, who was trained by his mother on how to pray the Orthodox way. Moreover, the presence of religious materialities tied to Orthodox "genres of ritual language"[386] contradicts arguments on the disembodied and privatized nature of online worship.[387] Rather, it raises questions on the extension and adjustment of sensorial engagements as Rum practitioners worked towards recreating at home what they used to experience in church.

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[384] Marcel Mauss, *On Prayer*, ed. W.S.F. Pickering, trans. Susan Leslie (New York: Berghahn Books, [1909] 2003), 33.

[385] The works of Fenella Cannell (1999), Robert Orsi (2005), Tom Boylston (2018), and Andreas Bandak (2022) are part of the anthropological scholarship that investigates prayers in relation to the social realities of practitioners.

[386] Thomas J. Csordas, *Body, Meaning, Healing* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 27–30. In his analysis of Catholic Pentecostal ritual discourse, Csordas identifies these genres as modes of speech that are categorized according to regulations of usage and prosodic features. One such genre is prayer.

[387] For instance, *see* Joseph O. Baker et al.," Religion in the Age of Social Distancing: How COVID-19 Presents New Directions for Research," *Sociology of Religion* 81, no. 4 (2020): 357–70, doi:10.1093/socrel/sraa039; Paul James and Freya Carkeek, "This Abstract Body: From Embodied Symbolism to Techno-Disembodiment," in *Virtual Politics: Identity and Community in Cyberspace*, ed. David Holmes (London: Sage, 1997), 107–24. For an opposing approach, *see* Berger, *@Worship: Liturgical Practices in Digital Worlds.*

Bandak also highlights the importance of investigating prayer in relation to quandaries of life. "The point is not to detract from the value of the everyday and the mundane but to probe what happens when such normality is suddenly sundered, and individuals and communities need to address novel situations, be they of impasse or possibility."[388] In the context of the pandemic, Salwa sought protection and the familiar in times of uncertainty. Her homemade rituals were a means to expand her potential of action in a time of limited access to religious and social spaces. However, homemade rituals had different levels of success in emulating in-person worship at different times and with different practitioners. While Salwa found her customized liturgical practice rewarding, this was not always the case. As she pointed to the efforts put into creating and embodying *jaw el-ʿid*, her remarks also hinted at the potential of rituals to go wrong—when the repetitive structure of devotion hinders, when the religious paraphernalia is not enough, or when the mind wanders.[389] Take the example of Johnny, another parishioner from Mazraʿa. Upon me asking about his home-based Lenten practice, he replied,

> J: I lived it at home but not properly. Once, you know what I did? While abuna was praying, I displayed the icons at home. I lit a candle. I brought a cup of wine and I put it with the bread next to the icons and next to the phone where abuna was praying . . . maybe, maybe, they will be blessed. Then I gave myself communion. [chuckles]
>
> R: But this was symbolic.
>
> J: Yes, something symbolic. I thought that maybe the Holy Spirit will descend on them since they are present next to abuna's words of consecration. I took a photo and sent it to abuna. He said that it does not work [like that], but I did it.
>
> R: What did you feel?
>
> J: Of course, I did not feel it [the communion]. There was noise and there were cars everywhere, and Maria [his daughter] shouting around wanting to watch TV. You cannot, one needs peace in order to live it.
>
> R: How was the online prayer for you?
>
> J: It may have worked if the environment allowed it. It would have been possible if there was silence; I was watching it online but then they stopped the image. It became only audio and it lost even more. The visual plays a role. You see the icons and you are *in* more. While you are home, there is a child, there are neighbors, there are people going up and down [the stairs]. The electricity goes and there is an interruption until the internet comes back. There are many factors that take you out of the atmosphere (*el-jaw*).[390]

[388] Bandak, "The Social Life of Prayers," 9.
[389] On failure of rituals, *see* Engelke and Tomlinson, *The Limits of Meaning*, 1–37.
[390] Johnny, interview by author, June 6, 2020, reception area (*salun*) of the church in Mazraʿa, Beirut.

Johnny's personality exuded sociability. He was always willing to talk and topics of discussion never lacked with him. He was an involved member of the parish and part of the church committee (*majlis al-kanisa*). On Sundays, he sat in the back of the church distributing candles, receiving donations, or selling books and calendars. Yet, in his isolation at home, the aural textures and the commotion of everyday life were obstacles for Johnny's prayerful moods. The disruption in online broadcasting because of electricity shortages, the inability to see the iconostasis in his parish church, the chaotic soundscapes of the neighborhood, and the attention required by his young daughter Maria – these factors combined hindered Johnny's immersion in the *jaw es-sala* (atmosphere of prayer). Similar to Salwa's case, the success of (re)creating this *jaw* was dependent on relational and sensorial factors. It was relational to instituted patterns of Orthodox devotional life and to widespread pandemic regulations. These translated into Johnny's longing for communion intimacy while complying with requirements of social distancing. However, in between intimacy and distancing, his "phygital" (physical and digital) attempts at customized worship seemed to fail.[391] His endeavors to pray were tied to visual registers and devotional objects associated with the church. He could not fully immerse in a mood of prayer without seeing the iconostasis. For Johnny, looking at the iconostasis was not just an act of seeing but an act of worship, where the act of looking is a form of submission to the gaze of God and the saints.[392]

Moreover, his engagement with these saints and especially with the Eucharist were dependent on tested modes of interaction sanctioned by priestly authority and church canons. An avid supporter of the Orthodox liturgical tradition and its apostolic genealogy, Johnny wanted to reproduce the experience of in-person communion and the particular relations, emotions, and attitudes it entailed. On his homemade altar, he displayed the gifts to be consecrated in the hope of a digitally mediated transfiguration. Yet, a replication of liturgical materialities and a predisposition to embody sanctioned prayer moods were not sufficient in creating a sacramental mode.[393] Johnny asking the opinion or approval of abuna Boulos hinted at him being aware of the heterodox character of his actions. Abuna's reply of impossibility invoked a claim to a more

[391] The term "phygital" is taken from Carola E. Lorea et al., "Religion and the COVID-19 Pandemic," 182.
[392] Robert Orsi, *Between Heaven and* Earth, 58. Orsi writes about looking as a "devotional activity" in his study of Marian Catholic adorations.
[393] I adopted the interplay of 'mood" and "mode" from Johnson, "Modes and Moods of 'Slave Anastácia,' Afro-Brazilian Saint," 27–73.

immediate access to the divine that relies on authorized divisions of religious labor for ritual efficacy.[394] In the Orthodox Church, sacramental practices are highly regulated rituals which take place within strict hierarchical structures. For instance, once the gifts are consecrated, only a priest can handle them, him being the first and last to commune.[395] Johnny's efforts to replicate this sacrament at home introduced a context where domestic materialities posed a semiotic risk to sacred liturgical objects and rhythms. This compelled practitioners like Johnny to push the limits of right practice, and leaders like abuna Boulos to intervene and mitigate against this risk. However, Johnny's actions were not done from outside the church as an anti-clerical statement. Neither did he challenge the authority of abuna in performing the sacrament. Johnny's attempt to do things "properly" was done from within the institutional legitimacy of the Church. Even though creative in his worship practice, Johnny deferred to the authority of the priest for approval or, better said, for confirmation of what he already knew, namely the unavailability of long-distance communion.

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> A Brother at the Monastery of Choziba, The Words of the Holy Offering and Abba John.
>
> Abba Gregory, a former member of the Imperial Guard, told us of a brother at the Community of Choziba who had learned by heart the words used at the offering of the holy gifts. One day he was sent to fetch the <eucharistic> oblations and, as he returned to the monastery, he said the offering prayer as though he were reciting verses. The deacons placed the same oblations on the paten in the holy sanctuary. The priest at that time was Abba John the Chozibite who later became Bishop of Caesarea in Palestine. When he offered the gifts, he did not perceive the coming of the Holy Spirit in the accustomed manner. He was distressed, thinking that it might be on account of some sin on his part that the Holy Spirit was absent. He withdrew into the sacristy in tears and flung himself facedown. An angel of the Lord appeared to him and said: 'Because the brother who was bringing the oblations here recited the holy prayer of offering on the way, they are already consecrated and made perfect.' The elder laid down a rule that from henceforth nobody was to learn the holy prayer of offering unless he had been ordained; nor was it ever to be recited at any time other than in a consecrated place.[396]

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[394] Bandak and Boylston, "The 'Orthodoxy' of Orthodoxy," 25–46.
[395] "Madkhal ila al-liturgia" [Introduction to the liturgy] (course support).
[396] John Moschos, *The Spiritual Meadow*, trans. John Wortley (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1992), 17. This fragment is part of the collection of stories and anecdotes by John Moschos on late sixth–early seventh century Palestinian, Syrian, and Egyptian monasticism. In addressing the tensions between individual agency, divine intercession, and institutional legitimacy, it brings to light the long-standing instabilities of the Eucharistic sacrament in Christianity.

### *Questions With(out) Answers*

The example of Johnny leads me to a more general argument about the dynamic relation between individual creativity and church canons, as expressed in the worship formats developed and activated during the pandemic. The translocation from habitual shared spaces to remote media platforms allowed for a certain degree of innovation that pushed the limits of centrally controlled Orthodoxy, yet they did not necessarily circumvent and undercut religious authority. The worship of my interlocutors was still anchored in prayer formats and religious materialities that were canonically authorized.[397] Echoing Marcel Mauss, both collective and individual prayers are part of socialized language patterns that are formed and transmitted within the Orthodox tradition. These are reinforced by familiar repertoires of performative acts that dictate possibilities of praying in the right way. Even individual prayers, that may rely more on spontaneity in comparison to strict liturgical scripts, are based on mechanical movements and formulaic language.[398]

This relation between creativity of practice and the routine of tradition was emphasized in anthropological studies on Orthodoxy that followed conceptual genealogies within this tradition. Andreas Bandak and Tom Boylston put forward the concept of "religious worlds" as a notion that captures the centrality of deference to church and tradition, without underestimating the creative potential in matters of correct practice and belief.[399] A similar approach was taken by Simion Pop in his study of Orthodox revivals in post-socialist Romania. Albeit retaining an individualizing tone, the religious and ethical aspirations of practitioners towards a return to "true tradition" were analyzed at the intersection of liturgical practices and adjustments to ordinary life.[400] Vlad Naumescu explored Orthodoxy as living tradition through the mystery-mastery relation. Here, a creative epistemology of revelation intersected with sacramental worship as a pedagogical tool in shaping Orthodox subjects within corporate rituals.[401] While contingencies of everyday life shaped my interlocutor's engagement with icons, chants, prayers

[397] Sonja Luehrmann, "Authorizing: The Paradoxes of Praying by the Book," in Luehrmann, *Praying with the Senses*, 121.
[398] For a classic engagement with immediacy, creativity, and structure in religious practice among the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, *see* Thomas J. Csordas, *The Sacred Self: A Cultural Phenomenology of Charismatic Healing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).
[399] Bandak and Boylston, "The 'Orthodoxy' of Orthodoxy," 25–46; *See also* Boylston, *The Stranger at the Feast*, "Fasting, Bodies, and the Calendar."
[400] Pop, "Orthodox Revivals," 219–21.
[401] Naumescu, "Becoming Orthodox," 29–53.

books, and liturgical texts at home, they were "expressly and actively returning to the authority of the church and the priest as the public instantiation of Orthodox belonging."[402] This deferral to religious authorities, whether consciously or unconsciously, worked in tandem with what practitioners considered to be true and possible.[403]

An instance where online media generated debates around the production, circulation, and consumption of authentic religious practice came from Mount Athos. On the night of Friday to Saturday in the fourth week of Lent (27–28 March), monasteries and their dependencies across Mount Athos engaged in all-night vigils (*sahraniyyat*) to Virgin Mary and Saint Charalambos, known as the healer of plagues and other infectious diseases. Targeted against the COVID-19 pandemic, these vigils were held behind closed doors, with no audiences in attendance.[404] During that night, a monk from one of the monasteries was said to have had a vision of Virgin Mary. Sometimes described as a luminous spectrum, this vision instructed Christians to use holy oil to draw the sign of the cross on their house doors in order to protect their families from the virus. Reminiscent of the exodus story where God (through Moses) told the enslaved Israelites to mark their houses so that the plague would spare their families, the miracle story sparked heated debates on its authenticity and the validity of what the monk proclaimed. Moreover, the proliferation of online technologies in religious practice during the pandemic enhanced the circulation and distribution of this story on platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp.[405] The media platforms enhanced the exposure of a purported event localized in a sacred space inaccessible to many individuals. Given the seclusion and distancing regulations enforced by nation-wide regulations against the pandemic, space was physically constricted and virtually enlarged. This enabled practitioners to feel connected to larger global networks, even when temporarily disconnected from their immediate physical and social surroundings.[406]

This miraculous narrative defied conventional dichotomies of popular religion and church canons since its credibility potential and its wide appeal were grounded in canonic

[402] Boylston, "The Media Landscape," in *The Stranger at the Feast*, 143.
[403] Séverine Rey, "The Ordinary within the Extraordinary: Sainthood-Making and Everyday Religious Practice in Lesvos, Greece," in Schielke and Debevec, *Ordinary Lives and Grand Schemes*, 82–97.
[404] The organization of all-night vigils throughout Mount Athos was advertised by several Christian and Orthodox media outlets. One reference can be found here: https://orthochristian.com/129575.html.
[405] While the core instruction was consistent, the specifics of the story changed across its different reiterations. For instance, the purported holy oil might have been ordinary water or any variety of oil.
[406] For another approach on the temporal and spatial extension of a miracle beyond its immediate locus of production, *see* de la Cruz, "Petals for the Public," in *Mother Figured*.

components.[407] The visionary in question was a monk, a highly revered figure of piety in Orthodoxy. His image aligned with Christian scriptural orthodoxies, where privileged figures like prophets, saints, and kings have been recipients of visions and prophecies. Moreover, the alleged vision aligned with the Orthodox institutional landscape. It occurred in one of the monasteries on Mount Athos, the epicenter of Orthodox monastic geography. The sacred spatiality was reinforced by the liturgical temporality of the event. The alleged vision happened during a night-long vigil (*sahraniyya*), a liturgical format that requires physical fitness and mental exertion throughout its continuous, repetitive, and exhausting enactment.

In her work on Marian apparitions as visual indexes of dynamic Christian-Muslim relations, Angie Heo highlighted a shift in the structure of apparitions. This shift was defined by a transition from an individualized visionary act to mass visualities, where apparitions were no longer restricted to a selected and privileged few but became accessible to a wider audience. As a consequence, the techniques and protocols of authenticating these apparitions changed as well. Modern epistemologies and technologies used in assessing the veracity of these Marian visions and apparitions relied on statistics, numbers, and majoritarian consensus, but also on sectarian and national belonging or enmity.[408] Priests argued in scientific registers, brochures were created to rebuke Muslim and Protestant critiques, and inventories of witnesses were compiled. The nature and strength of evidence was in numbers and witnesses.

In contrast to the Marian apparitions examined by Heo and their aspirations for collective witnessing and authentication, the apparition on Mount Athos was restricted to the monk. The quantitative weight of the apparition increased not by the numbers of individuals who witnessed the miracle, but by the numbers of people who shared the story. Recognizing the ethnographic potential of this story, I used it as an elicitation technique during my online interviews. Between what my conversation partners heard and shared about the event and the acknowledgement of the monk's vision as divine, a potential of not taking a clear stance on the matter emerged. Unlike Heo's interlocutors, my interlocutors seemed to inhabit what Michael Lambek called an "ironic mode," where "irony understood as concealment moves interpretation away from the question of

[407] Schielke and Debevec, introduction to *Ordinary Lives and Grand Schemes*, 1–16.
[408] Heo, "Territorial Presence," chap. 3 in *The Political Lives of Saints*.

truth versus deceit."[409] Instead, a sustained uncertainty around the validity of the story suspends the agentive responsibility of the speakers to make up their minds or to express their position on the matter. Hence, accounts of the vision were frequently shared with a question mark, aimed at opening a topic of discussion, but not necessarily at ending it with a conclusion on the event's validity. Belief and certainty were not at stake in the discussions that I witnessed and engaged in. Rather, the accounts were fueled by a constant oscillation between various instantiations of doubt and hope. Individuals were not sure of the veracity of the miracle, but neither were they particularly interested in finding certainty. [410]

This suspension of (dis)belief was upheld until authorized figures of the Orthodox clergy intervened. While the apparition reportedly occurred during the night in between March 27 and 28, by the end of March 28, the extensive spread of viral accounts of the apparition prompted ecclesiastical intervention and oversight. One such intervention came from abuna Nektarios, one of the Lebanese priests who served in the Saint George Rum Orthodox Cathedral in downtown Beirut. On the evening of March 28, he shared a pre-recorded video on Facebook in which he rejected the vision. The video, presented in portrait frame, showcased a straightforward composition. Abuna wore his black soutane. An icon of Saint Nektarios, his eponym saint, was placed in the background, subtly signaling the chain of authority from saints to priests to the laity. Asserting strong connections to Mount Athos and following his communication with several monks residing there, he challenged the veracity of the apparition. His argument was partly institutional and partly theological. First, he worked towards separating the monk's agency from the official stance of Mount Athos by stating that the monastic administrative authority there was yet to issue a statement on the event. Second, abuna delved into a series of theological explanations on the significance and usage of religious objects such as the holy oil and the cross. Subsequently, he concluded with a series of Biblical references to reinforce the importance of faith and submission to God's will as tools to work with the fears and anxieties engendered by the pandemic.[411]

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[409] Michael Lambek, "Rheumatic Irony: Questions of Agency and Self-deception as Refracted through the Art of Living with Spirits," *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Social and Cultural Practice* 47, no. 2 (2003): 51–52, http://www.jstor.org/stable/23170054.

[410] Andreas Bandak, "Problems of Belief: Tonalities of Immediacy among Christians of Damascus," *Ethnos* 77, no. 4 (2012): 545–47, https://www.new-directions.sps.ed.ac.uk/bandak-problems-of-belief-tonalities-of-immediacy-among-christians-of-damascus/; Janeja and Bandak, *Ethnographies of Waiting*, 4–6.

[411] The Facebook video [in Arabic] can be accessed here: https://www.facebook.com/father.nektarios.khairallah/videos/10158589102619301.

As other church authorities, including those from Mount Athos, swiftly came forward to disprove the authenticity of the vision and its accompanying narrative, the online hype dwindled soon after. Thus, the potentially subversive and innovative replication of this story on media platforms gave way to a reproduction of ecclesial hierarchies and power relations between laics and clergy. Yet, the indecisiveness of opinion did not preclude the impetus of action. The institutionally authorized intervention did not prevent some Rum from complying with the stipulations of the vision within the privacy of their homes. One of them was Najat, a pious Christian living with her sick father. As we were conversing over Zoom on the increase of miracles advertised on Facebook, I brought into discussion the authenticity of the monk's vision. Like other of my interlocutors, Najat was not particularly keen on taking a stance on the veracity of the event, yet she did mark her windows and door with holy oil as a precautionary measure, concluding, "It is blessed oil. If it will not do you any good, it will not do you any harm."[412]

**Conclusion**

Building upon the themes explored in Chapter 2, this chapter investigated the conundrums and negotiations that arose during the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to Orthodox practice in crisis. The primary focus here revolved around digital technologies as alternative to in-person communal worship. The onset of the pandemic prompted an unprecedented and swift transition to online platforms during a period of heightened religious activity. Amid new forms of physical and social immobility imposed by church and public health measures, the acceleration and proliferations of broadcasted liturgical events created new opportunities and constraints for the corporate and liturgical worship of Rum practitioners. The cases presented in this chapter reflect how the pandemic impacted the parameters and conditions under which a religious tradition is defined and pursued. Orthodox repertories tied to habitual spaces of ritual performance descended into the textures of daily life, punctuated by the precarious rhythms of a pandemic. Bodies outside the confines of prescribed liturgical aesthetics sat day after day in front of screens to celebrate the Lenten and Paschal cycles. Simultaneously, these personalized ways of engagement were shaped by what was considered "right practice" in the offline. In the words of Jeffers Engelhardt, "the sensorium and performative practices through which individuals

[412] Najat, WhatsApp interview by author, April 9, 2020.

realized Orthodoxy by engaging media technologies correctly, with discernment, and within tradition, continually returned to the authority of liturgical experience and sacramental theology."[413] Thus, the tenants of a dynamic yet restrictive liturgical tradition intersected with the diversity of personalized sensorial registers from the comfort of one's home.

All these considered, this chapter has made several significant contributions. First, it has advocated against placing sole emphasis on digital technologies and online religious engagements as disembodied and dematerialized experiences. Instead, I investigated negotiations of "orthodox" practice during the pandemic at the intersection of online technologies, physical domestic spaces, and normative visions of Orthodox sacred spaces (e.g., church or monastery). This convergence was expressed in the phrase *buyutkun sarit kana'is* (your houses have become churches), which became meaningful at the intersection of two mutually enhancing transformations: *the domestication of liturgical practice* and *the religious imprint of the domestic space.* Domestic spaces morphed periodically into religious settings as weeks of isolation and restrictions unfolded. Broadcasting schedules of online religious activities became part of daily routines. The sensorial and material perceptions of the sacred spilled into "new arenas of daily life, beyond the immediate sphere of ritual action" and beyond previously authorized spaces.[414] It is within the context of these various processes that Rum practitioners sensed and made sense of their devotions during the pandemic.

Second, this chapter has emphasized the dialectical relation between the creativity of practice and the structure of tradition. The personal sensitivities and preferences of my Rum interlocutors regarding particular prayers formats and pious sensorial registers intertwined with normative visions of ritual efficacy and the authorizing discourses of clerical figures. While confronted with the need to improvise their liturgical engagements within the confines of their homes, Rum were also actively and genuinely interested in practicing their Orthodoxy correctly. Whether through enacting liturgical scripts, participating in online liturgies, or seeking the guidance of priests and monks, their material and sensorial engagements in religious practice were shaped by the affordances of the digital sphere and the tenets of Orthodox tradition. Moreover, this approach allows for an interpretation of online religious practice not as entirely

[413] Engelhardt, "Listening and the Sacramental Life, in Luehrmann, *Praying with the Senses*, 72.
[414] Schulz, "Soundscape," in Morgan, *Key Words in Religion, Media, and Culture*, 175.

new but rather as interconnected with offline devotionals and their authorized media and mediation methods. Third, this chapter focused not only on the potential of digital technologies to mediate religious experiences but also on the theological and practical affordances within Orthodoxy when integrating online media into Orthodox practice. For instance, framing digital mediations within Orthodox liturgical practices and their relational ontologies has facilitated the development of multilayered narratives on concepts of presence, communion, and relationality. In this context, paying attention to liturgical theology, along with ritual materiality and sensory registers, has allowed me to highlight the diversity of liturgical worship while still accounting for aspirations to adhere to the Orthodox tradition during the critical period of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Chapter 4 In Search For Futures Lost: Waqf, Parish, and Locality

> I search for memories of when Palm Sunday was a ʻeid and we came out of the church to the sound of Eastern chants: I find only a small, neglected picture in my pocket.
> Elias Khoury, *Little Mountain*, 7

Sunday, 9:30 a.m. I rush out the door of my rented apartment in Ashrafiyeh and step in my Uber. "*Marhaba. Mazraʿa, kniset Mar Mikhail wa Jubrail, iza betrid; baʿd suq ad-dahab.*" (Hello. To Mazraʿa, Mar Mikhail and Jubrail Church, please; after the gold market). As usual, I see the puzzled face of my driver. I could presume he did not understand me because I am wearing an N-95, or because I speak a "broken" (*mkassar*) Arabic. But the confusion also stemmed from the presence of a church in Mazraʿa, an area predominantly inhabited by Sunni and Shiʿi communities. "There are no Christians in Mazraʿa." "Is there a church in Mazraʿa?" "Are there still Christians there?" These were among the most common reactions I got on a Sunday morning going to church there. This is mainly because most Beirutis, and especially post-civil war generations, are not familiar with the history of the district as a mixed Muslim-Christian area. Moreover, little is known of Christians being the dominant community in the Mazraʿa sector up to the outbreak of the civil war,[415] when their numbers drastically decreased to the minority they are today.[416]

One of the factors contributing to this unfamiliarity is the socio-political portrayal of the Mazraʿa district as Sunni-Shiʿi territory, with a reputation for frequent episodes of sectarian clashes between supporters of two political parties: the Sunni Future Movement (*Tayyar al-Mustaqbal*) and the Shiʿi Amal (*Harakat Amal*).[417] For instance, a quick scan of media outlets

[415] Administratively, Mazraʿa is one of the twelve districts of Beirut. In its turn, this district is divided into nine sectors, two of which bear the names Tariq el-Jdideh and Mazraʿa. I refer to the district as the "Mazraʿa district" and to the sector as simply "Mazraʿa."
[416] Hafeda, *Negotiating Conflict in Lebanon,* 71.
[417] Harakat Amal or simply Amal is a major Shiʿi political party in Lebanon, which was initially established in the 1970s as a Shiʿi militia. It exercises political influence within the Mazraʿa sector. Founded in 2007 by the former Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri, Future Movement, known as Tayyar al-Mustaqbal or simply al-Mustaqbal, is a political party with a predominately Sunni base and a strong following within the Tariq el-Jdideh sector.

covering the 2019 nationwide protests (*thawra*) in Lebanon revealed a focus on sensationalist narratives of violent sectarian clashes along Corniche el-Mazraʿa,[418] the main artery that cuts through west and south Beirut and acts as a symbolic urban demarcation line between the Sunni-controlled Tariq el-Jdideh and the Shiʿa-controlled Mazraʿa sectors. These clashes and their media coverage were reflective of lingering sectarian sensitivities imprinted on the local landscape of the district. Their symbolic and discursive potential have often activated memories of the civil war, along with socio-spatial instantiations of the March 8–March 14 archetype.[419]

I am stuck in traffic on the main street of the gold market (*suq ad-dahab*) The urban landscape is eclectic. Currency exchange shops and stores displaying eye-catching golden jewelry mingle with surveillance cameras that index the panoptic presence of Amal. Posters of Nabih Berri – the leader (*zaʿim*) of the party – portraits of Shiʿi martyrs, and Shiʿi flags adorn the streets, standing as evidence of Amal's socio-political control of Mazraʿa. Sounds of scooters and car horns, calls to prayer, smells of coffee and burnt diesel, voices muffled by surgical masks, and discussions on the erratic exchange rates of the dollar blend together into the daily bustle of the area. Coming out of the *suq*, we reach Mar Mikhail and Jubrail Rum Orthodox Church (Rum Orthodox Church of the Archangels Michael and Gabriel). Often referred to as the Mar Mikhail Church or the Mazraʿa Church, it stands like a cartographic anomaly in the area. Located amid residential buildings and a medium-sized parking lot, its two high towers overlook the neighborhood. The building is surrounded by a metal fence adorned with vegetation. Its metal gate opens only during liturgical and parish activities. A video camera installed at the entrance of the church recalls security issues of the past and "what if" scenarios of the future.[420]

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[418] *See* "Politiques et religieux appellent au calme après des tensions entre sunnites et chiites" [Politicians and religious leaders are calling for calm after tensions between Sunni and Shiʿa], *L'Orient-Le Jour*, June 6, 2020, https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1220891/religieux-et-politiques-appellent-au-calme-apres-des-tensions-entre-sunnites-et-chiites.html; Zeina Antonios, " À Corniche Mazraʿa, la rue sunnite craint d'être devenue 'la plus faible'" [In Corniche Mazraʿa, the Sunni street fears it has become 'the weakest'], *L'Orient-Le Jour,* December 21, 2019, https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1199528/a-corniche-mazraa-la-rue-sunnite-craint-detre-devenue-la-plus-faible-.html.

[419] Hermez, *War is Coming*, 39. This archetype references two political coalitions formed in 2005, as a reaction to the assassination of Sunni Prime Minister Rafic al-Hariri. March 8 includes mostly Shiʿa and their Christian allies, while March 14 is mainly supported by Sunni and their Christian allies. The March 8-March 14 is often one of the go-to interpretation frames when clashes erupt between residents of Tariq el-Jdideh and Mazraʿa.

[420] "Tawqif lubnani wa suri iʿtadaya ʿala kanisat Mar Mikhail bi-mahallat al-Mazraʿa" [The arrest of a Lebanese and a Syrian who attacked Mar Mikhail Church in the Mazraʿa area], *Al-Joumhouria*, April 3, 2013, www.aljoumhouria.com/ar/news/64888.

**Figure 7** – 4.1. Mar Mikhail and Jubrail Church in Mazraʿa. July 15, 2020. Photo by author.

Under the pastoral guidance of abuna Boulos Wehbe, the parish includes close to 200 families, who mostly live in Mazraʿa, on the real estate properties owned by the church under the title of *waqf*, or inalienable endowments. They are the lasting members of a Christian majority who used to inhabit the Mazraʿa sector up until the mid-1970s. The economic and cultural reforms of the 1950s and 1960s, coupled with the state-building initiatives undertaken during the Fuʾad Shihab presidency (1958–1964), translated into rapid urbanization and higher mobility from rural to urban areas, but also within cities.[421] Within this context,

> . . . Muslims from Tarik al-Jdide and elsewhere began to cross the road [Mazraa Road] to live with the Christians in Mazraa. . . . By the mid-1970s, the Mazraa sector had been transformed from a predominantly Christian space into a mixed space comprising a Sunni and Shiite majority and a Christian minority; this transformation occurred most notably at the outbreak of the civil war.[422]

The outbreak of the civil war marked a deepening of sectarian ideologies, accelerated the fragmentation of urban spaces along politico-sectarian lines, and spurred both temporary and permanent demographic dislocations. As Sunni and Shiʿa were moving in Mazraʿa, Rum were moving out to Christian-dominated areas like the Matn region.

[421] Cammett, *Compassionate Communalism*, 42–44. For a historical overview of the Shiʿi community in Lebanon, *see* Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern*, 72–75. *See also* El-Khazen, "The Uneven Communal Development of Lebanese Society," chap. 3 in *The Breakdown of the State in Lebanon.*
[422] Hafeda, *Negotiating Conflict in Lebanon*, 72.

Yet, the current urban toponymy of Mazraʿa signposts the historical presence of Christians in the area. A scan of administrative maps of Beirut at different stages in its urban development, particularly after the 1943 Lebanese independence, showed streets in the area named after prominent Christian families like Saliba, Zreik, and Majdalani.[423] One street bears the name of Gregory IV (Haddad), the well-known Rum Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch and All the East from 1906 to 1928. The church itself cannot be omitted; it has been a constant landmark in city maps and plans stretching before the 1900s.[424] The church – as stone and as community – stood witness to the gradual development of Mazraʿa into an extensive zone of development at the beginning of the 1960s and a densely populated area in the late 1970s. However, these urban representations that announce past Christian presence are incongruous with the current spatial practices and lived experiences of Rum residing in Mazraʿa. The disjuncture between their historical dominance and their current feeble numbers in the area is present in the social collective of the community, and the frustrations, hopes, and sensorial sensibilities of its members. Together, these nourish a discursive thread of Christians coming back to the area. Seen as both a means and an end in itself, members of the community argue for this return from the standpoint of a past where their community dominated the area; even as their present situation is characterized by low population density, reduced parish activity, and precarious everyday lives. Yet, what does it mean for Christians to come back to Mazraʿa? Who are the Christians expected to return? What past representations and future narratives are invoked? What sensory impressions and affects animate this return?

In answering these questions, I challenge a smooth linear pattern of past-present-future, while adopting a frame of overlapping temporalities that come to reflect how Rum in Mazraʿa "live through and understand their existence in time, how they carry the past into the present and future."[425] Fragmented memories of a past where Mazraʿa was Christian reposition the present as a space of possibilities in reclaiming a lost future. By working across multiple tenses, I also underline the tension inherent in the co-existence of an irretrievable future and other potential

[423] I consulted maps and plans of Beirut from 1936 (Bureau Topographique des Troupes Françaises du Levant), 1940 (Bureau Topographique des Troupes du Levant), 1961 (Beyrouth, Series K921, Army Map Service, Corps of Engineers, U.S. Army), 1978 (Bayrūt, Series K921, Defense Mapping Agency, U.S.), and 2021 (Google maps)
[424] The church is mentioned in an inventory of Rum Orthodox churches in ʿAbd al-Basit al-Unsi, *Dalil Bayrut wa taqwim al-Iqbal li-sanat 1327* [Guide to Beirut and al-Iqbal Almanac for the Year 1327 [1909 in the Gregorian calendar]] (Beirut: Matbaʿat Jaridat al-Iqbal [Printing Press of al-Iqbal Newspaper], 1327[1909]), 107.
[425] Boylston, *The Stranger at the Feast*, 72–73.

futures, together with the conditions of their possibility.[426] As remnants of the past resurface in the present lives of my interlocutors, the nostalgia for what Mazraʿa used to be carries with it a future lost. Yet, nostalgia here is not a romantic sensibility for what was lived in the past, but rather an incentive pointing at what is *no longer* lived in the present. This "*no longer*" suggests a temporal intersection between past presence and present absence, translating into narratives and experiences of loss.[427] At the same time, it acts as a driving force for imagining and working towards activating a future where Christians return to the area. Thus, the lives of Rum in Mazraʿa unfold in overlapping temporalities, where memories of the past aliment future hopes, but also foment present frustrations and fears. Narratives of the past and visions of the future merge into affects and practices grounded in the sensorial and material stimuli of the area. In turn, these translate into new narratives that look to the past for a place in the future.[428]

Currently, the presence of Rum in Mazraʿa disappears between the drama of Sunni-Shiʿa clashes. Yet, their representation as collateral victims in the struggle for influence in the area does not automatically imply that this community lacks agentive power. A look at the distribution of waqf properties owned by the Rum Orthodox Church in Beirut reveals that Mar Mikhail and Jubrail Church has the second largest Orthodox endowment (waqf) in Beirut. Starting from this seeming paradox, this chapter investigates the dynamic relation between the administrative practices of the waqf, the social fabric of the Rum community in Mazraʿa, and the lived experiences of parish members. These administrative and social dimensions inform and are informed by people's subjectivities as members of the Rum Orthodox community, grounded in the precarious reality of urban life in Mazraʿa and, more generally, in Beirut.

Moreover, in line with my aim of accounting for the structural dimension of Orthodoxy as a way of living (*tariqat ʿaish*), this chapter's analytical and methodological framework revolves around the waqf as a social and urban structure. Through its urban and material infrastructure, as well as its connections to the church, the waqf has framed lived experiences and spatial practices of Rum in Mazraʿa. While the waqf has played a role in writing the history

[426] Sarah Pink, Yoko Akama, and Annie Fergusson, "Researching Future as an Alterity of the Present," in *Anthropologies and Futures. Researching Emerging and Uncertain Worlds*, ed. Juan Francisco Salazar et al. (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), 133–50.
[427] Geneviève Zubrzycki, "The Politics of Jewish Absence in Contemporary Poland," *Journal of Contemporary History* 52, no. 2 (2017): 251, https://www.jstor.org/stable/44504015.
[428] This approach finds inspiration in the concept of "historicity," developed by Eric Hirsch and Charles Stewart in "Introduction: Ethnographies of Historicity," *History and Anthropology* 16, no. 3 (2005): 261–74.

and potential futures of this Christian community, its social identity has been produced and reproduced by the community and the social life of the local church. In this sense, I adopt a relational approach where I look "at the way people live lives of which religious beliefs and practices constitute a part."[429] The case of the Rum in Mazraʿa exemplifies how religious narratives blend into sectarian practices, while local allegiances coexist with kinship networks and parish structures. Also, while real estate strategies around the waqf were influenced by sectarian ideologies, these did not preclude charitable grounds or practices of real-estate speculation.

This chapter draws from fieldwork carried out in Mazraʿa between 2019 and the end of 2021. During this period, I actively participated in the liturgical and social activities of the Mar Mikhail and Jubrail parish, while carefully navigating between patchworked research, ethical commitments, and safety protocols. From in-person interactions during home visits and Sunday gatherings to virtual communication via WhatsApp and online prayers due to pandemic-related restrictions, this chapter brings together stories gathered in the reception area (*salun*) of the church, interviews with members of the parish, and recurrent discussions with members who became invested in my research. My interlocutors were Rum Orthodox, active members of the parish, and largely from lower- and middle-class backgrounds. Most of them were residents of Mazraʿa and lived on the waqf, while some had grown up in the area and moved to other parts of Beirut. What brought them together was their affiliation to the Mar Mikhail and Jubrail Church. To these ethnographic sources, I added historical maps and transect walks, in the attempt to understand the administrative structure of Mazraʿa and the location of the waqf within the broader urban landscape. The transect walks entailed structured walks around the waqf real estate, accompanied by a member of the Rum community in Mazraʿa. During these walks, I interacted with local residents and shop owners, and mapped the urban distribution of the religious endowments. This approach facilitated a critical dialogue between panoptic representations of the sector and the micro-sphere of quotidian negotiations of space and movement in its urban environment.[430]

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[429] Schielke and Debevec, introduction to *Ordinary Lives and Grand Schemes*, 1.

[430] Here it is worth mentioning that the confessional and political composition of Mazraʿa had a significant impact on my mobility and data collection methods. The church was located in an area under the control and surveillance of Amal. Also, the church had waqf properties close to the childhood house of Nabih Berri and along Corniche el-Mazraʿa, which served as an informal Sunni-Shiʿi border. Consequently, I seldom took photos outside the perimeter

**The Stories Bob Tells**

I could feel the sweltering heat of another humid day in Beirut. Next, the ice-cold air of the AC hit my overheated body as I entered the office of the waqf administration, located in an annex of the church in Mazraʿa. I immediately spotted Assaad, the young acolyte of abuna Boulos who also worked for the waqf. He had offered to introduce me to Bob (short for Ibrahim), who was one of the administrators of this office. Among those present in the office, all men, it was impossible to miss Bob. Part of the Majdalani family, with kinship ties anchored in the local history of the area, Bob was tall, active, and reactive to several discussion threads in the room. His mere presence called for attention. He worked from morning to 2 p.m. for the waqf administration, which left him room for his other business endeavors. These included "Bob Technology," a mobile store in a space rented in one of the waqf buildings in Mazraʿa. As the only woman in the office, I had to keep up with the rolling jokes in Arabic to assert my presence. I was moderately successful, yet I came recommended by abuna and by my active presence in the parish. These introductions granted me a certain leeway to shape jokes into questions.

I asked Bob if I could see a map of the property endowments in Mazraʿa. Bob laughed and replied that the previous administration dealt with everything in pen and paper, relying predominately on property deeds, building plans, and local knowledge. His half-joked reply mirrored a previous complaint made by an architect working for the Rum Orthodox Archdiocese of Beirut, who expressed his frustration at the lack of digitizing practices across ecclesiastical institutions. In reply to my insistent questions and my rather puzzled demeanor, Bob took a pen and piece of paper and, without noticing the implicit irony, started drawing a toponymic map of the waqf buildings in Mazraʿa. In clumsy lines, he sketched the commercial and residential spaces of the Mar Mikhail and Jubrail waqf, using the church as a point of reference. Unlike representations of the Mazraʿa district as a Sunni-Shiʿa turf, Bob engaged in a confessionalized representation of space where the urban landscape marked the demographic distribution of Rum in Mazraʿa.

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of the church and, on the rare occasions I did, it was primarily with my mobile phone and very rarely with my camera. I primarily used a photo camera during my transect walk around the waqf real estate with Assaad on July 15, 2020. My gender and my companion acted as buffers, sparing me from scrutiny or interrogation.

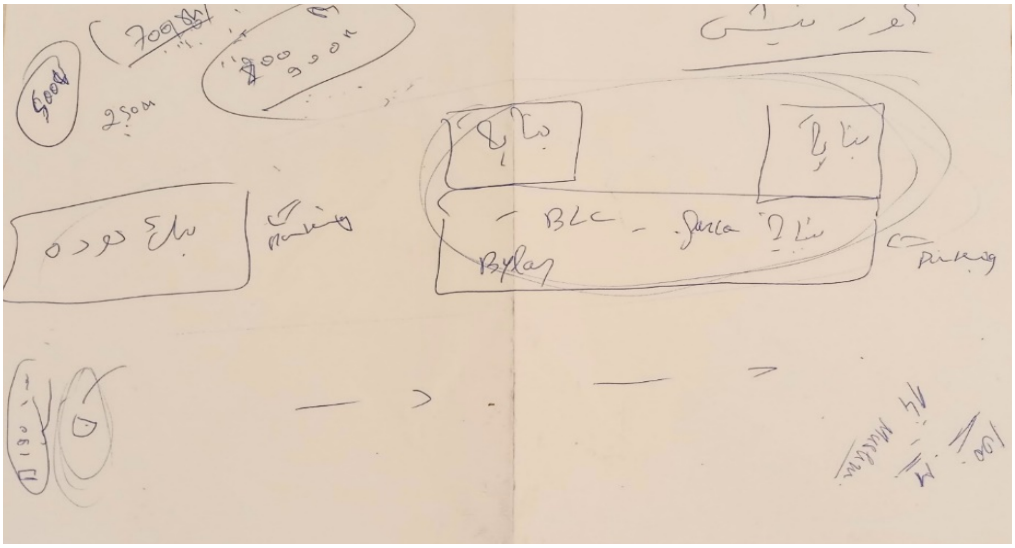

**Figure 8** – 4.2. Bob's sketch of the waqf buildings in Corniche el-Mazraʿa. July 3, 2020.

This map is a partial representation of the waqf as it includes only the real estate properties in Corniche el-Mazraʿa. It is also partial because it crops the endowed assets from the urban environment of the area. It excludes most urban landmarks and their potential to guide the viewer in understanding where this crop fits in the larger map of Mazraʿa. Instead, directional arrows sit next to words in Arabic and English that reference residential buildings and businesses. The former are simply referred to as *binaya* (building)/ *binayat* (buildings), while different sums of money are jotted down in the upper left corner. Beyond this superficiality of pen strokes lies an excess of meaning that the viewer must look for, inquire about, and have knowledge of. This excess stems from the authority of the author (Bob), the sociality that the map conceals, and the administrative practices that surface in the discursive surround of the sketch. "Building" does not index only a regular residential property in Mazraʿa, but one that is owned by the Rum waqf. In this instantiation, it is identifiable through the names of Christian families who rent and live there. It becomes meaningful through the social networks that stretch across the church parish and the Orthodox community in Mazraʿa. The social fabric of this community is structured along a few traditional, local families. This means that most of them know each other and many are related by kin or alliance. Learning these intricate family ties was essential for me in establishing relations, developing contacts, and being immersed in the life of the parish. In Bob's words, "This is the complex where Youmna, Jad, and Claude live." I am expected to know who these people are since they are members of the church community.

Conversely, Bob looked at the commercial spaces in the buildings owned by the waqf through a market-driven lens, where they became profitable assets identifiable by the companies and businesses that rent them. Audi, BLC, and Byblos are banks that have branches in the area, while Fairco is a stationery store often used as reference point when asking and giving directions.

Then, there are the sums of money jumbled together in a corner, which allude to the renting practices of the waqf management and their discursive authorization. As Bob drew his map to a close, I inquired about those who rented on the waqf. Proudly, he replied that the residential apartments from Corniche el-Mazraʿa were predominantly rented by Muslims, yet that was gradually changing due to practices implemented since his joining the office in 2017. Aiming to create incentives for Rum to rent on the waqf, the administration has implemented practices of lowering the rent below the market rate for Christians and raising the rent at market-level for Muslims. "For the Rum, if it was 500$, for example, we lowered it to $250 or $300, while for the Muslims, if it was $700, we raised it to $800 or $900."[431] According to Bob, this incentivized Muslims to move out and Rum to move in. "From approximately 100 Muslim families in Corniche el-Mazraʿa, about fourteen are left renting now." Neither Bob nor Assaad shied away in declaring that the Rum in Mazraʿa should be given priority on the waqf. "Between a Muslim and an Orthodox? Of course, an Orthodox. Between an Orthodox from Mazraʿa and one outside Mazraʿa? Mazraʿa of course. Locals of Mazraʿa come first (*wled el-mantaqa awwal shi*)." Bob continued to argue that Rum were coming back to rent in the area and this was how it should be. The waqf was for the benefit of the Orthodox since it came to be through donations given to the Mazraʿa church by its members.

Challenging these strategies based on sectarian and local allegiances, I asked him if the same principle applied to the commercial space. "No," replied Bob cunningly. The leasing of these spaces was left to the whims of market competition, most of the time resulting in the majority of tenants being Muslims. Not only because they were majoritarian in the area, but also because they could afford it. Surprised, I asked what the rationale was for this seemingly clear-cut difference. "We need the money to cover for the low rents of Rum and for building maintenance. Where should the money come from? Muslims pay for it. Now you are going to write about this in your thesis," replied Bob as he began to laugh. In the same cheerful atmosphere, he continued by asking me,

[431] Bob, discussion with the author, July 3, 2020, office of the waqf administration, Mazraʿa.

"Are you truly a Christian since you seem to defend Muslims?" asks Bob.

"I am rather ecumenical, like abuna Boulos," I reply.

"Do not tell him this as Bob does not like me for the same reason. I also resemble abuna," intervenes Assaad.

"I am ecumenical, but I do not know if you are a zealous (*metaʿassib*) Orthodox, a salesman, or a heretic," I gleefully reply to Bob.

"All three of them!" Bob and Assaad reply in unison, laughing.

## The Waqf of Mar Mikhail and Jubrail for the Rum Orthodox


**Figure 9** – 4.3. Section of the waqf. Corniche el-Mazraʿa. July 15, 2020. Photo by author.

Waqf is an Islamic philanthropic institution with a long and complex history that stretches from pre-modern Islamic societies to the present day. At the core, the foundation of a waqf implies that the founder (*waqif*) transfers the ownership of her assets (e.g., land, buildings, infrastructure, money) to God, to be used for charitable purposes in perpetuity.[432] Even though defined by Islamic law as a virtuous act that brings rewards in the afterlife and closeness to God (*qurba*), waqfs have been established for practical considerations as well. Exemption from taxes, avoiding property fragmentation through inheritance, securing private assets for offspring, or prestige are just a few examples of the here-and-now reasons that illustrate the dynamic nature of

[432] Nada Moumtaz, *God's Property: Islam, Charity, and the Modern State* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2021), 1.

waqfs.[433] Even though widely known as Islamic philanthropy, this practice has had Christian and Jewish manifestations. For instance, in nineteenth century Ottoman Beirut, more than half of the waqf foundations were by non-Muslims.[434] Their creation was conditioned by a pious character that fitted the dominant Islamic jurisprudence.[435] Expressions of this piety included acts of charity that benefited the poor, the orphans, or the widows, yet excluded the funding of clergy or places of worship.[436]

While the practice of charitable endowment withstood across centuries and cut across religious traditions, its meanings varied and depended on the larger socio-political and economic structures that it was part of. Working on the Sunni waqf in Lebanon, Nada Moumtaz argues that the (re)conceptualization of the contemporary waqf is rooted in the emergence of the modern state, which she traces back to the Ottoman empire and its nineteenth century modernizing reforms. This paradigmatic shift altered understandings of state, law, religion, and property, resulting in waqfs being less about the afterlives of subjects and more about assets contributing to national wealth and economic progress.[437] Once with the fall of the empire and the establishment of the French mandate after World War I, the colonial aspirations of creating a "civil state" worked towards a secularization of the waqfs and their conversion into real estate assets.[438] Moumtaz further states that these new legal and economic regimes translated into an absence of waqf foundations stretching to the late 1980s. Then, contemporary Beirut registered a revival of the waqf reconfigured within the logic of non-profit organizations and legally tied to a

[433] Daisuke Igarashi, "The Waqf-Endowment Strategy of a Mamluk Military Man: The Contexts, Motives, and Purposes of the Endowments of Qijmās al-Isḥāqī (d. 1487)," *Bulletin of SOAS* 82, no. 1 (2019): 25–27, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0041977X18001519; Itamar Katz and Ruth Kark, "The Church and Landed Property: The Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem," *Middle Eastern Studies* 43, no. 3 (2007): 392, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4284551.
[434] *See* Aurore Adada, "Réseaux Socioculturels et Économiques à Beyrouth Ottoman (1843-1909) à Travers Les Waqfs" [Socio-cultural and economic networks in Ottoman Beirut (1843–1909) through waqf documents] (PhD diss., Marseille, Université de Provence, 2009), 138–40, quoted in Nada Moumtaz, "Late Ottoman Beiruti Waqfs: Closeness to God (Qurba) and Charity for the Family," *Islamic Law Blog,* April 15, 2021, https://islamiclaw.blog/2021/04/15/late-ottoman-beiruti-waqfs-closeness-to-god-qurba-and-charity-for-the-family/.
[435] *See* Richard Van Leeuwen, *Waqfs and Urban Structures: The Case of Ottoman Damascus* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 42; Souad Abou el-Rousse Slim, "The Greek Orthodox Waqf in Lebanon during the Ottoman Period" (PhD diss., Sorbonne IV-Paris, 1984); Sabine Mohasseb Saliba, ed., *Les Fondations pieuses waqfs chez les chrétiens et les juifs, du moyen âge à nos jours* [Pious endowments waqfs among Christians and Jews, from the Middle Ages to the present day] (Paris: Geuthner, 2016).
[436] Muh. Muhammad Amin, "Un acte de fondation de waqf par une Chrétienne (Xe siècle h., XVIe s. chr.)" [An Endowment Deed by a Christian Woman (10th century AH, 16th century CE)], *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 18, no. 1 (1975): 43–44, https://doi.org/10.1163/156852075X00029.
[437] Moumtaz, introduction to *God's Property*.
[438] Moumtaz, *God's Property*, "Waqf, A Non-Definition."

sectarian discourse as religious properties of various sects (*taʾifa*s).[439] Even though Moumtaz's work focuses on the Sunni waqf in Beirut, her insightful historical and ethnographic analysis applies, to a large extent, to the waqf of the Rum Orthodox. Given the scarcity of research, particularly anthropological, on this topic in the post-Ottoman period, her conceptual and historical genealogies around this institution allow me to better contextualize how Rum residing in Mazraʿa understand and relate to the waqf.

The waqf of Mar Mikhail and Jubrail is the second largest in terms of Rum property owned as endowment in Beirut, preceded only by the waqf of Mar Elias Btina, a church (former monastery erected in late nineteenth century) in a district neighboring Mazraʿa. The Seat of the Archdiocese of Beirut, represented by the Metropolitan in office – currently Elias Audeh – is the owner of the endowed assets. The Metropolitan delegated the administration of the waqf of Mar Mikhail and Jubrail to a board of trustees (*majlis al-umanaʾ*), currently headed by the Rum Orthodox ex-deputy Atef Majdalani. The waqf bought, built and accumulated several real estate properties across the years, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, most of which are revenue-bearing assets. Among these are a medium-sized parking lot, several plots of land, residential buildings, and commercial spaces. The nature and functional diversity of these endowments are hinted at in Bob's map and corroborated by administrative information from the parcel inventory of the waqf. To these sources, I add the photographic data collected during my urban mapping with Assaad. However, this diversity of assets is not reflected in the urban distribution of the real estate. Most of the times that I was invited for lunch or coffee in the homes of my close interlocutors, I would end up in the same few buildings. They were neighbors and parish members renting from the waqf. This is mainly because the endowed properties are aggregated in two main clusters: around the Mazraʿa church and along the Corniche el-Mazraʿa avenue.

How is it that a church whose parish is low in numbers owns the second largest property endowment, in a predominantly Muslim area? The answer to this question requires a historical lens on the urban and demographic development of Beirut in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. The city gradually expanded starting from the city center (located by the Mediterranean Sea in the north) towards the south, east, and west. New semi-rural suburbs emerged, characterized by low population density, merchant and peasant residents, and wide land estates used for agriculture or quarrying. This urban expansion followed kinship patters of

[439] Moumtaz, *God's Property*, "Waqf, A Non-Definition."

settlement, with entire families occupying large plots of land.[440] Mazraʿa was one of these quarters. It was also known as "*hayy al-dabsh*" (quarter of rubblestone), since stonemasonry was a widespread occupation in the area.[441] Moreover, the increase in population density and urban activity led to the fragmentation of waqf estates and revenues in the old city. As a consequence, the attention shifted to the extramural endowments, consisting mostly of large plots of rural estates and arable land. Parts of these were granted by the Rum Metropolitan as waqfs for the development of institutions that would cater to and serve the new growing Christian communities in semi-rural suburbs like Mazraʿa.[442] These suburban landscapes were described in *Yawmiyyat Tajir Beiruti* (*Days of a Beiruti Merchant*), a published biography of a local resident of Mazraʿa named Nicolas Elia Habib. In recalling his upbringing in the area during the 1940s and 1950s, he writes,

> At that time, the Mazraʿa area was the ideal and safe place for children to grow up in the bosom of nature (*ahdan al-tabiʿa*). As soon as morning came, children would rush outside to play in the gardens, by themselves and in groups. All their games were inspired by nature and earth. At that time, we did not know toys that came from factories. Among these games was "the hole of the kernel of the apricot fruit," (*jurat ʿajwat thamarat al-mushmush*) fruits that were found in abundance in these gardens . . .[443]

Today, the buildings owned by the waqf are socially and administratively referred to as *bineyet el-waqf* (the buildings of the waqf). In public administrative terminology, the term references an address. For example, the Mazraʿa branch of Bank Audi is located in "Wakf Al Roum Center, Corniche el-Mazraʿa, Beirut." Conversely, the term cannot escape its confessional imprint since most of my Rum interlocutors live and rent in these buildings.[444] This dynamic duality is imprinted on one of the imposing buildings in Corniche el-Mazraʿa. Large Arabic golden letters transliterated as "Wakf Al Roum Center" are attached above its side entrance. This confessional imprint is challenged in visibility by an equally large logo of Bank Audi, which rents part of the building. Together, these material symbols make a synecdoche for the negotiated administration and representation of the waqf as a revenue-bearing object, as a charity

[440] Samir Kassir, *Beirut*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 224–25.
[441] Abou el-Rousse Slim, "The Greek Orthodox Waqf," 156–59.
[442] Abou el-Rousse Slim, "The Greek Orthodox Waqf," 157.
[443] Nicolas Elia Habib, *Yawmiyyat Tajir Beiruti* [Days of a Beiruti Merchant] (Beirut: Dar Nelson, 2012), 19.
[444] According to the data provided by the waqf administration, by the middle of 2020, there were approximately 100 Christian and 20 Muslim families that lived in residential spaces on the waqf, while 11 Christians and 60 Muslims leased commercial spaces.

institution, and as ground for sectarian practices. In all these instantiations, the waqf influences the lives (and afterlives) of the Rum community in Mazraʿa.

**Renting from the Waqf – Ambiguities and Intersections**

> Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's,
> and to God the things that are God's.
> Mark 12:17

The administrative practices of the waqf operate according to a constitutive ambiguity that shifts between sectarian, socio-religious, and market-driven significations. First, the waqf is a tool of asserting presence on the real estate market in Mazraʿa, where land and buildings are monetized as profit-yielding assets. Second, the urban materiality of the waqf grounds sectarian practices of renting that follow a socio-spatial logic aimed at changing the confessional configuration of the neighborhood. These practices are endorsed by visions of the waqf as communal heritage and an incentive for Christians to come back to the area. In turn, these demographic changes would translate into a revival of the parish and a change in the everyday life of Christians in Mazraʿa. In these two cases, the waqf functions as a means for the Rum community to engage in neighborhood making at a level where their minority status would have excluded them. Third, the waqf is a social safety net for many Rum residing in Mazraʿa, providing living facilitates and securing the resources for their maintenance and subsidization.[445] In the absence of a welfare state and given the violence of the crises affecting present-day Lebanon, the waqf reverts to its initial scope of charity and functions as a source of securing affordable and safe housing. These three significations are not mutually exclusive, but rather reflective of the multilayered relations between the administration of the waqf, the church parish, and the hopes, expectations, and needs of its members.

My interlocutors would often remind me that Mazraʿa once belonged to the Rum as they were once majoritarian in the area. They would reminisce of a past before the civil war, characterized by somewhat idyllic neighborly relations. The interactions between Muslims and Christians were depicted as smooth, with residents rarely being aware of each other's confessional allegiance. By contrast, the reality that they currently inhabit is "what people are

[445] *See also* Randi Deguilhem, "The Waqf in the City," in *The City in the Islamic World*, ed. Salma Khadra Jayyusi et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 949.

left with: [ . . . ] the material and social afterlife of structures, sensibilities, and things."[446] For many, this reality is tied to a discourse of Muslim "others" invading the spaces of Christians up to the point where the presence of the latter is obsolete.[447] In the case of Rum in Mazraʿa, their memories and experiences of living in the area nourished strategies on the waqf and contributed to their understanding of the waqf's role in shaping the urban and confessional makeup of the area. These narratives were expressive and spatially productive as they shaped practices on the waqf and thus urban space. They authorized and reinforced sect-centered activities where particular renters were privileged or discouraged because of their sect affiliation. In other words, they capitalized on time to claim space, arguing for a historicized legitimacy of presence to reclaim Mazraʿa.

During the civil war and late into the post-war period, the properties owned by the waqf were left in disarray, empty, or rented to Muslims, who had become majoritarian in the area. Driven by a vision to bring back Rum Orthodox in the area, the administration is actively using the waqf as an asset geared towards increasing the percentage of Christians living in Mazraʿa. To this aim, strategies are designed to raise the rent for Muslims as an incentive to leave, and to lower the rents for Christians as an incentive to move in. The endowed residential buildings function here as a material mediator for a series of sect-based exclusionary practices where not only are Rum privileged over Muslims, but Muslims are actively encouraged to cancel their renting contracts since they may not be able to pay. During my urban mapping, I got the chance to test the effectiveness of these strategies in one residential and commercial complex in Corniche el-Mazraʿa. Part of the "Wakf Al Roum Center," this complex was taken care of by Ali, a Syrian Muslim who had been working as a *natur* (caretaker) for the past twenty-five years. Inside the building, next to a faded marble plaque listing the names of those who donated for its construction in 1974, I asked Ali if Christians had been renting here for a long time. He replied that most of the residents used to be Muslim in the past. Yet, the confessional balance started changing around three years ago, when more and more Christians came to rent. As I inquire about the reasons for this change, Ali stated that the waqf administration decided to raise the rent

[446] Ann L. Stoler, "Imperial Debris: Reflections on Ruins and Ruination," *Cultural Anthropology* 23, no. 2 (2008): 194, http://www.jstor.org/stable/20484502.

[447] A phrase that my interlocutors would use in our daily conversations in relation to what they perceived as the encroachment of Muslims was "*akaluna.*" The literal translation is "they ate us," but the expression is a vivid and almost visceral way of saying that Muslims have overpowered/outnumbered/subdued Christians in Lebanon.

for Muslims. Not being able to pay, they left and made room for Christians who were originally from the area.[448]

Rental procedures for commercial spaces seem not to follow this sectarian line. Bob framed these spaces within a capitalist market logic, where the highest bidder wins. In this case, the waqf is an asset partaking in the accumulation of profit from the competitive real estate market. However, this divide is not as clear-cut as it appears to be, with the economic and sectarian fusing together. The revenue from these commercial spaces is a source of funding for maintenance expenses and for the discounts enjoyed by Christians. In this case, market-driven decisions come to reinforce the logic of political-religious communities or sects (*taʾifa*s) in Lebanon. In discursive and institutional frames, the waqf comes to represent the heritage of the Rum community as a whole, meant to provide the material basis for its sustenance and growth.[449] It is no longer the result of individual endeavors and interests, but rather the collective heritage of the Rum sect as "one 'community' among others that make up the national body politic and that are defined by the civil state."[450]

An example where the functionality of the endowed properties reflects the fusion of the economic and the sectarian is the medium-sized parking lot in front of the church. With few parking spaces in the area and in Beirut in general, this parking is a "breath of fresh *space*" for the crammed streets and congested traffic in Mazraʿa. The waqf administration has a steady income stream from renting the land to a Shiʿi developer who manages the parking business. Yet, when entering the car park, the simple phrase "*jeyeh ʿal-kniseh*" (I come to church) spares one the trouble of paying the parking fee. Another example is the sports club facing the parking lot and named the Club of Cooperation (*nadi al-taʿadud*). Displayed on the façade of the building, next to posters of Lebanese heritage that read "Lebanon – A Part of Heaven," are glimpses of the history and achievements of the club. The club was founded in the 1940s by the *jamʿiyyat al-taʿadud al-khairiyya* (Charitable Organization for Cooperation), under the

[448] It is worth mentioning that the waqf has residential spaces that are not rented at all. Whether it is because of poor administration, lack of renters—Christian or Muslim—or the unwillingness of Christians to come and live in Mazraʿa, the Christian-Muslim zero game is not always applicable.
[449] Moumtaz, *God's Property*, 227–30. Moumtaz argues that this association between waqf and various legally defined sects is a trend that emerged once with the establishment of the French mandate in Lebanon and the ensuing legal definitions of the national body politic as the sum of political-religious communities or sects (*taʾifa*s). Yet, this sum rarely results in a whole. It rather replicates a collective sectarian logic where each sect caters to the needs of the community it represents, sometimes in the benefit of some and the detriment of others.
[450] Moumtaz, *God's Property*, 227.

leadership of Michel Tadros. Built on the land of the waqf, the sports club has developed into a private business that pays rent to the endowment administration. At the same time, it is a source of employment for the Rum community in Mazraʿa since access to jobs in this center is influenced by confession and locality.

Besides their functionality, *bineyet el-waqf* are also sites of sensory experience, where memories, social relations, and affects are negotiated through the daily interactions with the built-in environment of Mazraʿa.[451] Here, the waqf as a lived social space mirrors a series of sensory impressions tied to class, sect, and locality. Youmna lived with her mother in a rented apartment in one of the endowed buildings in Corniche el-Mazraʿa. They had moved to Mazraʿa from Verdun, a mostly Sunni upper middle-class area, since they could no longer afford to rent there. As we chatted over coffee, Youmna's mother started complaining about her inability to sleep because of the constant noise outside. "Every time you hear 'bum-bum,' a couple of seconds after, you hear 'Mohammaaad!'"[452] As an onomatopoeia, "bum-bum" suggests noise (*dajjeh*), defined as sounds that disturb and intrude, sounds that are unwanted and inappropriate, and sounds that index the presence of Muslim "others."[453] Grounded in the soundscape of Mazraʿa, this presence is perceived as intrusive, sensorially dominating the area and breaching the borders of private space. Here, "Mohammad" is more than a proper name; it is a confessional idiom used to underscore a lack of social propriety connected to class and education. For Youmna's mother, it is not only about Mohammad being Muslim, but also about him being a Muslim from Mazraʿa. While Verdun and Mazraʿa are mostly Muslim-inhabited areas, they are differentiated by the prevailing social status of the residents. In turn, these perceived socio-economic differences translate into lived experiences. Living in upper middle-class Verdun felt peaceful and uneventful for Youmna and her mother, while living in lower- and middle-class areas like Mazraʿa is uncomfortable. Furthermore, the power of this story goes beyond its particularities. In this context, it is not only about one loud voice yelling at Mohammad, but also

[451] *See* Kevin E.Y. Low, "The Sensuous City: Sensory Methodologies in Urban Ethnographic Research," *Ethnography* 16, no.3 (2015): 295–312, https://doi.org/10.1177/1466138114552938.
[452] Youmna and her mother, interview by author, December 4, 2019, private home in Corniche el-Mazraʿa.
[453] Ziad Fahmy, *Street Sounds: Listening to Everyday Life in Modern Egypt* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020), 7–9.

about the recurrence of these acoustic practices, whose rhythms coalesce into noise. Noise translates into discursive markers of internalized sectarian and classist distinction.[454]

Youmna's story illustrates how the senses act as media for expressing "feelings of likes and dislikes in us [when] evaluating social others."[455] It also acts a reminder that proximity does not always generate social cohesion, but rather the opposite. The physical proximity of the sectarian "other" is experienced as a sensorial "assault" that can lead to social alienation. The porous material borders of the waqf are infringed by the urban sonic surround of Mazraʿa. By contrast, the physical proximity of living on the waqf can contribute to the sustenance of social ties. Discussing on the benefits of Christians renting from the waqf and coming back to the area, Assaad referenced a residential building in the proximity of the church, inhabited only by Christian families. They visit and greet each other on celebrations like Easter or Christmas. They help each other. They stick together. In Assaad's words, these interactions create *jaw el-ʿaʾileh,*[456] which can be loosely translated as a familial atmosphere and a feeling of familiarity.[457] This phrase comes to express a particular embodied and affective environment that is mediated by a dialectical relation between physical and social proximity. The former is facilitated by the waqf administration and its policies of privileging Christians, and particularly Rum from Mazraʿa. Also, a spatial dimension is added as the residential buildings are located in two urban clusters—namely, in Corniche el-Mazraʿa and around the church. The latter is mediated by the social networks developed through living on the waqf, being from Mazraʿa, and being part of the church parish. Moreover, *el-jaw* becomes meaningful at the blurred borders between locality and confession. The residents of these buildings are not only Rum, but also members of local families. They are tied through different family lineages and kinship structures. Thus, it is not only the confessional uniformity and residential proximity that come together to create a familial atmosphere, but also the kinship networks that ground residents in Mazraʿa.

Bob's words come back to mind at this point, "*wled el-mantaqa awwal shi*" (Locals of Mazraʿa come first). While the endowment stands for the Rum community as a whole, the case of Mazraʿa reveals a dimension that is overlooked in the associations between waqf and politico-

[454] These markers are also active within the larger Orthodox community of Beirut, with some Rum from Ashrafiyeh describing Rum from Mazraʿa as uneducated.
[455] Kevin E.Y. Low, "The Sensuous City," 298.
[456] For a closer look at the term "*el-jaw*," *see* the Section "Missing the Urban Textures of Mazraʿa."
[457] Assaad, interview by author, June 29, 2020, office of the parish priest in Mazraʿa, Beirut.

religious communities. Here, the confessional identity extends into localism, differentiating between Rum of Mazraʿa and outsider Rum. Localism encompasses a spatial factor (current or past residence in the area) and a social one (kinship networks). Priority in renting from the waqf is given to Rum in general, but more particularly to Rum who live or have lived in Mazraʿa , or whose families have a history in the area. The latter are the ones who are first and foremost expected to come back and repopulate the area by tracing their family roots and connections in the area. The former, even though part of the same confessional community, can be seen as *ghurabaʾ* (strangers) since they are not locals.

As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, the history of this Christian community in Mazraʿa is tied to the biographies of a few powerful local families. This strong connection between confession and family lineage grounded in the history of the area can be better expressed through a story that circulates in the community under different versions, but the same principle. This particular rendition was told to me by Patricia during a coffee break in the *mustawsaf* (socio-medical center) where she worked as a nurse and I volunteered. Imagine there is a celebration at church, such as Christmas. Papa Noël shares presents in the indoor courtyard of the church, decorated with images depicting the nativity scene. Children eager to receive their presents wait for their names to be called out from a list handed to Papa Noël. "Majdalani, Majdalani, Saliba, Majdalani, Majdalani, Smayra, Saliba, Saliba." First names would most of the time make the difference when the same surnames were shouted on repeat. This story, which brought a laughter of approval every time I used it as an elicitation technique in my interviews, references a community structured along a small number of local families and an extended network of family relations. In this case, renting from the waqf is encouraged not only because one is Rum, but also because he or she is part of these local family networks.[458]

**When It Is Not Only About Sectarianism**

A great deal has been written about the intricate relation between sect and space in post-war Lebanon, with anthropological research highlighting how territories are negotiated along sectarian lines through violent clashes, administrative strategies, or more mundane urban

[458] The aspect of locality is further developed in the Section "A 'Child of Mazraʿa' or a 'Child of the Church.'"

practices.[459] The conclusion of this scholarship that "land has a religion"[460] in Beirut marks the starting point when it comes to the waqf, which has an intrinsic confessional imprint. Yet, the administration of the endowments and the socio-economic practices that it entails complicate this initial label by adding several other layers of meaning. From economic and financial to sectarian and charitable, these representations come together to make and remake the space of the waqf. In turn, the functionality of the waqf and its representations within the socio-economic environment of Mazraʿa partially index the past and current presence of its Rum residents.

In her work on the history of the Rum Orthodox waqf in the Ottoman Empire, historian Souad Abou el-Rousse Slim mentions that the title deeds of established endowments had to include the phrase "for the poor," up until the nineteenth century. This charitable role was a central condition for establishing Christian endowments according to the Islamic law (the Hanafi School) of the Ottoman Empire.[461] By providing relief and support, endowments acted as a social safety net. This role of catering to the vulnerable, and especially the vulnerable Rum from Mazraʿa, was evident in my field, even though it was not devoid of a political dimension.

To better understand the role of the waqf as a charitable institution in the lives of my interlocutors, I must briefly contextualize their needs and expectations within the socio-economic and political situation of Lebanon after the civil war. Starting with the 1990s, neoliberal market policies have defined the privatized reconstruction project of war-torn Beirut. Real estate and housing development boomed under a free-market logic.[462] In parallel, the inefficiencies of a corrupt post-war state translated into structural precarity at the level of state policy, social services, and urban infrastructure. The shortcomings of the Lebanese government, coupled with the presence of a liberal market economy, led to significant price fluctuations and exorbitant expenses associated with renting or purchasing homes in Beirut.[463] The housing insecurities for

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[459] *See* Caroline R. Nagel, "Reconstructing Space, Re-creating Memory: Sectarian Politics and Urban Development in Post-War Beirut," *Political Geography* 21, no. 5 (2002): 717–25, https://doi.org/10.1016/S0962-6298(02)00017-3; Bou Akar, *For the War Yet to Come*; Ward Vloeberghs, *Architecture, Power and Religion in Lebanon: Rafiq Hariri and the Politics of Sacred Space in Beirut* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).
[460] Bou Akar, *For the War Yet to Come*, 29.
[461] Abou el-Rousse Slim, "The Greek Orthodox Waqf," 145.
[462] *See* Mona Fawaz, "Neoliberal Urbanity and the Right to the City: A View from Beirut's Periphery," *Development and Change* 40, no. 5 (2009): 827–52, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7660.2009.01585.x; Bruno Marot, "Developing Post-War Beirut (1990-2016): The Political Economy of 'Pegged Urbanization'" (PhD diss., McGill University, 2018), 444–75, https://escholarship.mcgill.ca/concern/theses/zg64tp32n.
[463] Marot, "Developing Post-War Beirut (1990–2016)," 444–75. For an ongoing project that aims to document gentrification, urbanization, displacement, and various forms of housing-related dispossession in Beirut and

most middle- and lower-income Beirutis have only increased once with the large-scale structural breakdowns impacting Lebanon starting with 2019. The devaluation of the Lebanese pound by more than 80%, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the August 4 explosion have further deepened multidimensional poverty, widened the wealth gap between rich and poor, and weakened an already vulnerable working class.[464] As a result, middle- and lower-income families, particularly younger generations, are finding it increasingly challenging to manage their living costs and cope with rising housing costs. This has made renting, let alone buying a house, increasingly unattainable within municipal Beirut.[465]

The ensuing uncertainties were a constant in the lives of my interlocutors. They were embodied and discursively expressed throughout the community in Mazraʿa and all-around Beirut. Discussions over coffee, after church, on the streets, and in private homes revolved around the skyrocketing prices of food and rent. We competed over stories of who saw or heard of the most outlandish increase. It brought them both comfort and anger, a feeling best described by the Lebanese bittersweet expression "*el-mudhik el-mubki*" (a loose translation being laughing-crying).[466] Time was riddled with contingency and growing uncertainty. Daily lives were set according to electricity schedules—"Is it the motor or the *dawleh* (state electricity)? None of them!"—and social interactions were at the mercy of instant adaptations.

These circumstances further highlighted the power of non-state actors in developing and strengthening grounded networks of services and assistance (i.e., food, education, cash, social capital, accommodation). Yet, the charity and good will showed by these actors did not come without reciprocating clauses, often under the form of different types of allegiance.[467] The Orthodox Church, with its endowment infrastructure, was one such actor. It is true that, in its instantiation as a charity institution, the waqf was no more than a palliative solution to larger structural causes of inequality and poverty. Also, its charitable practices often mobilized racial, sectarian, and communal markers of discrimination in offering help and support. At the same time, my interlocutors made pragmatic decisions in their strategies of living with the

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Lebanon, *see* the "Housing Monitor" project conducted by Public Works, a multidisciplinary research and design studio. For additional information, *see* https://publicworksstudio.com/en/housing-monitor/about/.

[464] Zbeeb, "Lebanon's Postwar Political Economy," in Karam and Majed, *The Lebanon Uprising of 2019*, 28–31.

[465] Tala Alaeddine et al., "Rental Market Trends Amid Crisis: Prices, Conditions and Threats," report by Public Works Studio, based on field survey conducted between March and April 2021, https://housingmonitor.org/en/content/rental-market-trends-amid-crisis.

[466] A more accurate grammatical translation would be "causing laughter-causing crying."

[467] Cammett, "Political Loyalty and Access to Welfare, " chap. 5 in *Compassionate Communalism.*

"incommodious daily reality of warring Beirut."[468] By renting from the waqf, they avoided dwelling outside the city and commuting through endless traffic jams every day. They were still residing within the borders of municipal Beirut, albeit Mazraʿa was not necessarily their preferred neighborhood to live in. They reduced the pressure and the stress of housing insecurities. Consider the arguments presented by Jad, an active member of the parish who leased from the waqf,

> R: Do you think there will be no Christians in the area in the future?
>
> J: No. I think there will always be Christians in the area as long as there are buildings of the waqf. Hopefully they will start building [new] ones soon, and the numbers of Christians will increase. *Inshallah* (God willing). And there are two aspects here. First, Christians in Mazraʿa are not rich. They go to the waqf because the rent is low. This is something *positif.* Also, renting from the waqf is not like renting from a private owner. The waqf is *malléable* (flexible) with you. This month you cannot pay, no problem. If there is war or, like now, Corona, and you are without work for a couple of months, then you do not pay rent for one or two months. This helps. Then, the rent is lower than usual and you still live in Beirut. All factors help. So, on the contrary, *inshallah*, if they continue building or if someone old dies, *la samah Allah* (God forbid), a young man with his family can come and take his place.[469]

Yet, the legitimizing arguments brought forth by Rum whom I interacted with were mixed and sometimes contradictory. Triggered by issues of hope, entitlement, security, and religious practice, they reflected the nuanced registers that characterized the lives of my interlocutors. Nicolas and his wife Patricia were two of my most consistent conversation partners and close friends in Lebanon. Nicolas grew up in the area, as part of the Smayra family, one of the local families of Mazraʿa. After spending several years abroad, they returned to Beirut to raise their two daughters in Mazraʿa. They lived in a residential building constructed by the Smayra family in the 60s. At that time, the building was one of the first "skyscrapers" in the area, with ten floors shared among the brothers of the family, including Nicolas' father. At the time of our interview, part of the building was inhabited by some of the Smayra family members, while the rest of the apartments were rented to both Christians and Muslims.

> P: In your opinion, if Muslims live on a building of the waqf, should I be paying the same as them? If I pay 200$, is it unfair for them to pay 300$?
>
> R: I think it is a bit unfair.

[468] Samira Aghancy, *Writing Beirut: Mappings of the City in the Modern Arabic Novel* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 61.
[469] Jad, interview by author, November 6, 2020, office of the parish priest in Mazraʿa.

P: I do not feel it is unfair. If I go to their places, they will do the same. These buildings were built for Christians to live in them. Why should I pay as much as they pay?

N: I would explain it from a different perspective. They pay the market price, while it is subsidized for Christians. So, if the rent market is $500, I take $500 from Muslims. From Christians, I take $200 because I am giving them incentive to stay. You can consider that the sect is subsidizing for Christians.

R: How can the sect subsidize?

N: Like governments, which can buy gas for $20 and sell it to the people for $10 and pay the difference. The church does the same. It asks you to pay $200, but there are other expenses that the church covers. However, it takes the full price from Muslims.

P: Yes, you do not increase above the market price. So they did not increase for Muslims, they just subsidized for Christians. Why would it subsidize for Muslims?

N: [ . . . ] I want to subsidize Christians. Why should I subsidize Muslims? [This is] how I see it. There are many poor families receiving housing, medication, and a monthly allowance. Plus, you have the expenses of the building maintenance. So you need income from somewhere. Also, many offices on the waqf are rented by Muslims; there is also Bank Audi, for example. Why do I have to subsidize them? From my perspective, it is fair. We are doing this to keep the Christians here. But if I put the rent for $1000, they might as well go and rent in Ashrafiyeh. Why should they stay here for $1000?

P: You have to give them something in return. It is not enough to tell them that they have their family, parish, and church here because their sense of security is more ensured by living in Ashrafiyeh. If I have the same price in Ashrafiyeh, I will go and live in Ashrafiyeh because all are Christians there. I am not afraid there. So how to incentivize? Only the money can incentivize a person to stay in a region where they are afraid to show their cross.

N: If you want to think from another perspective. Ok, you can say it is discrimination. Yet, these buildings were not built with an economic purpose, but with the purpose for Christians to stay here and those who left to return. The couples that marry to stay here as well, so the demographics does not change. If the children stay here, then the church increases.

This interview section activates two different configurations of the waqf: as collective heritage and as real estate asset. The former was meant to assure the welfare of the Rum community in Mazraʿa. Both Nicolas and Patricia legitimized the renting practices on the waqf through the lens of charity. They were a means to subsidize for Christians in need, rather than discriminate against Muslims. Moreover, it was not discriminating against Muslims since they also have charitable institutions and networks to cater for their poor. Going back to Moumtaz's argument about the waqf as the religious property of various sects (*taʾifa*s), Patricia's remarks hint at widespread clientelist infrastructures that provide basic needs, resources, and privileges based on communal allegiances.[470] The latter is geared towards profit, stressing the competitive

[470] *See* Nucho, "Building the Networks" and "From Shirkets to Bankas," chaps. 3 and 4 in *Everyday Sectarianism.*

value of the waqf on the real estate market. Here, the *bineyet el-waqf* are not destined for "the poor and destitute," but for clients, businessmen, and professionals.

These two configurations came together as Patricia and Nicolas argued for the waqf as a means to an end, as a tool for Christians to come back and stay in the area. Here, their arguments are based on a series of underlying assumptions. For instance, if put in the position to choose, Rum in Mazraʿa have few incentives to stay. Beirutis often describe the area as *mantaqa shaʿbieh,* which roughly translates as a popular area. This phrase is often used to describe densely populated places, with generally lower- and middle-class residents. The term is imbued with urban and social representations of crowded, run-down, even unsafe areas that are inhabited by residents with relatively lower levels of education, social standing, and financial power. On top of that, Mazraʿa is largely a Muslim area, with Christians disappearing between Sunni and Shiʿi communities. Their social invisibility is tied to a wider phenomenon of urban fragmentation along socio-economic lines. In Beirut, living in confessional homogeneous enclaves has been advertised as an ideal since the outbreak of the civil war, when segmentation of urban spaces along politico-sectarian allegiances became a norm.[471] To sect, one adds class, education, and affordability as criteria that further influence the socio-spatial choices of Beirutis. These markers impact their decisions in buying a house, in how they refer to neighborhoods, in where they decide to open a business, and even in how they navigate the city. In this frame, Rum in Mazraʿa are socially invisible not only because they are Christians living in a Muslim-dominated area, but also because they are mostly part of the lower- and middle class. In this frame, the subsidized practices of the waqf act as incentive for Christians to rent in Mazraʿa. Otherwise, Ashrafiyeh would be a more reasonable choice.

"I will go and live in Ashrafiyeh because all are Christians there. I am not afraid there." The feeling of fear is spatialized through this Mazraʿa-Ashrafiyeh comparison, dividing Beirut into safe and unsafe spaces. Urban borders are grounded in memories and future prospects of politico-sectarian clashes. Confessionally homogeneous areas are deemed safer, while mixed areas have an intrinsic potential for disruption. This "geography of fear"[472] is reproduced discursively. Ashrafiyeh is safer because it is a Christian area and part of East Beirut. Mazraʿa is less safe because it is a Muslim area and part of West Beirut. While part of the daily discourses

[471] Bou Akar, *For the War Yet to Come*, 20–24.
[472] Khalaf, *Civil and Uncivil Violence in Lebanon*, 4.

of Beirutis and their practices of navigating the city, these spatial divisions do not follow only a sectarian logic of fear. Ashrafiyeh is not only a Christian area, but also an upper-middle class area, with a prestige for good standards of living. Ashrafiyeh is "first class," as one Mazraʿa resident told me. The ability to pay rent in Ashrafiyeh does not only secure a place in a predominantly Christian area, but also projects a certain level of stability and comfort of living. By contrast, Mazraʿa is not only Muslim, but *mantaqa shaʿbieh*. Living in the area and renting from the waqf implies a series of compromises and socio-spatial burdens, a highly contingent future, and increasing economic insecurity. Here, fear is not only about the anticipation of political violence,[473] but also about the frustrations and anxieties that come once with living highly precarious lives. Rum in Mazraʿa do not live in Ashrafiyeh because they cannot compete with the fluctuating high prices of real estate there. In this frame, the waqf is not defined as a source of profit in the housing market in Mazraʿa, but rather as a reprieve from the uncertainties of everyday life for Rum in the area. In between these narratives, the profit derived from market-led strategies on the waqf is understood as a long-term investment in a vision where Christians return and stay in Mazraʿa.

**Missing the Urban Textures of Mazraʿa**

The renting practices on the waqf are often framed as part of a larger effort for Christians to come back in the area and restore the demographic balance. Yet, what does this "balance" imply? Crudely put, the transformation or, better said, the re-transformation of Mazraʿa into a Christian area. Here, the discussion of demographics is worth dwelling on. The reference to numbers and demographic change is rather intriguing given that Lebanon did not have a comprehensive official census since 1932. Hiba Bou Akar writes that everyday discussions on demography reference the existential and social anxiety towards the "encroaching" Muslim, most often Shiʿi, others.[474] The "encroaching" scenario has already taken place for Christians in Mazraʿa. A decrease in their numbers and a subsequent redistribution of political power has already taken place. Here, anxiety for the future is embodied knowledge of the past expressed in the urban environment of the present. In this context, *bineyet el-waqf* become spaces of contestation and a material means to (re)assert presence in the area and create new forms of

[473] Hermez, "At the Gates of War:" Time, Space, and the Anticipation of Political Violence," chap. 3 in *War is Coming*.
[474] Bou Akar, *For the War Yet to Come*, 23. *See also* Maktabi, "The Lebanese Census of 1932 Revisited," 219–41.

visibility for Christians. It is the idea of a past that informs the present longing to reenact itself in the future. In their status as a minority, they want to revive the social life of the neighborhood as it was, could have been, and has the potential to be.

In my discussions with Christian residents of Mazraʿa, a pivotal moment that they identify as having altered their social reality and drastically reduced Rum presence in the area is the civil war.[475] Even though they tend to idealize life in Mazraʿa before this multidimensional conflict, their narratives do reflect population mobility in the area. During the war, space was something to fight for and the urban map of Beirut was shaped and reshaped along politico-sectarian lines. Large numbers of people were dislocated. Some moved for safety reasons. Others emigrated for better opportunities abroad. Others moved for practical reasons related to job security and ability to circulate in the city. These movements were not always definite. Residents would leave the area when conflicts were heightened and return when the danger had subsided. In other cases, family members would stay behind to safeguard their homes and belonging.

More often than not, these narratives of a Christian exodus leading to their present minoritarian status were linked to Shiʿi expansion in the area during and after the war. This expansion was seen as an encroachment on the living spaces of Rum and a challenge to both their past and future existence in Mazraʿa.[476] Their status as a numerical minority was embodied as loss that my interlocutors expressed through sensorial, affective, and temporal topoi imprinted on the urban topography of Beirut. This made loss an "an emplaced everyday practice carried out in relation to the multisensoriality of social and material relations."[477] It was felt as an embodied experience of absence, where particular sensorial stimuli associated with Christian calendric temporality were no longer present in the urban materiality of the neighborhood. It was also felt as an embodied experience of presence, where sensorial stimuli attached to Muslim "others" were overpowering and intrusive. Between absence and presence as sensorial urban experiences

[475] Hafeda, *Negotiating Conflict*, 71. It was the Mazraʿa sector and not the entire district where Christians were majoritarian before the war. Samir Kassir, *Beirut*, 225. The district has a history as a mixed area going back to the late nineteenth century.
[476] This sectarian discourse on demographics is not particular to Mazraʿa. It is part of a larger discourse of fear, anxiety, and frustration among Christians in Beirut over the looming Muslim intrusion on their living spaces. According to Franck Mermier, this discourse is also endorsed by a common representation of Sunni and Rum as urban communities, while Maronites, Druze, and Shiʿa are localized outside the city. Franck Mermier, "The Frontiers of Beirut: Some Anthropological Observations," *Mediterranean Politics* 18, no. 3 (2013): 376–93, doi:10.1080/13629395.2013.834563.
[477] Sarah Pink, *Doing Sensory Ethnography*, 2nd ed. (London: Sage Publications, 2015), 45.

of the present, particular versions of the past were activated.[478] These versions were brought into the present through fragmented memories of what used to feel like being a Christian in Mazraʿa. At the intersection of these internal mental impressions and external urban stimuli, residents experienced social alienation as sensorial loss.[479]

For Dany, a pharmacist who grew up in Mazraʿa as a self-identified *ibn er-raʿiyyeh* (son/member of the parish), but lived in Sin el-Fil, the prevailing conditions in Mazraʿa rendered it impossible for him to go back.

> I do not see myself going back to live in Mazraʿa. I left there nineteen years ago. Because there are many Muslims living there and, once you live in a Christian area, it is difficult to go back living among them. The agglomeration, the scooters [are] everywhere around you. Maybe you live here in Sin el-Fil and your neighbors are not good people, but here I feel the atmosphere of celebration (*jaw el-ʿid*). For Christmas, they put the *taratil*. [For] the month of the Virgin [May], you do not have to open the tv since you can listen the *taratil* [and] the sound of bells from outside. You feel the atmosphere (*el-jaw*) as Christian; but you do not feel the Christian celebrations in Mazraʿa. Here, on Sunday afternoon, everything is closed. Sunday afternoon, everything slows down here. You go to Mazraʿa....uuuuuuuuu [noise].[480]

It is worth dwelling on the Arabic notion "*el-jaw*," a term which is generally translated as the air or the weather. At the same time, the term has a surplus of meaning that allows it to be meaningful beyond its literal sense. Out of this surplus comes a discursive reference to what can be loosely translated as *milieu* or the vibe/ the atmosphere of a place. *El-jaw* acquires an interactive dimension that brings together the material, the social, and the lived experience of being emplaced. Bou Akar dwells on a similar word—*biʾa* (natural environment)—in order to explore the everyday discursive practices that contribute to the spatialization and naturalization of sectarian identities. A term that usually refers to the physical and/or natural environment becomes a discursive tool in normalizing sectarian differences and residential segregation.[481] While both of these terms have a surplus of social meaning that affords their usage in sectarian and racializing discourses, *biʾa* is a more encompassing, almost structural term that comes to define sectarian "ecosystems" in the post-war political geography of Beirut. In contrast, *el-jaw* implies a more subjective experience, like an impression where the material, affective, and

[478] *See* Hirsch and Stewart, "Introduction: Ethnographies of Historicity," 261–74.
[479] Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel,* trans. and ed. Kurt H. Wolff (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, [1903]1950), 409–24.
[480] Dany, interview by author, June 19, 2020, pharmacy in Sin el-Fil, Beirut.
[481] Bou Akar, *For the War Yet to Come*, 20–22.

sensorial stimuli contribute to feeling what Dany has termed *jaw masiheh* (Christian atmosphere) or *jaw muslim* (Muslim atmosphere) of a place or an event.

The term *el-jaw* also underscores an understanding of Christianity and Islam as idioms of everyday life, negotiated through the sensorial landscape of Beirut. [482] In this frame, the quality of life is determined by the confessional composition and, to a certain extent, the homogeneity of the neighborhood. For Dany, Mazraʿa was "difficult to live in" because of the number and close proximity of Muslims. Their presence was expressed through socioreligious rhythms and sensorial urban markers. Mazraʿa was overpopulated and chaotic; *el-jaw* there was noisy and incomprehensible. The urban landscape of the area was riddled with material objects underscoring the Sunni and Shiʿi domination of the area (e.g., posters of political figures, Qurʾanic verses, banners, portraits of martyrs). This domination also dictated the social tempos of the neighborhood, with Friday serving as the weekly day of prayer instead of the Christian Sunday. These material and sensorial inputs contributed to the definition of a Muslim *milieu* and the replication of particular Muslim socio-political identities. According to Dany, all these aspects made Mazraʿa a difficult place to live in. Conversely, in Sin el-Fil, a largely Christian area, the atmosphere was meaningful and comprehensible. The socioreligious rhythms of the neighborhood were defined by the temporality of Christian feasts as religiosity materialized through its social and urban fabric.[483] The sounds of *taratil* (religious hymns), the prayers for Virgin Mary, and the Sunday liturgy created a religious soundscape that went beyond the confined spaces of churches and houses and into the public textures of the city.

For Nicolas, loss was also conveyed through the temporal and material aspects of Christian festivities, whose imprints were lost to the daily rhythms of the neighborhood. The celebration (*ʿid*) of the Christian saint and martyr Barbara was a case in point. Celebrated on December 4, children dress in costumes and visit homes, singing and recounting stories from the life of the saint. In return, they receive special sweets that include and reference wheat, an element with miraculous traits in the stories. In other words, a hagiography is brought to life in the streets and a socioreligious dimension is added to the daily life of the neighborhood. Yet, for Nicolas, *ʿid el-Barbara* was no longer present in Mazraʿa. Children no longer dressed up on the

[482] *See also* Schielke and Debevec, introduction to *Ordinary Lives and Grand Schemes*, 3–12.
[483] Mona Harb, "On Religiosity and Spatiality: Lessons from Hezbollah in Beirut," in *The Fundamentalist City? Religiosity and the Remaking of Urban Space*, ed. Nezar AlSayyad and Mejgan Massoumi (Abingdon: Routledge 2011), 148.

streets, shops no longer sold special sweets, and the festivity no longer triggered inter-confessional neighborhood sociality. In the words of Nicolas,

> When *ʿid el-Barbara* came, we would wear costumes and start visiting all the nineteen apartments in the Smayra building, then we continued with the buildings on the entire street. Then, when Christians left and the ones who came were Muslims, we would not know them. However, even the Muslims that were initially here, because they grew up with us, they would celebrate our feasts. So when we knocked on their door, they knew what *ʿid el-Barbara* was. They would open for us, having prepared chocolate and treats. When people whom we did not know came, themselves not knowing what *ʿid el-Barbara* is—what is a Christian so to speak—not knowing the habits and practices, how do you knock on their doors for *ʿid*? Also, on Palm Sunday, we used to do a procession, but then we stopped. As for Easter, we restarted celebrating at night only six years go. Before, we were afraid to celebrate at night. Now, everything we do, we do within the walls [of the church] and during the day. Always day since it is safer. These are the things that one misses, so one feels disconnected. [484]

Nadia Seremetakis argues that "memory has material and sensory coordinates that are part of the living membrane of a city. Memory can be found in the emotional connection to particular spaces that have their own biographies and carry biographies with them."[485] In this case, Nicolas' fragmented memories on growing up were triggered from the past by the present absence of urban textures of Christian festivities. Particular forms of religiosity associated with celebrations such as *ʿid el-Barbara* were no longer materialized in the social and urban fabric of Mazraʿa. The loss of socio-sensorial imprints of Christian practices translated into particular affective responses towards the confessional changes engendered by the outbreak of the civil war and its aftermath. These changes were experienced as causes for social fragmentation and a loss of social cohesion and trust. During a civil war that was fought over urban spaces as commodities of sectarian-political influence, dislocations along sectarian and political lines changed the confessional make-up of neighborhoods.[486] Even though Mazraʿa was already a mixed Muslim-Christian sector by the outbreak of the civil war, the coming of Muslim "others" was felt by its Christian residents as a violent encroachment that disrupted the organic sociality of the neighborhood.

This disruption was predicated on a dual approach to "otherness," activating different ideas of community. Nicolas associated the loss of social cohesion with the migration of Muslims in the area. Yet, their "otherness" did not come only from their confessional allegiance,

[484] Nicolas, interview by author, January 16, 2020, private home in Mazraʿa, Beirut.
[485] Nadia Seremetakis, *Sensing the Everyday: Dialogues from Austerity Greece* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 34.
[486] Nucho, *Everyday Sectarianism*, 23.

but also from the fact that they were not local to Mazraʿa, thus not grounded in the social networks and history of the area. The infringement is not only from Muslim others in relation to Christian residents, but also from outsiders (*ghurabaʾ*) in relation to locals to the area (*wled el-mantaqa*). One did not know her neighbor not only because she was Muslim, but also because she was not "from there." In other words, they were in Mazraʿa, but not from Mazraʿa.

In this case, it was locality and confession, together with the nuances of their relation, that came to defined who "the others" were. Furthermore, for Nicolas and many of my interlocutors, this post-war lack of social cohesion in Mazraʿa was the result of a paradoxical relation between physical proximity and social distancing. In a densely populated and mixed area like Mazraʿa, the proximity of Muslim residents who came from outside Mazraʿa was a sensorial and material constant. While in certain instances, this social intimacy provided an opportunity for increased inter-confessional interactions, in other cases, it divided and triggered affective borders rooted in the urban and social environment of Mazraʿa. Such borders refracted onto the life of the Mar Mikhail and Jubrail parish.

**A "Child of Mazraʿa" or a "Child of the Church"**

A few days after Assaad and I mapped the *bineyet el-waqf* in Mazraʿa, he sent me a WhatsApp message asking if I could send him a photo of the church. I gladly accepted since we agreed that the waqf administration can have access to the photos resulting from our mapping. Later, while browsing the church's Facebook page, I came across a photo that looked similar to mine, but with one notable difference: the buildings behind the church had been meticulously edited out. In this modified version, the church stood tall against the background of a clear blue sky. Whether Assaad cropped the church outside the urban frame of Mazraʿa for aesthetic purposes or as a statement that dissociated the church from its sectarian-political environment, his action is illustrative of the intricacies and tensions between belonging to the church parish and to the local community. In reality, it is difficult to crop the church out of Mazraʿa since the church and the waqf are two Rum enclaves connected through networks of kinship, parish, and local ties. For instance, parish members are also part of local families with a long history in the area, referred to as *ahl el-mantaqa* (local families/families from the area). The Arabic term *ahl* has both a social and a spatial dimension, referencing not only families and kinship relations, but also local communities and the social relations among their members. In the case of Mazraʿa, the

Arabic phrase alludes to kinship networks grounded in both the church and the sector. For instance, when Bob stated that the waqf is for "*wled el-mantaqa,*" he referenced both their Orthodox affiliation and their local origins. In other words, the church is an extension of the Christian community of Mazraʿa, while the life of this community revolves around the church.

Negotiations over primacy of communal loyalty to each of these categories were part of everyday life processes. A brilliant expression of the challenges arousing from these negotiations was articulated by Samer, the main *murattil* (chanter) in the parish. Every Sunday, his voice guided the worshipers through the liturgical rituals. A quiet, self-described introverted individual, Samer became cheerful and talkative when discussing topics that were of interest to him. As we sipped our coffee in Café Younes, he expressed his frustrations over the lack of parish life and an excessive loyalty to local identities. "I should be a child of the parish who goes to church in Mazraʿa and not a child of Mazraʿa who happens to go to church there."[487] For him, commitment and involvement in the church as a community of faith should take precedence over kinship politics, where primacy was given to local origins and family affiliations.

While the relation between church and local kinship was not always as antagonistic as Samer depicted it, it was at the intersection of these loyalties and local identities that the concept of Christians returning to the area became meaningful. This return did not only hint at the political implications of a sectarian domination of the area. In the case of the Rum community in Mazraʿa, it was also an expression of hope in and an expectation for the revival of parish life. While I agree that "religion is rarely, if ever, an isolated variable,"[488] I work towards a recognition of religious practice that is not always a means towards replicating politico-sectarian discourses. In this frame, this revival of the parish was strongly tied to the waqf as an incentive for practicing Christians to return and stay in Mazraʿa.

While looking for a church to engage in long-term field research and practice my rather ecumenical faith, the Mar Mikhail and Jubrail Church in Mazraʿa was recommended to me, mainly for the reputation of abuna Boulos. A graduate in sociology who was also teaching at a Catholic university, abuna came recommended as *nashit* (energetic, active). Yet, during my first two months in the parish, I gradually came to the realization that its social life was scarce,

[487] Samer, interview by author, February 29, 2020, Café Younes, Hamra, Beirut.
[488] Samir Khalaf, "Primordial Ties and Politics in Lebanon," *Middle Eastern Studies* 4, no. 3 (1968): 262, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4282251.

revolving mostly around Sunday liturgy, socialization over coffee in the reception area (*salun*) of the church, and the scouts. All activities took place within the spatial enclosure of the church. At the same time, the church was an affective landmark for the Christian community in Mazraʿa.[489] Parishioners described it as a place of uninterrupted comfort in all narratives and memories of civil war. "The church was never closed during the war" was a phrase that parishioners often stated. It had marked rites of passage (i.e., birth, wedding, death) for many members of the community. Its history was strongly intertwined with the biographies of *ahl el-mantaqa* up to the point where there was a sense of social entitlement and ownership of the church and its endowments. In the words of Jad, "The families of the area believe that the church is theirs. They say that their grandmother, grandfather, and uncle built it, so it is theirs."

The church harbored both presence and absence, a discrepancy that my respondents attributed to various causes. One of them was the outbreak of the civil war and the exodus of Christian families from Mazraʿa. For those who stayed, the low activity of the parish was tied to bordering spatial practices when it came to religious activity. In the words of Nicolas, "Now, everything we do, we do within the walls [of the church] and during the day." Liturgical and social practices were limited to the fenced courtyard of the church and to a schedule that did not disturb. Processions, celebrations, scout activities, and communal meals for the parish were all events held within the confines of the church, shielded by the metal fence covered with vegetation. As a concrete example reflecting the loss of Christian aesthetics in the urban landscape of Mazraʿa, I return to the case of *ʿid el-Barbara*, described by Nicolas.

It was December 4, 2019. Upon entering the church gate, I was promptly welcomed by parents engaged in cheerful conversations. Loud voices of children and teenagers running around filled the courtyard. They were dressed in carnivalesque outfits, rehearsing for their theatre performance. Under the sight of Archangel Mikhail, overseeing from a banner in the corner of the stage, sketches unfolded about Lebanon, school, relationships, and the life of Saint Barbara. The entire event started and ended within the fenced perimeter of the church. This relegation of communal religious practice to the perimeter of the church was coupled with the inconvenient daily realities faced by parish members as residents of Beirut. Congested streets and intersections, endless hours spent in traffic and commuting, long working hours, violent sectarian

[489] Seremetakis, *Sensing the Everyday*, 40.

clashes in Mazraʿa, lack of electricity, and financial instability were among the reasons mentioned by my interlocutors to account for the low church attendance.


**Figure 10** – 4.4. *ʿid el-Barbara* at Mar Mikhail and Jubrail Church, Mazraʿa. December 4, 2019. Photo by author.

In this context, the waqf and its renting practices were legitimized through narratives of parish revival. Samer argued that the waqf had allowed the Christian community in Mazraʿa to stay together by being close to the church. He went on to invoke the historical presence of Rum in the area as an argument for a wider focus on Christian communities in places where their presence had been historically attested. Quoting former Metropolitan Georges Khodr, he added that the Church should represent the interests of the Rum through its waqf since the church reflected the community. The continuity of presence was an argument that justified legitimacy over space. To this spatial dimension, a "sacred kinship" was added, where the presence of Orthodox in Lebanon and the wider Middle East was legitimized by narratives of uninterpreted Christian genealogy that went back to the apostles.[490]

A central place in these narratives of parish revival was given to the scouts. Combining interactive activities with religious education, the scouts' program of Mar Mikhail and Jubrail parish brought together children and teenagers from the Mazraʿa parish and from the parishes of Mar Elias Msaytbeh and Mar Elias Btina, two churches in the neighboring district of Msaytbeh.

[490] This type of discourse is by no means new. *See* the case of the Copts in Egypt or the Maronites in Lebanon.

Mazraʿa parishioners would often present the success of this program by comparing it with the lethargic parishes of the other two churches. Here is Nicolas talking about Mar Elias Msaytbeh Church. “Go one Sunday there and see how many adults and, even more, how many children are. There are no more than ten children. Everyone there was selfish and sold so now you do not have anyone. Their children are out. But here, in Mazraʿa, [there are] so many children. Same areas [Msaytbeh and Mazraʿa].” The difference in the neighboring districts was predicated, among others, on Christians having sold their apartments to Muslims and on the lack of an active vision for the church endowments there. An example was the waqf of Mar Elias Btina, which is the largest Orthodox waqf in Beirut. Yet, by comparison to the waqf in Mazraʿa, most of the properties are vast plots of empty land. The lack of a real estate incentive translates into fewer reasons for Christian families to stay or come back to the area.

In a discursive frame where scouts embodied the gradual revival of the parish, this revival was accounted for generationally and quantitatively. The scouts were organized on age categories, with each cohort registering an increase in membership. This, in turn, indexed an intergenerational continuity of Christian presence in the area and an ongoing revitalization of the church. Moreover, this increase in numbers followed local family lineages, which meant an increase in local kinship networks, either by marriage, birth, or return in the area. Remember the story told by Patricia? “Majdalani, Majdalani, Saliba, Majdalani, Majdalani, Smayra, Saliba, Saliba.” Members of these traditional local families were able and will be able to settle or return to Mazraʿa partially because of the opportunities offered by the waqf.

Another aspect that hints at how parish, family, and waqf are strongly intertwined is connected to the sociocultural role of the family in Lebanon. While the impact of urbanization and industrialization on the decline of kinship and family ties is uncontested, these social structures are still pervasive in the Lebanese society.[491] As Suad Joseph argues, in the Arab sociocultural system, “the family is valued over and above the person, identity is defined in familial terms, and kin idioms and relationships pervade public and private spheres.”[492] Individuals are part of relational matrixes, most often patriarchal, where they have to negotiate, resist, or construct networks that run along and across boundaries of family, parish, sect, and

[491] *See* Zeina Zaatari, “Lebanon,” in *Arab Family Studies: Critical Reviews*, ed. Suad Joseph (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2018), 190–211.
[492] Suad Joseph, “Introduction: Theories and Dynamics of Gender, Self, and Identity in Arab Families,” in Suad Joseph, *Intimate Selving in Arab Families: Gender, Self, and Identity*, 12.

local community.[493] I approach this ongoing significance of family and kin not necessarily as a consequence of lingering relics of premodern communal identities, but rather the result of unmet needs, striking inequalities, and difficulties in coping with a post-civil war context characterized by persistent multilayered crises and growing unpredictability.

The rapid and chaotic re-construction of post-war Beirut, driven by neoliberal policies of development, has engendered frustrations and uncertainties for the working class when it comes to accommodation. Add to these the current financial and social insecurities resulted from a lack of basic public utilities and minimum social safety nets, and the livelihood of a young working-class family becomes precarious. Faced with these challenges, people turn to their extended families for social, economic, and psychological support. "The family is still the major security device in society. It is a most sobering palliative. It serves as a tranquilizer pill, a confessional stand, a safety valve, and a 'security blanket' all put together."[494] In this context, young families with children return to Mazraʿa and rent on the waqf because grandparents and parents can take care of their children while they go to work. Often times, these members also join the Mazraʿa parish, an aspect that contributes to the generational discourse on parish growth. In other words, the church grows through localized kinship affiliations.

Here, it is important to take into consideration the civil war and its aftermath, together with the kinship structures of the Orthodox community in Mazraʿa. With the fragmentation of urban space along politico-sectarian spheres of influence, young men who were not politically affiliated or sided with "the wrong side" were targeted by militia groups. Once with the division of Beirut along what came to be known as "East Beirut" and "West Beirut," Mazraʿa became part of the latter. To avoid targeting, Christian families would temporarily or permanently send their children to East Beirut, outside Beirut, or even outside Lebanon. Now grown-ups, they have families of their own. The help of grandparents in raising their nephews and the support of the extended family are incentives that contribute to them returning or settling in the area and renting from the waqf. The story of Jad was often related to me as a case in point,

> I lived in Junieh for seven years. I got tired a lot. I am used to coming here every Sunday. So every Sunday I would come from Junieh to here. Every day, actually, since my work is nearby, in Furn el-Shebbak. After work, I would come here [Mazraʿa], stay until 8 p.m. and then go home to

[493] Joseph, "Introduction: Theories and Dynamics of Gender, Self, and Identity in Arab Families," 1–17.
[494] Samir Khalaf, "Family Associations in Lebanon," *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 2, no. 2 (1971): 237, http://www.jstor.org/stable/41601175

> Junieh. For seven years, I did not know anyone in Junieh. Here, even if I do not know someone personally, even if they are not from my religion, I greet them and they greet me back as I walk.
>
> [After] seven years in Junieh, I got tired, even though I have a beautiful place there. It has a view to the sea and I hear the church bells every day, while in Mazraʿa there could be a war at any time. Yet, I could not live in Junieh.

His case is an example of the dynamic relation between family networks and parish life. Jad was an involved member of the parish community. Part of the local Saliba family, he had a house in Junieh, a city approximately sixteen kilometers from Beirut. He lived there with his family for seven years. Every Sunday he would drive this distance from Junieh to Beirut to attend the liturgy in Mazraʿa and to visit his parents, who still lived in the area. Every day he commuted from Junieh to his working place in Furn el-Shebbak. Most of the holidays (Easter, Good Friday, New Year) were spent at Jad's parents. After seven years, he decided to move to Mazraʿa and rent on the waqf so as to be closer to his family and be more involved in the parish.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has told the story of Mazraʿa as a mixed Muslim-Christian area through the lived experiences and spatial practices of its Rum community. Members of this group negotiate their presence in the area in between histories of past dominance, current realities of minoritarian status, and hopes for a reimagined future. It is at the intersection of these overlapping temporalities that we must understand what it means for Rum to return to Mazraʿa. First, this return references parish revival, where the current low activity of the congregation is lived through memories of active religious practice and hopes for an on-going increase in parishioners. Second, it hints at the sectarian domination of Mazraʿa, where the Rum waqf is a means to change the confessional demographics and reestablish Christian socio-political presence in the area. Third, it is connected to kinship structures as members of local Christian families return to Mazraʿa and rent on the waqf in order to appease growing housing insecurity and economic duress. These meanings intersect in the personal stories of residents, materialize in the urban environment of Mazraʿa, and replicate through the social networks of parish and kinship.

Going beyond homogeneous confessional categories, this chapter emphasizes the diversity and dynamism intrinsic to the notion of "Rum." By accentuating the particularities of a localized Christian community, I highlight intra-communal diversity in the attempt to paint a more nuanced picture of identities in the making. Rum identities in Mazraʿa are relational and

localized. They are lived through forms of sociality embedded in narratives of loss and hope. They are performed through socio-economic practices associated with the waqf, which blur the line between confession, real estate, and church. They are defined through encounters with "the other," be it Muslims from Mazraʿa or Christians from Ashrafiyeh. They are localized through kinship and parish networks mapped on the area.

This chapter also highlighted the coexistence of multiple definitions of the waqf, framed at the intersection of personal narratives of living in *bineyet el-waqf*, administrative renting practices, and social representations of the endowment. From real estate to charity and sectarian tool, waqf is a concept that is actively produced through everyday life, rather than a concept "that can stand for everyday life, as empty form awaiting content."[495] On a more general note, this approach highlights the fallacy of taking for granted categories like "sect," "locality," and "religion." It hints at other untold stories of mixed areas in Beirut, where these notions are (re)defined through the intimacy of everyday interactions that bring together and/or separate.

Finally, sect as social formation is shaped by being part of the networks and infrastructures that sectarian practices create and sustain, even within neighborhoods that are demographically diverse. The material and social environment (re)produced by the waqf, the church, and local kinship illustrates how sectarian difference contributes to the formation of social space in Beirut. Conversely, it reveals that sometimes it is not about sect, but about practicality of everyday life, religious practice, and parish life. Going beyond clearly defined conceptual frames allows the construction of narratives on the return of Rum to Mazraʿa as more than just a competition over sectarian influence and domination in the area. Church, locality, family, and sect – all intersect and overlap to weave together a dynamic and often incomplete picture of Christian presence in Mazraʿa.

[495] Débora Lanzeni and Elidensa Ardèvol, "Future in the Ethnographic World," in *Anthropologies and Future*, 117.

# Conclusion

## In the Aftermath

In the aftermath of one of the largest non-nuclear explosions in Beirut's port on August 4, 2020, a series of promotional banners for insurance companies popped up across the city. These perpetuated recurring narratives of Beirut's resurgence, much like the mythical Phoenix rising from its ashes. Tied to this myth-inspired collective identification is the celebration of resilience as a core feature of the Lebanese people.[496] In spite of the numerous wounds, losses, and scars they have incurred, Lebanese rise again and again. Considering the deluge of devastating crises and systemic failures that have affected the country, any sensitive observer would be in awe of the countless adjustments that ordinary Lebanese have had to make daily to ensure their survival and preserve a sense of their humanity. These adjustments include overt actions like participating in the 2019 nationwide demonstrations (*thawra*), navigating the impossibility of accessing their bank savings, as well as mourning for the deceased and caring for the injured during the pandemic and in the aftermath of the explosion. They also encompass more inconspicuous daily challenges like ensuring affordable housing, securing electricity and running water through privately operated businesses, coping with mental health issues, and navigating the repercussions of a skyrocketing inflation.[497] Considering all these factors, the myth of Beirut as an urban phoenix in relation to the resilience trope is just that, a myth. Lebanon's current state is not a success story of resilience, but rather one of being stuck in a relentless cycle of getting knocked

[496] *See also* Tim Llewellyn, *Spirit of the Phoenix: Beirut and the Story of Lebanon* (London: I.B. Tauris 2010); Silvia Venier, "Rising from the Ashes, Once Again? The Beirut Port Explosion and International Disaster Law," *Yearbook of International Disaster Law Online* 3, no. 1 (2022): 325–51, https://doi.org 10.1163/26662531_00301_013; Abdul Rahman Bizri, Walid Alam, Nazih A. Bizri, and Umayya Musharrafieh, "COVID-19 and the Lebanese Crisis: Will the Phoenix Manage to Rise Once Again?" *Disaster Medicine and Public Health Preparedness* 16, no. 3 (2022): 857–58, doi:10.1017/dmp.2020.416.

[497] Tania El Khoury and Ziad Abu-Rish, *The Search for Power* (Washington, DC: Tadween Publishing, 2022); Aya Majzoub, Brian Root, Lena Simet, "Cut Off From Life Itself: Lebanon's Failure on the Right to Electricity," Human Rights Watch report, March 9, 2023, https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/03/09/cut-life-itself/lebanons-failure-right-electricity; "Lebanon: Rising Poverty, Hunger Amid Economic Crisis," Human Rights Watch report, December 12, 2022, https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/12/12/lebanon-rising-poverty-hunger-amid-economic-crisis.

down and staggering to its feet again, each time more battered, more disheartened. The narrative of Lebanon or Beirut as an urban phoenix entails a storyteller whose voice progressively becomes more distorted, wearier, more anxious, often muted, and less comprehensible.[498]

In the Preface to her book *Sextarianism: Sovereignty, Secularism, and the State in Lebanon*, Maya Mikdashi astutely points out that the term "crisis" might not be the most apt word to describe the multipronged events that have unfolded since 2019. A temporality of crisis implies a *before* and an *after* in relation to a bounded state of exceptionality that upends ordinary life.[499] However, the current situation in Lebanon has root causes that trace back to the many events that compounded the 1975–1990 civil war, and the neoliberal sectarian context of the post-war reconstruction. These genealogies index crisis as a "recursive temporality,"[500] much like the recursive resurrections of the Phoenix bird. Crisis translates into an extraordinary ordinary, where critical events are part of everyday life as present reality and future expectation. As of this writing, Lebanon's presidential elections are at a standstill, and so is the prospect of implementing a comprehensive financial restructuring plan to address the banking sector restrictions and the triple-digit inflation.[501] These deadlocks have significantly exacerbated class disparities and led to the swift erosion of an already fragile middle class. As access to basic public services, essential food items, and safe housing grew more difficult, a 2021 UN ESCWA policy brief reported that over 80% of the population in Lebanon was living in multidimensional poverty.[502] Like numerous Lebanese, several of my Rum interlocutors have left the country amid surging waves of emigration since 2019, while others have faced unemployment and payment cuts. Many household incomes cannot keep up with the increasing costs of living, while negotiations of new salaries are tied to percentage-based payments in dollars.[503] Moreover, with an opaque black market that dictates prices for goods and services, and a market economy that is

[498] Jeanine Jalkh, "Lebanese torn between revolution and 'resilience'," *L'Orient-Le Jour*, February 17, 2023, https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1328652/lebanese-torn-between-revolution-and-resilience.html; Camille Ammoun, "Not resilience, subsidence!" *L'Orient-Le Jour*, February 26, 2022, https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1291894/not-resilience-subsidence.html.
[499] Mikdashi, *Sextarianism*, x-xii.
[500] Mikdashi, *Sextarianism*, x.
[501] Zbeeb, "Lebanon's Postwar Political Economy," in Karam and Majed, *The Lebanon Uprising of 2019*, 28–42.
[502] "Multidimensional Poverty in Lebanon (2019–2021): Painful Reality and Uncertain Prospects," policy brief, United Nations Economic and Social Commission for West Asia, September 3, 2021, https://www.unescwa.org/sites/default/files/news/docs/21-00634-_multidimentional_poverty_in_lebanon_-policy_brief_-_en.pdf.
[503] Satirical remarks that blend humor and exasperation have emerged regarding the redundancy of the Lebanese currency. One example is the reference to the 100,000 Lebanese pound banknote as "*waraq ʿarish*" (grape leaf).

increasingly dollarized, perplexing social and financial practices have emerged around the physicality of money. The monetary value of paper dollars and their transaction feasibility are often indexed not by the numbers imprinted on banknotes but by the level of wear and tear.

In terms of the epidemiological crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic appears to be a thing of the past, with no current government restrictions or emergency decrees in place. The tourism sector has shown indications of recovery, contributing to increased inflows of remittances. The prospect of foreign capital in the form of "fresh dollars" from expats and tourists during the summer season has translated into marketing strategies and official financial forecasts targeting these two segments. One such campaign was the 2022 *Ahla Bhal Talleh* (with its English equivalent "Welcome To Lebanon") campaign by the Lebanese Ministry of Tourism.[504] In-person public worship within the Orthodox community, as well as within other religious congregations, has reverted to its pre-pandemic formats, with the use of digital media in liturgical worship gradually loosing traction. Congregants have resumed ingesting the Eucharist, closing their mouths on the spoon, kissing icons, and socializing over coffee in church reception areas (*saluns*). Apart from liturgical activities, the MJO mustawsaf (socio-medical center) witnessed a notable surge in its activity and relocated to a more spacious and better-equipped facility in the Ashrafiyeh district. MJO Beirut has undergone a change in leadership as well, with Rami, a member featured in this dissertation, taking on the role as president. His *nashit* (energetic, lively) spirit has come through his active involvement in organizing events and meetings within the Beirut *firqa* (group), aligning with the increasing number of voices advocating for a new *nahda* within the movement.

In the urban landscape of Beirut, the areas directly affected by the August 4 explosion have been partially reconstructed, with buildings and spaces being offered for sale or rent at significantly higher prices. Emerging businesses have sprung up in the vibrant and tourist-friendly neighborhoods around the port, such as Gemayzeh and Mar Mikhail. While playing a role in the economic revitalization of the city, these changes have also worsened housing insecurities for the communities residing there.[505] Amid the growing bustling activity, the

[504] For a visual representation of this campaign, *see* here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_TCm__MKryc.
[505] For a more in-depth urban and social analysis of the residential areas surrounding the port after the explosion, *see* Tala Alaeddine, Nadine Bekdache, Jana Haidar, and Abir Saksouk, "Rental Market Trends Amid Crisis: Prices, Conditions and Threats Documented in 2021," Public Works Studio report, https://housingmonitor.org/en/content/rental-market-trends-amid-crisis; Abir Saksouk, Nadine Bekdache, and Tala

remnant of the grain silos stand as a constant and poignant reminder of the devastating event. Anti-establishment messages and artwork crafted from the debris of the explosion linger around the silos and in downtown Beirut, where the 2019 *thawra* (revolution) was concentrated. In a different part of the city, the waqf in Mazraʿa continues to support the Mar Mikhail and Jubrail parish and the local Rum community. From monthly allowances and reduced rents for Rum living in *bineyet el-waqf* (the buildings of the waqf), to a modernized parking facility facing the church and a renovated Club of Cooperation (*nadi al-taʿadud*), the waqf remains a consistent urban and social presence in the lives of Orthodox in Mazraʿa.

**Intersections of Being Rum in Lebanon**

Orthodoxy as a way of living (*tariqat ʿaish*) proposes a comprehensive but not singular mode of existence, arguing that there are many ways of being Rum in Lebanon. These ways are shaped by individual biographies and personal religious sensibilities, but also by religious and social institutions that place individuals in relational networks and communal associations. They are also influenced by structural conditions of systemic failures, over which ordinary Lebanese have limited control, but which significantly impact their lives. The chapters in this dissertation analyzed different yet interconnected ways in which members of the Rum Orthodox community in Beirut practically navigated and made moral sense of the multidimensional crises affecting Lebanon since 2019. A consistent thread throughout these chapters has been the focus on religious practitioners, both clerics and laypersons. The incentive for this focus was two-fold. First, to underscore the dynamic nature of what counts as "right" doxa and praxis within the frame of Orthodoxy as an *institutional* tradition; and second, to disrupt a scholarly focus on sect as social category and sectarianism as political ideology by highlighting communal formations and institutions that do not fit comfortably within the sacred-secular dichotomy.[506]

Ethnographic and theological engagements with institutions like the waqf in Mazraʿa, the Church as transnational structure, or the mustawsaf in Ashrafiyeh, along with social formations

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Alaeddine, "How to Protect Residents of the Neighborhoods Affected by the Beirut Port Explosion," Public Works Studio report, 2021, https://publicworksstudio.com/en/how-to-protect-residents-of-the-neighborhoods-affected-by-the-beirut-port-explosion-2/.

[506] Ussama Makdisi, *Age of Coexistence: The Ecumenical Frame and the Making of Modern Arab World* (Berkley: University of California Press, 2019). Ussama Makdisi pushes against sectarianism as an overpowering and often clichéd framework to approach the Middle East. Instead, he proposes the ecumenical frame to highlight complex systems of religious coexistence and plurality during the Ottoman Empire and in the post-Ottoman Arab world.

like local parishes or eucharistic communities, complicated the material and institutional realities of sect in Lebanon. Narratives constructed around the socio-medical center and the endowed real estate in Mazraʿa delved into the entanglements of communal narratives, local religious worldviews, and urban sectarian practices. Through an analysis of how such entanglements influenced the social (re)configurations of these social structures on the ground, I highlighted intersections between sect and religion that questioned oversimplified approaches of total separation between the two. They also questioned reductive narratives of religion as a perpetrator of politico-sectarian ideologies and a counterforce to the secular state. At the same time, my approach advocated for perspectives on religious and welfare practices in Lebanon that do not automatically conform to sectarian-ecumenical dichotomies. Such perspectives account for confession-based processes of differentiation that are not inherently sectarian and for sectarian attitudes that are not necessarily driven by religious incentives. They also recognize the practical aspects of giving during times of crisis and underscore intra-confessional divisions and hierarchical distinctions.

Sections of this dissertation (i.e., Chapters 2 and 3) engaged less with Rum as sect and focused more on the liturgical and theological dimensions of Orthodoxy. Yet, it is precisely this emphasis on religious rituals and ecclesial structures that adds to my critical engagement with historiographies and ethnographies on sectarianism in Lebanon. Beyond the case of Antiochian Orthodoxy, the field of religious studies rarely intersects with scholarship on sectarianism. The former usually addresses subjects like confessional practice and ethical becoming, Christian-Muslim encounters, the histories of religious minorities in the Middle East, as well as the theological and ritual characteristics of different confessions.[507] The latter tends to focus more on politicization of religion, legal translations of confessional identities, conceptual genealogies and intellectual histories of sectarianism, and ethnographic approaches to lived dimensions of sect.[508]

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[507] Constantin A. Panchenko, *Arab Orthodox Christians under the Ottomans 1516–1831*, trans. Brittany Pheiffer Noble and Samuel Noble (Jordanville, NY: Holy Trinity Seminary Press, 2016); Anthony O'Mahony and Emma Loosley, eds., *Eastern Christianity in the Modern Middle East* (New York: Routledge, 2010); Michel Boivin and Manoël Pénicaud, eds., *Inter-Religious Practices and Saint Veneration in the Muslim World: Khidr/Khizr from the Middle East to South Asia* (New York: Routledge, 2023); René R. Khawam, *L'Univers Culturel des Chrétiens d'Orient* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1987); Albera Dionigi and Maria Couroucli, eds., *Sharing Sacred Spaces in the Mediterranean: Christians, Muslims and Jews at Shrines and Sanctuaries* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012).

[508] Bassel F Salloukh et al., *The Politics of Sectarianism in Postwar Lebanon* (London: Pluto Press, 2015); Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel, eds., *Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East* (New York:

What happens when we bring these two research areas in conversation? How can we think of religious ways of being and living in relation to colonial histories of legal and political codification of religious difference in Lebanon? How do sect-based divisions and communal politics intersect with confessional expressions fostered by activities like attending the liturgy, receiving communion, or embodying Christ through acts of giving? What happens when we account for ways of living shaped by both divine management (*al-tadbir al-ilahi*) and sectarian clientelism? These are some of the overarching questions that have guided this dissertation, which will, I hope, serve to catalyze future research into the critical intersections of Orthodoxy as sect, church, and community of practice.

In its engagement with the anthropology of religion, this dissertation found inspiration in the ethnographic literature on piety and its commitment to projects of ethical becoming. It also resonated with scholarship on everyday religion by recognizing the diversity of practices both within and outside normative "orthodoxies." At the same time, I argued that the underlying structural dimension in both these areas of research has often been overlooked or restricted to translations of discursive authority and embodied habitus. Pushing against such reductive perspectives, each chapter called back into focus the structural configurations of Orthodoxy by grounding the lives of Rum congregants in communal and urban institutions that shaped and were shaped by divine and social relations. The mustawsaf as a social and healthcare center and MJO as a religious organization, jointly provided the institutional frameworks for the mobilization of Orthodox activist models anchored in the localized theologies of the twentieth century Antiochian *nahda*. The waqf as an urban and communal structure, and its symbiotic relation with the Orthodox community in Mazraʿa, shaped the present experiences and future prospects of the community in the area. Additionally, the activities and social configurations of both the mustawsaf and the waqf were examined in connection with the economic structural breakdown and dysfunctional state systems in Lebanon. In this context, these two institutions emerged as options for securing livelihoods during uncertain times of multidimensional challenges, including housing and food insecurity, bio-viral disaster, unemployment, and financial vulnerability. My advocacy for structural perspectives extends to my engagement with

Oxford University Press, 2017); Deeb, Nalbantian, and Sbaiti, *Practicing Sectarianism*; Ward Vloeberghs, *Architecture, Power and Religion in Lebanon* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

Orthodoxy as an *institutional* tradition. In critical dialogue with the anthropological genealogies of tradition, influenced extensively by the anthropology of Islam, I engaged with the social life of theological concepts to highlight corporate practices and religious lives anchored in social and communal structures like church, parish, liturgy, or sacrament. This approach allowed me to consider Orthodox ways of living that leave room for diversity, contradictions, ambiguities, and failures of practice, while also accounting for the structural affordances and limitations of Orthodox institutions and rituals. The dialectical relation between religious structures and practice played a central role in analyzing negotiations surrounding Orthodox concepts like "sacrament" and "liturgy" amid the hurdles posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Debates over what constituted "right practice," and what made a "good Orthodox" in the context of disrupted in-person corporate worship were shaped by the semiotic and material affordances of institutionalized rituals like the divine liturgy (*al-quddas al-ilahi*) and the Eucharist as church sacrament (*sirr kanasi*). They were also influenced by the awareness and intentions of Rum towards practicing their religion correctly, all while grappling with the moral dilemmas and existential anxieties brought about by the pandemic. These intentions manifested in how practitioners sensed and made sense of digital liturgical practice during periods of home isolation and limitations on social gatherings. Together, these factors shaped dynamic social relations of submission, deferral, and contestation in relation to religious, medical, and governmental sources of authority. Here, a passage from Bandak and Boylston encapsulates the core argument of this dissertation regarding the dynamic nature within institutional spaces of what constitutes "right" belief and practice.

> We argue that deferral is necessary for orthodoxy to hold as a principle for lived religion. For a relatively fixed, institutional doctrine to apply to everyone, that doctrine must be sufficiently flexible in its application to encounter a wide range of situations without being invalidated. It must also be able to cope with a certain degree of deviation on the part of its members, clergy and laity alike. Otherwise, Orthodoxies would become inapplicable to present circumstances. It is in this indefinite space that many Orthodox Christians and their institutions live for much of the time.[509]

My focus on Orthodoxy as a way of living in times of crisis afforded a privileged ethnographic perspective on Orthodox rituals that are rarely questioned and debates that unfold discreetly. This vantage point allowed me to explore the structural instabilities and ambiguities of meaning that Orthodox rituals could accommodate without eroding their ritual authority or

[509] Bandak and Boylston, "The 'Orthodoxy' of Orthodoxy," 34.

institutional identity. How much can the format and the administration of the Holy Communion change and still hold the authority of a church sacrament? To what extent can liturgical moods and sensational forms be evocative in the absence of liturgical materialities and corporate practice? In the context of the pandemic and the many fractures it caused in religious communal practice, the case of the Rum community in Beirut becomes even more relevant given Orthodoxy's emphasis on enacted liturgical scripts and their prescriptive sensorial and material regimes. Paradoxically, it was the impossibility of engaging in traditional corporate worship that underscored the foundational role of institutionalized practice. Despite extensive negotiations over digital alternatives to "brick and mortar" liturgies, the substitutes were never quite as satisfactory as the offline original.[510]

As mentioned in the Introduction, my intention has not been merely to carve out a place in the shape of Orthodoxy within the anthropology of Christianity. Still, the prevailing scholarly focus on Christian traditions associated with Catholic and Protestant (especially Charismatic) denominations has rendered invisible those Christian communities whose genealogies do not trace back to Euro-Atlantic histories of imperialism and conversion. In the emerging theoretical and methodological approaches to studying Christian communities, the specific sensibilities and concepts of Protestant and Catholic denominations often stand in for "Christianity."[511] Approaches emphasizing the religious subject as a bounded introspective entity, mediation as a form of transcending a perceived "broken" material world, and even religion as a matter of choice has been critiqued for their normative power in projects on global Christianities.

Aligning with this critique, I highlighted how theories of mediation and religion tend to privilege particular Christian ontologies that posit transcendence as the normative mode of human-divine relationality. By engaging with Orthodox liturgical and pastoral theology, and observing its ethnographic activations on the ground, I underscored alternative approaches to materiality and corporeality. These were not seen as something to be transgressed for their *less-than* nature, but rather as integral components within liturgical and eschatological models that include different manifestations of the body— i.e., the body of Christ, the physical body, and the eucharistic body. These inclusive models extended beyond the confines of liturgical practice and into the world at large, as exemplified by the civic and social models advocated by MJO. In

[510] For a different approach, *see* Berger, chap. 6 in *@Worship: Liturgical Practices in Digital Worlds*.
[511] Hann and Goltz, "Introduction: The Other Christianity?" in Hann and Goltz, *Eastern Christians*, 1–29.

localized Orthodox worldviews where heaven starts from earth, the created world is not to be transcended but elevated through engagement in social activism, communal service, and pragmatic efforts to embody Christ-like qualities.[512]

### *Arab/Eastern/Orthodox Christians*

Acknowledging the deep Eastern foundations and histories of Christianity, this dissertation has contributed to scholarship on contemporary Arab Christian communities, which are often overlooked in Middle Eastern studies and the anthropology of Christianity alike. From European colonial interventions on behalf of Christians in the Ottoman Empire, to the twenty-first century paradigm of a "global war on terror," oversimplified divisions between the "Christian West" and the "Muslim Middle East" have persisted in both regional and global politics.[513] In this context, the existence of ethno-religious communities like the Antiochian Orthodox in Syria and Lebanon, the Copts in Egypt, or the Chaldeans in Iraq has often been reduced to polemical narratives of minority persecution and calls for Western intervention.[514] Instead, I advocate for "thick" ethnographies of Arab Christian communities as a catalyst for disrupting conventional political and geographical conceptions of Christianity and religion in the region. Chapter 1, in particular, highlighted Orthodox models of social and civic engagements that converged ideas on nationalism, Arab cultural awareness, and religious revival in Lebanon and the wider region. These models advocate for an immersion in the immanent world and in the history of the region, alongside various forms of commitment to public issues driven by Christian ethics. [515]

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[512] For an edited volume that addresses the relation between Orthodox cosmologies and environmental issues, *see* Chryssavgis and Foltz, *Toward an Ecology of Transfiguration*.

[513] Anh Nga Longva, "Introduction: Domination, Self-Empowerment, Accommodation," in *Religious Minorities in the Middle East: Domination, Self-Empowerment, Accommodation*, ed. Anne Sofie Roald and Anh Nga Longva (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 1–23. For a critique of bounded geographical categories like "the Balkans" and "the Middle East," which may trigger broader inquiries into the politics of area studies within and beyond academia, *see* Hakem Al-Rustom, "Rethinking the 'Post-Ottoman:' Anatolian Armenians as an Ethnographic Perspective," in *Companion to the Anthropology of the Middle East*, ed. Soraya Altorki (NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 452–79.

[514] Even the term "minority," which gained prominence following World War I and has been coopted in domestic and international discourses, tends to accentuate differentiation between "Christian minorities" and "Muslim majorities," and undermine shared Arab identities and projects of national unity.

[515] For similar engagements with the intersections between nationalism, communalism, and religion, *see* Mouchir Basile Aoun, *The Arab Christ: Towards an Arab Christian Theology of Conviviality*, translated by Sarah Patey (London: Gingko, 2022); Noah Haiduc-Dale, *Arab Christians in British Mandate Palestine: Communalism and Nationalism, 1917-1948* (Edinburgh University Press, 2013).

The focus on Rum Orthodoxy as a way of living also prompts a critical examination of the political dynamic underlining studies of global Christianities. I argue that Arab Christians exist on the fringes of political and geographical conceptions of transnational Christianities. While these communities are local to a region that holds a central place in the genesis narratives of this tradition, their existence and communal diversity have often been reduced to Orientalized histories of Christian origins, and narratives of sacred sites and lineages going back to the Apostles. Language biases play a role as well, with public culture associating Arabic with Islam to the point where images of Christians praying in Arabic can elicit feelings of unease or unfamiliarity. The challenge for scholars studying Arab Christian communities lies in accounting for the local histories and theologies of these communities, while also addressing the role of these histories and theologies in Orientalist depictions of the "East" as monolithic, violent, ahistorical, and in need of civilizing.[516] Thus, an engagement with Rum Orthodoxy, which resists categorizations like "Oriental," "Eastern," or even "Christian," challenges us to adopt a broader view on Orthodox theological traditions and their territorial and political contexts. It may even make it less surprising to hear Orthodox chants in Arabic or see Arabic calligraphy on icons. My in-depth ethnographic and historical investigation of the Rum Orthodox in Lebanon has shed light on the intra-communal diversity of belief, practice, and social existence. At the same time, my engagement with Rum as grounded in transnational Orthodox structures and Christian cosmologies allowed me to consider Orthodoxy beyond crumbling state structures, sect-based networks, and secular ontologies. I could shift analytical angles from intimate religious practice to translocal ecclesial structures, from the minutiae of everyday life to national structural failures, from intra-communal power dynamics to inter-sectarian encounters.

However, concentrating on a single Christian community in the context of Lebanon may invite criticism for its potential to reinforce confessional narratives, in the sense of approaching the community as a singular object of study, detached from its broader multi-confessional environment. As a potential response, I argue that understanding the multidimensional identities and experiences of Arab Christians is a pre-requisite for producing compelling scholarship on inter-religious dynamics in the region. Lebanon officially recognizes eighteen different sects, all part of complex histories of inter-confessional and inter-sectarian relations. In my investigation

[516] Heather J. Sharkey, *A History of Muslims, Christians, and Jews in the Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 16–20.

of Rum Orthodox in Lebanon, I advocate for moving beyond dominant academic and public narratives of Shiʿa-Sunni conflicts and Maronite nationalism. I call for scholars to pay attention to different confessions relationally, without isolating them from the broader socio-political context of the country, their ecclesiastical institutions, and their religious practices. In line with this call, this dissertation has placed the present-day experiences of Rum practitioners and the Orthodox community as a whole in the context of historical developments such as the twentieth century Antiochian *nahda* (revival), the civil war and its aftermath, and the structural crises that have unfolded since 2019 in Lebanon.

Collectively, these intricate phenomena led to the internalization of colonial narratives concerning territorial legacies, cultural superiority, the naturalization of sectarian identities, and existential anxieties related to the prevailing social and political influence of sectarian "others." They have also engendered localized theological models and religious institutions promoting social and civic responsibility, welfare programs anchored in Christian ethics, along with religious practices that resist political and legal institutionalizations of sect. Several chapters have highlighted Orthodox ways of living where representations and embodiments of sect, religion, class, kinship, and locality overlapped. Sect-based sensibilities and class hierarchies converged with a social ethos grounded in localized Orthodox worldviews and activated in networks of social assistance and housing provision. Struggles over sectarian influence and territorial domination intersected with aspirations of a rich parish life. Histories of sectarian clashes intertwined with histories of church revivals. Negotiations of Orthodoxy as sect intersected with narratives and experiences of the Orthodox Church as universal and eternal. Rum practitioners navigated between their allegiances to the Antiochian Patriarchate, located in Syria and under Syrian influence, to their nationality as Lebanese, to their sect as legal and political entity, but also to Orthodox regimes of priestly, saintly, and divine authority.

The in-depth focus on a community like the Rum Orthodox disrupts homogenized portrayals of sects in Lebanon by highlighting intra-confessional diversity and hierarchies of power. The pursuit of coherence within the frame of sect as legal or analytical category runs the risk of obscuring the intricate ways in which this concept is worked and reworked through everyday social interactions.[517] The legally ascribed affiliation of an individual to the Rum sect

[517] For a series of historic and ethnographic interventions in the scholarship on sectarianism in Lebanon, see Deeb, Nalbantian, and Sbaiti, *Practicing Sectarianism*.

does not necessarily align with their active membership in the Orthodox Church. Their public status as Rum, as stipulated by bureaucratic state authorities and documented through church records and confessional courts, evokes different sensibilities than their engagement in Orthodox liturgical rituals. Also, a common legal and social identification as Rum does not necessarily equal being a Rum practitioner. "Rum-ness" is sectioned by class hierarchies, sectarian patronage relations, varying levels of socioeconomic access, but also differences of doxa and praxis within church structures. In the words of sociologist Rima Majed,

> sectarian liberalism is to be understood as a social order that can at once exploit and benefit the same group based on the individual's position within the grid of political allegiances, patronage networks, and gender and class privileges.[518]

For example, for the Rum communities in Mazraʿa and Ashrafiyeh, distinctions related to social class, education, and proximity to the Orthodox Archdiocese of Beirut often took precedence over their shared confessional affiliation. Also, in the case of the mustawsaf in Ashrafiyeh and the waqf in Mazraʿa, locality and kinship played significant roles in providing welfare services and housing. In Mazraʿa, the entwined histories of the parish and the urban waqf led to distinctions between Rum as locals and Rum as *ghurabaʾ* (strangers) on the basis of not being from Mazraʿa, and thus not part of localized kinship networks. In Ashrafiyeh, the geographical proximity to the MJO mustawsaf influenced access to its services, often placing other Orthodox communities, such as the one in Mazraʿa, at a disadvantage.

In critical dialogue with language-oriented approaches to studies of Christianity and religious traditions as discursive,[519] I emphasized the sensorial and material dimensions of Orthodoxy. Across the chapters, focus shifted from embodied negotiations of domestic liturgical practice to the material and biological features of church sacraments, and to confessional and sectarian urban aesthetics. My analytical angle moved from the interior of bodies to the exterior of sensorially rich rituals and the spaces in between, emphasizing an Orthodox aesthetic that is ritualized, immersive, and participatory. This aesthetic extended beyond the confines of religious rituals, shaping various experiences and interactions within larger material and social ecologies.[520] In their focus on Orthodox liturgical practice, Chapters 2 and 3 showcased the

[518] Majed, "Sectarian Neoliberalism," in Karam and Majed, *The Lebanon Uprising of 2019*, 78.
[519] Susan Friend Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).
[520] Two engaging examples of this approach are Boulay, *Cosmos, Life, and Liturgy in a Greek Orthodox Village*, and Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast.*

impactful relation between religious practice and an epidemiological phenomenon like the COVID-19 pandemic. The liturgical mediations and sensorial negotiations on regular corporate worship during pandemic-related restrictions were approached in relation to the normative sensorial and theological registers of the Orthodox liturgy. Simultaneously, this approach was not limited to the practical consequences of engaging in customary religious practice but also extended to the epistemic and ontological conundrums of Rum practitioners when it came to surviving and making sense of the pandemic.

My engagement with the dilemmas arising from the crisis around the Holy Communion highlighted the intersections of religious and scientific registers not as representatives for the sacred and the profane, but as interconnected ways for people to sense and make sense of an exceptional event with powerful consequences for their existence. Together, Chapters 2 and 3 highlighted the religious sensorium in a paradoxical frame, namely through its absence. While focusing on the personal negotiations of Rum practitioners when it came to domesticated rituals, I did not discard the structural framing of the liturgy. The focus on the domestication of liturgical practice and the religious imprint of domestic spaces showed the intertwinement of spaces usually deemed separate, but also of sensorial registers of bodies praying and bodies engaging in domestic activities. Moreover, the political and urban dimension of Orthodox religious aesthetics was evident in the lived experiences and embodied memories of Rum in Mazraʿa. In their struggle for a place in the area, the remembered but absent Orthodox imprint in the urban environment stirred an active longing for a remembered past and imagined futures. This particular example alludes to a broader sectarian and confessional urban aesthetics, where religious materiality and sensory cues imprinted in the urban landscape of Beirut act as markers of territorial contestations and sectarian struggles for urban dominance.[521]

On another note, models of ethical becoming within the piety paradigm may create the impression of religious traditions as prime ordering structures, where religious lives are negotiated in relation to its incentives, institutional authorities, and normative visions of practice. This impression is further enhanced by what some scholars have called the "domain-ing" tendency in anthropology, which replicates a sacred-secular dichotomy by separating the sphere

[521] Hafeda, *Negotiating Conflict in Lebanon*, esp. chap. 3.

of religion from politics, economics, medicine, or psychology.[522] In this dissertation, I argued that religiosity and substantive religious doctrines are not the only forces shaping Orthodoxy as a way of living in Lebanon. For instance, Orthodox social formations like parish and church intersected with Rum as sect, each with significant legal, political, and social manifestations. In this context, deferrals to God and priests as sources of authority intersected with the authority of communal and political leaders (*zuʿamaʾ*). Ecumenical and national models of inclusion such as the ones promoted by MJO blended with expectations of social and economic benefits based on sect affiliation. The corporate image of the Orthodox Church as the Body of Christ entwined with the corporate identification of Rum in matters of personal status laws, distribution of public offices, and governmental representation.

My interlocutors looked to Christ, saints, monks, and priests as models of piety and faith in their daily lives, but also wrestled with existential anxieties, economic instability, and moral uncertainties brought on by devastating events that relentlessly impacted their lives. Here the overarching conceptual frame of *crisis* allowed me to work against dichotomies like sacred–profane or religious-sectarian by showing the entanglements of existential modes of being in a world in crisis. Each chapter dealt with some form of structural crisis and its ramifications on the ground level. Chapter 1 centered on dysfunctional public welfare systems and their impact on Lebanese, who became dependent on different forms of clientelism for physical and social survival. Chapters 2 and 3 investigated fractures in liturgical practice in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic and the existential and medical uncertainties it triggered. Chapter 4 contextualized the social and religious life of the Rum community in Mazraʿa within the context of housing precarity in municipal Beirut and local kinship networks. These manifestations of crisis are not approached as isolated phenomena, but rather as integral components of Orthodoxy as a comprehensive way of life. I also worked in and through each of these challenges to consider Orthodox theology and ritual practice in relation to the predicament of ongoing crisis. This approach allowed me to argue for the coexistence of hope in divine provisions and anxieties for uncertain futures, of pathogenic and divine mediations, as well as communal sensibilities alongside neoliberal market principles.

[522] Michael Lambek, "What Is 'Religion' for Anthropology? And What Has Anthropology Brought to 'Religion'?" in Body and Lambek, *A Companion to the Anthropology of Religion*, 5.

### *Anthropology and Theology – Still an Awkward Relation*

Recent calls for decolonization within the social sciences and the humanities have astutely underscored the endurance of Eurocentric epistemic and ontological biases in disciplinary processes of knowledge production, replication, and translation. Productive critical work has been done on decentering categories such as "religion," "personhood," "faith," or "liberal secularism." Yet, more often than not, the conceptual and methodological inspiration for this work comes from outside Christianity or even in opposition to this tradition. My engagement with Orthodox theology as ethnographic practice and embodied doctrine brought into discussion religious worldviews that push the foundations of anthropology as a modern secular enterprise, as well as the more recent critique of the secularized Christian heritage in the anthropology of religion. In this frame, the aspirations of a self "buffered" from nature and divine agency[523] enter into dialogue with human experience that is intrinsically relational to larger divine and environmental assemblages.[524] This dissertation has highlighted relationality within a sacramental economy that brought together divine agency, biodegradable matter and pathogenic agents, and human beings as partakers in communion. It has also underscored relationality along and beyond mediation as the standard for digital and liturgical transformations.

Nevertheless, engaging with Orthodox theology within anthropology as a discipline has prompted questions about the (im)possibility of fully grasping Orthodox ways of living. How do we, as anthropologists, engage with theology beyond practices of conceptual "pick-and-choose" where we selectively adopt theological concepts that resonate with our analytical frameworks and training? How do we navigate interactions with forms of knowledge that do not subscribe to our traditions of critical inquiry? What challenges arise when we engage with theology and its prescriptive, universalist worldviews, while simultaneously upholding our anthropological commitment to embracing diversity? Echoing Yasmin Moll's critique of the secular epistemic biases inherent in calls to decolonize anthropology, can calls for epistemic and ontological diversity accommodate the universal cosmologies of Orthodoxy?[525] Insights into these tensions arose from the holistic tendencies of Orthodox tropes like "sharikeh," and their potential to

[523] This is a reference to Charles Taylor's notion of a "buffered self." *See* Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 25–41.
[524] Sherry B. Ortner, "Practicing Engaged Anthropology," *Anthropology of This Century* 25 (May 2019), online, http://aotcpress.com/articles/practicing-engaged-anthropology/.
[525] Moll, "Can there be a Godly ethnography?"

accommodate "otherness" in its various expressions. I have grappled with such questions, without necessarily providing answers, but rather highlighting the arising tensions of what continues to be an "awkward" relation between anthropology and theology.[526]

At the same time, my focus on Rum practitioners and my ethnographic approach to theology have sensitized me to the social life of theological concepts. These were activated through the religious and social experiences of my interlocutors, shaped by religious institutions as regulatory structures and communal formations, and reactive to the social realities of a country in crisis. Going back to the concept of "sharikeh," the social life of this trope grew as the country was succumbing to devastating crises. It emerged from the pastoral theology of the twentieth century Antiochian *nahda*, and found practical expression through the welfare practices of the MJO mustawsaf. Such was also the case with the expression "*buyutkun sarit kanaʾis*" (your houses have become churches), which I analyzed through the lens of digital mediations and in the frame of Orthodox normative visions of worship in sanctioned spaces.

Last but not least, a subject that has driven this work is the interplay between Christian traditions and projects of social justice. In the aftermath of the 2011 Arab uprisings, the role of religion in Middle Eastern societies sparked a renewed interest within and beyond the region and academia. Engaging with religious traditions in scholarly and public discussions of sectarianism in Lebanon could open new perspectives on the relation between sect, religion, and the secular state. How does a critique against sectarianism look from within religious traditions? What conceptualizations and activations of "civil" can religious organizations like MJO advocate for? What agendas of social, political, and environmental justice can arise from the theological foundations of religious traditions?

As I think about these questions for future research, the initial enthusiasm of the 2019 nationwide protests, the necropolitics of the pandemic, and the uncertainties of a looming economic and political meltdown that defined my fieldwork transformed into coping mechanisms and survival strategies in the context of a precarious everyday defined by structural conditions of economic duress and moral uncertainty. With no substantial reforms in sight and everyday anxieties and tensions on high, politico-sectarian conflicts intermittently flare up and

[526] Joel Robbins, "Afterward: Let's Keep it Awkward: Anthropology, Theology, and Otherness," in Fountain and Wen Lau "Anthropological Theologies: Engagements and Encounters," 329–37, special issue of *Australian Journal of Anthropology*, https://doi.org/10.1111/taja.12055.

subside. In this complex landscape, new religious groups with far-right social agendas and sectarian rhetoric, such as *Junud al-Rab* (Soldiers of God), have emerged.[527] By depending on external financial assistance, relying on sectarian clientelist networks, seeking communal solidarity, and placing hope in divine management, life in the country continues to unfold. The bustling streets of Beirut remain congested with traffic jams. Service and taxi drivers frequently voice their complaints about the rising prices of gasoline. Many Beirutis seek respite from the sweltering heat of Beirut's humid summer days by retreating to mountain villages. I still participate in the Sunday liturgy at the Mar Mikhail and Jubrail Church. The lives of its parish members continue to unfold amid a spectrum of emotions, encompassing hope, humor, criticism, piety, uncertainty, anger, defeat, and reliance on God, saints, *zuʿamaʾ* (communal and political leaders), and priests. These all continue, under different degrees of hope(lessness) that *Allah bidabbir* (God takes care/manages).

[527] Alex Khachachou, "Al-tatarruf marfud masihian . . . La biʿa hadinah li-'Junud al-Rab'" [Extremism is rejected by Christianity . . . There is no nurturing environment for 'Soldiers of the Lord'], December 14, 2022, https://tinyurl.com/2jewwn8m.

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