

Moving and Mixing

The Fluid Liturgical Lives of Antiochian Orthodox and Maronite Women Within the Protestant Churches in Lebanon

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As is often the case, this year's Western Easter coincided with the Eastern Palm Sunday. This coincidence is but one instance where the women I have considered in my dissertation have to make a liturgical choice: would they celebrate Easter or Palm Sunday? Would they go to their mother church or to their husband's? In this dissertation summary I will introduce the field and context I have studied, the methods I have employed as well as the theoretical frame and assumptions. I will then move to give a glimpse of the 6 articles that make up the dissertation and conclude with some closing remarks and observations.

1. Introducing the field

In my research I looked at the liturgical lives of Lebanese women who originally come from Antiochian Orthodox Churches or Maronite Churches and who joined the Lebanese Protestant Churches by virtue of marriage. Every year the minute Reformed Church in Lebanon adds to its numbers dozens of new female members through the door of intermarriage. The great majority of these women come from other Eastern Churches,¹ mostly the Maronite Church and the Antiochian Orthodox Church. Bound by social obligations and abiding by tradition, these women join their husbands' Church, where they are expected to act as Protestant congregants, without any official initiation or prior exposure to the Reformed faith and tradition.

The Protestant Church in Lebanon is a daughter of Anglo-Saxon missionary labor in the nineteenth century, particularly The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM). It has a liturgical heritage similar to that of its New England Reformed initiators. Though changes and adaptations occurred through time, many of its liturgical forms are inspired by the *Book of Common Worship* (1993) developed and used by the Presbyterian Church USA. Its Sunday liturgy and liturgical year confront those from Eastern traditions who

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¹ According to Church registries (1950-2009) these amount up to 90% of marriages.

join it, with a totally different spiritual reality than what they are used to and which they cherish. Eastern Churches with Byzantine and Syriac heritages, even if theologically and liturgically different from each other, share a certain Antiochian discourse and express their faith in a demonstrative style² far different from the didactic and verbal practice of the Protestant tradition.³ An undeniable clash exists between these two liturgical realities.

In my dissertation I looked at women who moved from one liturgical tradition into another. My initial assumption was that the move was one way: from the Orthodox to the Protestant, or from the Maronite to the Protestant.⁴ I intended to investigate what the women bring with them, what they leave behind, and what they acquire in the new environment. However, the research immediately showed that it is not a move similar to migration or conversion but a continuous movement and a creative mixing among several Christian traditions and spaces where borders proved to be porous.⁵

This dissertation picks up these themes from the empirical field and couples them with cultural-anthropological and theological discussions in order to understand what exactly is happening in these practices.

2. Aim, question and approach

In the research I looked at the ‘practices of faith’ of ‘ordinary’ people in their ‘everyday life’. Both from the perspective of the church and the academy, I aimed to understand these practices and the theology(ies) within them and to make them understandable. The research was driven by the unnoticed (liturgical) realities of these many women in the context of the Protestant Churches in

² B. VARGHESE: *West Syrian liturgical theology. Liturgy, worship and society* (Aldershot 2004) 7.

³ M. BARNARD, J. CILLIERS & C. WEPENER: *Worship in the network culture. Liturgical ritual studies, fields and methods, concepts and metaphors* (= *Liturgia condenda* 28) (Leuven / Paris / Walpole 2014) 37-48.

⁴ I therefore started by referring to them as Protestant women as is shown in the title of the very first published article R. NASRALLAH, H. MURRE-VAN DEN BERG & M. BARNARD: ‘Kinetics of healing. Protestant women pledging baptism in Saydnaya orthodox monastery’, in *Studia liturgica* 42 (2012) 270-284. Later, I have realized that a more general ‘Eastern Christian women’ was a more adequate nomenclature.

⁵ Studies on religion and migration as well as identity and migration have informed my study greatly; T. TWEED: *Crossing and dwelling. A theory of religion* (Cambridge, MA 2008); S.H. LEE: ‘Liminality and worship in the Korean American context’ in M.E. BRINKMAN & D. VAN KEULEN (eds.): *Christian identity in cross-cultural perspective* (Zoetermeer 2003); D. KONING: *Importing God. The mission of the Ghanaian Adventist Church and other migrant Churches in the Netherlands* (Amsterdam, VU dissertation 2011); M. KRZYZANOWSKI & R. WODAK: ‘Multiple identities, migration and belonging. “Voices of migrants”’ in C.R. CALDAS-COULTHARD & R. JEDEMA (eds.): *Identity trouble. Critical discourse and contested identities* (New York 2008) 95-119; E. MAYDELL: *The making of cosmopolitan selves. The construction of identity of Russian-speaking immigrants in New Zealand* (Wellington 2010).

Lebanon. By conducting this research, I brought this reality to light and invited the church, the academic world and the women themselves to acknowledge it and have a better understanding of it. My main question was ‘How do these women live their liturgical lives and what theology(ies) do their practices enact?’

Ethnography, particularity and the everyday

Such a question can only be answered using empirical methods. Over a period of six years, I used ethnographic methods to look at and investigate the liturgical lives of more than 27 women. I collected spiritual biographies, conducted in depth interviews, participated in rituals both in public spaces and in the homes, and photographed and videotaped as much as possible.

The observation and the participation were at all times accompanied by interpretations and reflexivity. The practices considered revealed many aspects and layers in the practices of faith. These practices are embedded in and informed by doctrinal and confessional views, which in this case belong to several traditions and which are not clearly separated. Tracing and identifying the various flows in the practices was important. When possible, I investigated how certain aspects are understood and practiced in the Orthodox Church, in the Maronite Church and in the Protestant Church. Doctrinal but also historical tracing was important at every stage before analysis was possible. These three traditions are also layered, and many practices were colored by sub-flows such as Jesuit piety, protestant pietism, enlightenment legacies etc. All these layers are appropriated in personal ways by the women who create their own *bricolage* of practices and of concepts.⁶

I looked at these practices with concepts and theories from cultural anthropology and sociology, as well as in terms of historical developments and doctrinal issues. Having identified the major themes, I frame them and analyze them with the help of theories from various disciplines. When considering the women as a ‘group’, the context of Eastern Christianity but more generally the context of late-modern society, hybridity and fluidity of religion is summoned. When looking at their icons and collections, for example, I first trace the advent of the objects and their historical and doctrinal trajectories and then I have recourse to studies in material religion and religious media to understand what these objects are ‘doing’ in practice.

In this manner every theme called for a different set of disciplines. I referenced late modern studies (Zygmund Bauman, Peter Sloterdijk, Arjun Appadurai), post-colonial studies (Edward Said, Talal Asad), anthropology and sociology of religion (Thomas Tweed, Manuel A. Vasquez, Birgit Meyer), ritual studies (Jonathan Z. Smith, Ronald Grimes, Roy Rappaport, Victor Turner), migration studies, Eastern Christian studies (Heleen Mure-van den Berg, Bernard Heyberger, Willy Jansen), esthetics (David Morgan, Bruno Latour, W.J.T. Mitchell),

⁶ A term coined by Claude Lévi-Strauss and applied by Marcel Barnard to contemporary liturgical practices; see BARNARD, CILLIERS & WEPENER: *Worship in the network culture* 117-130.

and cognitive studies (Mark Johnson) to name few. However, the overarching concern was always the theological implications woven through the many perspectives. This research is thus trans-disciplinary as it interacts with many disciplines,⁷ giving them equal attention and connecting them to each other via the theological concern, in order to reach a holistic understanding of the practices.

Using this methodology and approach I built on an alternative view of theology that is gaining ground today in many circles, particularly in the field of practical theology. What I did is look at 'practices of faith' of 'ordinary people' in their 'everyday life'. This view takes particular and embodied faith practices seriously and arises from ethnographic realities, in order to listen to people rather than speak about them. Christian Scharen and Anna Marie Vigen are the names most associated with such an approach, while neither being the first nor alone in embracing it. Taking Scharen and Vigen's proposal as a general frame for my research, this approach to theology harmonizes with trends in practical theology represented by theologians such as Bonnie Miller McLemore and Barabara McClure. In particular it takes shape in the field of liturgical-ritual studies with theologians such as Marcel Barnard, Cas Wepener, Johan Cilliers, Paul Post, Mirella Klomp and Mary McGann.

A theology in motion

Turning to the women themselves, the research revealed individual liturgical lives and faith practices that often embodied a mingling of different theologies but have certain common themes. These theologies are the actual 'object' of study of this research. As I looked and listened to the women, I deciphered theologies that are shaken by the continuous movement, and sometimes contradiction, among the liturgical traditions, discourses and ontology. This 'shaking' or destabilizing of theological convictions is accompanied by a revitalizing energy that drives the women into creative 'solutions'. These take shape in fluid and varied practices embodying theologies that are neither Orthodox, nor Maronite, nor Protestant, but are personal hybrid theologies that are able to accommodate and cope with all of them. The image of God, the way one relates to God, and the way God relates to creation is redefined.

The results of my research are presented in six articles. The articles are discussions of separate themes that emerged from the empirical data. Though they do overlap and have some recurring notions, they are neither linear nor hierarchical. The articles in this dissertation were published as co-authorships with one, two or three others. The co-authors are my supervisors: Prof. Dr. Marcel Barnard, Prof. Dr. Heleen Murre-van den Berg and Prof. Dr. Martien E. Brinkman who each, with their particular expertise, guided and framed the many aspects of my research.

⁷ Bonnie Miller-McLemore underlines that such an approach is typical – though not exclusive – for women researchers 'who resist the rigid, classificatory boundaries'; see B. MILLER-MCLEMORE: *Christian theology in practice. Discovering a discipline* (Grand Rapids, MI 2012) 31.

From the analysis of the empirical data a number of motifs in different fields emerged. The importance of the body, of material objects, of enactment and performance, of physical movement, and of practical doing was visible on the anthropological and cultural level. On the other hand a need for healing, the importance of feasting, a search for a sense of divine presence, an experience of a feminine dimension of the divine, and an alternative route for religious knowledge, were also perceived from a more theological angle. The six articles that make up this dissertation are the result of various combinations and correlations between these sets of motifs.

In each article I offer sketches and snapshots which, when put together, give an idea and introduce a world but do not cover everything. As Clifford says ‘Cultures do not hold still for their portraits’.⁸ Though each article grapples with sets of motifs in order to make sense of them and present a ‘conclusion’ I also respect the fact that ‘ethnography ought not attempt to tidy the messy contradictions it may find or create a false sense of unity, homogeneity, synthesis’.⁹

Metaphors rather than clear cut theories are thus presented. The articles all begin with an illustrative example from the field and try to use as much ethnographic material as possible in order to convey ‘a story’.

3. The fluid liturgical lives

To start, I describe how the women move between the many liturgical traditions available for them and mix the theological notions and practices as they go, in a *bricolage*. These women, who do not form a physical group but are rather individuals on the move, appropriate the various liturgical styles each in her own personalized way. Proving that the borders between ecclesial structures are porous and flexible, the practices of these women challenge the illusion of liturgical purity. In their practices and their descriptions they easily mix and shuffle concepts and practices from many traditions. They alternate worshiping in The Protestant Church with worshiping in their mother church. They mix the understanding of sacraments, they redesign the liturgical year by incorporating feasts and days from the many traditions. They redefine liturgical theology in a way that does not fit with either one of the known traditions. All this is described in details in the first article: ‘Taking liberties. The fluid liturgical lives of Orthodox and Maronite women within the Protestant Church in Lebanon’, in *The journal of Eastern Christian studies* 65/1-2 (2013) 97-119.

In a second article ‘Itinerant feasting. Eastern Christian women negotiating (physical) presence in the celebration of Easter’, in *Exchange. Journal for missiologi-*

⁸ J. CLIFFORD: ‘Introduction. Partial truths’, in J. CLIFFORD & G.E. MARCUS (eds.): *Writing culture. The poetics and politics of ethnography* (Berkeley, LA / London 1986) 1-26, p. 10.

⁹ Ch. SCHAREN & A.M. VIGEN: ‘Prolegomena’, in IDEM (eds.): *Ethnography as Christian theology and ethics* (London 2011) 3-74, p. 69.

cal and ecumenical research 42 (2013) 319-342, I describe the women's particular feasting manner. I focus on the celebration of Easter and on the way the women move between their mother Church and the Protestant Church where a process of negotiation is taking place. All women considered in this research described how they structure their Easter feast between the two (or more traditions). They pick certain days, such as Good Friday, to celebrate in the mother Church and others to celebrate in the Protestant Church. Starting with the bodily experience of the feast, I analyze how each liturgical context physically orients and temporally locates the women. I explain how the engagement of the body relates to the material experience of presence where the women's body is directed by the architectural structures and their liturgical use. Constantly moving between the different celebrations the women considered create a personal symbolic network where their perception of Christ's presence and absence is challenged. In this weaving of the feasting experiences the women perform their liturgical and sacramental theology.

Focusing on the homes, I distinguish between two main angles. The first highlights the importance of material, particularly visual objects. The second looks at actions and home rituals. These two angles consider the same context yet use different theories and metaphors to understand it. The article 'Rearranging things. How Protestant attitudes shake the objects in the piety of Eastern Christian women' which is accepted to be published by the journal *Material religion* looks at how the objects in the piety of these women are challenged by the presence of the Protestant tradition in their lives. Objects that are normally inconspicuous – even 'invisible' – in their faith collide with Protestant attitudes and are shaken by dissonant theological concepts. Each of these women has a certain collection of objects that she has inherited from her tradition and family. These sacred objects, normally arranged in a home altar, are put into question when confronted with the Protestant tradition. Some women consider ridding themselves of all objects. Yet, these objects, icons, pictures, rocks, candles, oil, water etc. retain something of the holy in them and the women hesitate about their total elimination. In this murky situation, things are defamiliarized and yet re-emerge as active flexible agents with which individual theologies are written and connections are achieved. In the words of Bruno Latour, I explain how the things that furnish the lives of these women are 'defreeze-framed' or shifted and re-centered rather than destroyed or eliminated. Instead of eliminating or 'destroying' these inherited and collected objects the women keep rearranging them and reconsidering them.

From another angle, still looking inside the homes, I consider the women's rituals and everyday practices in 'Kinesthetic piety. Eastern Christian women's varying practices in Protestant homes' which is accepted by the journal *Questions liturgiques*. I describe how they cense their homes, cook their food, and go about their daily occupations. I argue that these practices are ways of knowing God in the body through doing and making. In this particular example, due to the interaction of many theological flows, the women are impelled to revise, change

and vary in their practices. This tinkering and ‘playing’ with the rituals is the arena where they form their theology and their religious knowledge, a knowledge that is mostly non-conceptual.

Not only is physical doing but also physical movement between geographical places meaningful. In the article ‘Kinetics of healing. Protestant women pledging baptism in Saydnaya Orthodox monastery’, in *Studia liturgica* 42 (2012) 270–284, I take the example of a common practice among most of these women to illustrate the function of physical motion. In the example of pledged baptisms in Saydnaya Orthodox monastery, I show how motion relates to illness and the quest for healing. For the women in this particularly complex liturgical make up, a flexible and welcoming place that provides physical movement, meets their situation and facilitates their crossing from one situation to another. Yet this crossing is never definite, on the contrary they keep moving in hope and anticipation.

Finally, I tackle the topic of the Virgin Mary in the article: ‘Which Mary? Eastern Christian women bringing their Mary into the Lebanese Protestant Church’, accepted by the journal *Mission studies. Journal of the international association for mission studies*. Mary is an important player in the piety and lives of the women considered. Moving between the Protestant tradition and their mother tradition sharpens the contrasts in their mind and alerts them to incongruity. Yet, as in all other aspects, the women take the liberty to choose among the many available images of Mary, the Eastern Orthodox Mary, the Biblical Mary, the pre-Vatican II Catholic Mary, the Jesuit Mary or the popular media Mary. They then fashion their own image and relationship with her. An analysis of the selected images shows that Mary helps give various ‘missing’ colors to the women’s experience of God. In particular, her presence as accessible friend, mother and co-sufferer completes the image of the divine rather than competes with it.

These various articles propose a kaleidoscopic image of the liturgical lives of these women where movement, fluidity, variation and personal constructions are obvious. In their unsettled practices of faith one sees their activated search and their faith engagement. The – sometimes contradictory – flows are an incentive for involvement and creativity. This creativity is not always positively valued by the institutional traditions, yet it can still function as critical ally for continuous change.

4. Concluding remarks

‘How these women live their liturgical lives’ and ‘what theology(ies) are enacted through their practices’ turned out to be the same question. The ‘what’ of theology and the ‘how’ of the practices are intrinsically connected. It is therefore but one question that I have asked and by interpreting the practices and the ‘hows’, I presented their theology. In what follows I will sketch some general remarks about this theology(ies).

One of the highlights of these liturgical lives is movement; unstructured continuous movement between physical churches, liturgical traditions, places of worship and pilgrimage sites. I have described the ‘confluences of organic-cultural flows’¹⁰ where past and present, traditions and world views, private and public, material and spiritual, western and eastern flow into each other. Though some would call this hybridity, I looked at what these movements achieve and reveal liturgically and theologically. I have shown in the article ‘Kinetics of healing’ how movement helps in crossing from one situation to another: from a situation of suffering or inadequacy to a situation of healing. Yet this movement also revealed a state of restlessness, where the women realize that complete ‘crossing’ to a final state of healing and joy, to a ‘home’, is not (yet) possible. The movements that they engage in are, in a sense, eschatological as they seek and point to a ‘better’ future situation. Their complex liturgical make up sharpens their realization of the inadequacy of the liturgical forms available and drives them to move around, try different places, practices and times as well as shuffle concepts in expectation.

Another theological notion that comes to the fore in those investigated lives is the ‘immediate’ experience of the divine in the everyday life where a situation of proximity and intimacy with God is obvious. Not only do the women experience presence in the material objects, pictures and food, but also in their daily rituals and practices where intimate, basic knowledge happens. In this organic and natural reliance on God, comes a search for and experience of blessing, healing, sustenance, protection and accompaniment yet only rarely punctuated with the notions of salvation and transformation. Many – particularly feminist¹¹ – theologians highlight this situation as particular to women’s experience of God, a rather immanent God. However, in the lives I looked at, there is always another discourse nudging them. The presence of the Protestant tradition in their lives presses the concepts of salvation and transformation, which in turn perturb the daily practices where fleeting moments of alienation happen.

This experience of God in the here and now, in the material world and the events of life, reveals a certain ontology and a way of relating to God where continuity rather than discontinuity is perceived between this world and the ‘other’; a continuity between the living and the dead, and between the body and the spirit. It is a world view where God is everywhere and in everything all the time. Yet again moments of hesitation occur when this world view is challenged and discontinuity is suggested in the Protestant discourse. In this hesitation – or in Bruno Latour’s words, ‘cracks’¹² – the women are addressed as their deep-

¹⁰ TWEED: *Crossing and dwelling* 54.

¹¹ L. SEXSON: *Ordinarily sacred* (Charlottesville / London 1992); A. BERLIS & A.-M. KORTE: *Alledaags en buitengewoon. Spiritualiteit in vrouwendomeinen* (Vucht 2012); B. MILLER-MCLEMORE: *The Wiley-Blackwell companion to practical theology* (West Sussex 2012).

¹² B. LATOUR: ‘What is iconoclasm? Or is there a world beyond the image wars?’ in B. LATOUR & P. WIEBEL (eds.): *Iconoclasm beyond the image wars in science, religion and art* (Cam-

seated theological images are shaken. Their image of God – an image that proved to be quite complex and in which the saints, the dead, and Mary take part – is thus creatively and continuously revised preventing it from ‘freezing’ or fossilizing.

Not only are the women connected to God and the divine world but they are also simply connected. Their spirituality – despite all the western/modern flows in it – is a spirituality of connectedness and continuity with the living and the dead, with God and the creation, with church and culture, with the many traditions, the different times and places. This connectedness might be seen as a barrier between them and the call for the ‘inner’ and individual experience of the divine or otherwise said the personal salvation experience (or conversion) that is sometimes called for by the Jesuit as well as the pietistic/Evangelical traditions. Though this personalized faith of the women is more elaborately expressed in the private sphere and alone, it is far from individualism. Prayer life for these women is never detached or disconnected. On the contrary it is always about their entire web of connections and within it rather than for the salvation of their own soul. The Protestant discourse that tries to engage the individual in them, teases them to ‘step out’ of their web in order to become actors ‘for’ rather than actors ‘on behalf of’ their web. An ethical imperative strikes them, as they are faced with this situation where instead of bringing or embracing their own web in prayer, cooking, fasting, pilgrimages, and rituals, they feel compelled to turn towards their web as ‘detached’ individuals and take responsibility. To illustrate this I give the example of prayer ‘on behalf of’ one’s children. Many women feel that as they step forward in prayer their children automatically are also brought forth as they are ‘organically’ connected. The Protestant discourse in their situation forces them to disentangle from their children and face their children as individuals with their own personal faith and responsibility and find ways to act ‘for’ them or towards them, for example by teaching, admonishing and encouraging in faith.

Finally these fluid liturgical lives confuse the liturgical experts around the women, even if not always taken seriously. They are literally homemade constructions that cannot be judged nor classified by the onlookers. Even more, they cannot be controlled nor ‘corrected’ by the elite. They are the private ownership of whose life circumstances has launched them on a lifelong journey of liturgical experimentation.

