

RELIGIOUS IDENTITY OF YOUNG AUSTRALIAN MARONITE ADULTS

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Abstract: The research described in this paper examined the religious influence on the lives of a group of young Australian-Lebanese adults who attended a Maronite¹ Catholic Church in Sydney, Australia. Data gathered through qualitative methods of in-depth and focus group interviews were collated using grounded theory, to reveal how religion defined a pattern of beliefs and morals and how it offered spirituality and social structures that guided these thirty three young Maronite adults. It was revealed that the Maronite Catholic faith of these young adults was tightly interwoven with nationality and Lebanese culture.

Maronite identity

Religious identity can be an influential part of people's lives, giving members of a faith tradition a sense of belonging to a community of believers with a distinctive history. So when asked what features / markers distinguish a Maronite, a majority of the participants in this study claimed that the Maronites belonged to an Eastern Catholic Rite and Antiochean Church. Being Maronite was connected with the notion of being other, of belonging to a smaller Catholic group, which appeared to be more favourable than claiming affiliation with the larger Roman Catholic Church. However a small number of the participants stated it was just part of the Catholic Church without any defining difference.

An overwhelming number of the participants in this study did associate their Maronite Catholic identity with a nation.

I believe the most important thing to that question is that the part of being Maronite is that we are the Christians who exist in the Middle East... I'd be very strong on the

¹ A Lebanese ethnic Congregation within the Roman Catholic Church which has its own distinctive Liturgical Rite.

fact that being Maronite there's a fear that Christianity could be totally wiped out of the Middle East.

The Maronite Church and its people preserve closely its Middle Eastern origins and for Maronites in Australia, the link to Lebanon was emphasized. On further enquiry the participants who established themselves as 'Maronite Lebanese' were referring to their culture, 'like the Epiphany your mum will make zlebaya' as one participant commented. So the meaning of religious beliefs can be strongly coloured by cultural contexts. Emphasis on tradition, cultural practices and acts of faith, allowed participants to feel they were participating in a sacred ritual of worship, practised by their forebears.

Tradition-centered lifestyle was also emphasized as part of a Maronite identity. This was observed in one comment, 'it holds onto a lot of the Catholic beliefs that sometimes seem to go by the way side.' Another defining factor in the Maronite identity was the emphasis on family, community and belonging.

A huge sense of family in the cultural tradition of Maronites... the sense of being one with them regardless of what happens in the secular world. There's also a huge emphasis on youth in our Church, Our Lady. So that's an identifier as well. The homilies focus a lot more on the family, the true nature of the family...

What further distinguished the Maronites and provided them with an identity was the way they prayed, particularly in the celebration of the Eucharistic liturgy.

Being Maronite is distinctive in the sense that you feel in Mass a uniqueness because of how it's celebrated... And they give the holy Eucharist time. Like the second half of Mass is dedicated specifically to the Eucharist.

The Maronite Divine Liturgy differs in style from a Roman Catholic Mass. For Eastern Christians, the Eucharistic liturgy is the source of all other meaning in life. This emerged in participants' comments which suggested that at Sunday worship their daily life became united with Christ and offered in sacrifice. In the

identification of being Maronite, the use of Jesus' language of Aramaic, and incense and chants in the Divine Liturgy were also noted.

In liturgical practices, the Maronite Eastern Church performs two sacraments at infancy, and for one participant this constituted a marker, 'when I have certain sacraments like Confirmation being the same time as Baptism.' The saints and emphasis on Mary the Mother of God were also viewed as determining markers. These saints included the Saints Maroun, Charbel, Rafqa and Hardini. As a participant commented, 'I think of all the Lebanese saints and I think of Maronite.' Furthermore, the spirituality of Maronites, with emphasis on sacrifice, was mentioned frequently by the participants, particularly during Lent and Good Friday.

We were taught since little children during Lent to try and give up something we really like. That's a sacrifice... It's part of our religion.

Passion Week, characteristically Antiochene, is very literal and dramatic in following the passion and death of Jesus and is evident in the practices of these young people.

Other characteristics of Maronite identity included the influence of faith on daily life, 'Commitment. Like every week you go to Mass. Every week you go to rosary. You kinda put in your routine, it's who you are.' For another it was about 'a deeper spirituality,' while another noted that a Maronite is one who puts their faith into practice, 'We have no problems in you know believing our faith and talking about faith and... we practice what we believe in.' There was indication that the young Maronite adults were encouraged to view Maronites as a community that 'prays more' and was faithful to the 'traditions,' more so than other Australian church communities, highlighting an 'us and them' attitude. However a small number of participants questioned the relevance of emphasis on 'Maronite' and whether it was significant.

I don't know if it is a positive thing or a negative thing – the promotion of being Maronite.... Who cares if you're Maronite? You're supposed to be pushing if you're closer to God... I haven't discovered anything different.

Some Maronites have accepted a Roman Catholic world view, based on the assumption that culture has little to do with one's faith journey. However, the majority of the participants did participate at the local Maronite parish and have remained committed to Maronite Catholicism. What emerged was a belief in the richness of the Maronite Catholic faith and spirituality that participants believed was not present in Roman Catholic Churches.

A relationship between being Maronite and being Lebanese

An overwhelming majority of the participants stated that being Lebanese was, in their view, connected with a Maronite identity.

For me I think they're almost one and the same. What we believe in as Lebanese, like not religious faith, but what our cultural tradition should be, it sort of links in very strongly with what our spiritual tradition should be. So you go to church and its preaching the same things when you're at home and you're not at church.

This connection was further enforced by the Maronite Church in Australia whose role affirmed ethnic heritage. Central to parish identity were efforts to build an Australian-Lebanese community, offer Arabic language classes, fundraising for Lebanese charities, and observation of ethnic festivals. This connection between a Lebanese identity, one's homeland and religion, has been examined in the recent Maronite Synod (2003-2006):

The Maronite Church will not seek to "Lebanize" emigrants as if all their achievements and their involvement in the life of their new Countries of Expansion were of no value. The expansion has become part of the history of this Church... However, the Maronite presence in the world still needs the Mother Church in Lebanon in order to confirm its identity. If a Western Maronite is not asked to consider himself as a Lebanese citizen, if he wishes to be an American or a Brazilian, then he cannot remain Maronite without integrating into his Maronite Church in Lebanon and without having an organic bonding with her. Otherwise, we shall have

several conceptions of the Maronite identity, unable to survive in a vast cultural and spiritual environment that can assimilate minorities very easily.²

Though the Synod acknowledged that the host nation will transform the Maronite identity, the Synod insisted on maintaining the religious connection to Lebanon. The question of the link between Maronite and Lebanese identity will remain part of the assumed religious identity, until the time when the Synod will acknowledge that a Maronite may not necessarily be a 'Lebanese citizen.' Until then, the Maronite Church will linger in its true transformation into a universal church.

In summary, the majority of the participants accentuated the connection between Maronite religious faith and one's Lebanese identity. Religiosity and ethnicity, through historical processes, fused with one another and have been maintained in that relationship through the particular nature of Australian multiculturalism. Yet the Maronite Church has ignored the Australian context as observed in the name of the parish as 'Our Lady of Lebanon,' despite being part of Australian life. The emphasis on Maronite and Lebanon has failed to grasp the significance of time and place in participants' spirituality. The social context of western urban Sydney needs to be considered in its multicultural and pluralistic context if the Church is to be relevant at the local level.

Identity forged by one's Religious faith

Hunter noted that the role of religion in the life of ethnic communities in Australia was at the very heart of the morality, attitudes and traditions that formed their family and national values. She also noted that migrants brought their life experiences with them and discussions often centred around family and friends, politics, economics and events 'back home.'³ So culture is a major

² Patriarchal Maronite Synod, 'The Maronite Church in her Global Expansion,' Text 4, 2006: paragraph 39.

³ Helen Hunter, 'Multicultural Ministry in Australia,' in *Ministry in Australian Churches*, ed. William Tabbernee (Melbourne: Joint Board of Christian Education, 1987), 137.

influence of religious expression, as in turn the experience of home life shapes the individual's faith and spirituality and religion in turn influences one's identity and life choices.

Behavioural Patterns

Most participants strongly agreed that the Maronite faith influenced their identity, one area being morals and values. While being moral is not identical to being religious, most Australians view religion as valuable in encouraging people to act morally. When morality is seen as a form of spirituality, it is about people who are committed to the well-being of others and the wider community.⁴ Specifically a number of respondents expressed that their sexual and marriage choices were based on Maronite teachings.

You become selective in the important choices you have to make in life, like marriage. You long to find someone who has what you have spiritually. I can't see anyone outside the Maronites having what I have.

The importance of religion as a form of exclusive social identity was also illustrated in a study by Batrouney where the participant women said they preferred their children to marry a person of their faith, even if they were not Lebanese.⁵ Australian statistics on marriage among children of Lebanese background revealed that 'in-group' marriage rates for Lebanese brides and grooms were among the highest for any country-of-origin group.

Another way in which religion influenced participants' identity was in the choice of friendships. The fact that most participants chose Lebanese friends, may explain why many participants included Lebanese as part of their national identity.

⁴ Philip Hughes, *Putting Life Together. Findings from Australian Youth Spirituality Research* (Christian Research Association. Victoria: Fairfield Press, 2007), 109.

⁵ Trevor Batrouney, 'Lebanese-Australian families' in *Families and Cultural Diversity in Australia*, edited by Robyn Hartley (NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1995), 202.

Socially it's easier to integrate with people who have the same beliefs as you because it's easier to talk to them.... Mostly Lebanese. I do have Orthodox friends. It's easier to talk to them about things like, 'Oh I'm going to Church on Sunday' or 'I'm going on a retreat'.

Respondents all indicated that their group of friends were often Lebanese Maronite or other Christian Lebanese or Christians of other nationalities. Yet the most enduring bonds of friendships were among their Lebanese Maronite friends, as they better understood them and shared the same cultural practices, religious views and moral stances. Though not examined here, it is likely that the tight knit community and extended families also led to a closer bonding with Lebanese Maronites.

Social behaviour patterns were also influenced by religion.

Yes because I don't do things that I know God wouldn't be proud of. I don't take drugs or drink or go out because I don't want my personality or me to do something that God won't be proud of.

Maronite religious identity contributed to the career choices of the participants, their meaning in life, as well as determining how they treated others.

Separateness Marker

There were participants who commented that their religious identity defined them against other cultures and religions. Racism, as experienced in Australia toward those of Middle Eastern origin, led participants to use their Maronite faith as a separateness marker, and in so doing, 'othering' those who were Muslim.

Whenever I meet new people it's like I want to tell them straight away I'm Maronite so please don't think anything of me. Not anything of me but I just wanna make sure that I don't want you to assume that I'm Muslim because I am Lebanese. I don't want you to go to any kind of assumptions. Yeah I'm pretty up front with myself in that sense.

The stigma of being labelled as 'Lebanese-Muslim' contributed to a particular identity construction in which religion was used to exclude others for the

coherency of their identity. The Maronite Synod noted that ‘Like other Christian youth, Maronite young people are divided into two major currents regarding relations with Muslims. First, and due to the effects of the latest war, some see no avail in embarking on dialogue with Muslims.’⁶ Yet the Synod went on to say:

Many Church institutions have instigated Christian, and especially Maronite, young people to embark on dialogue with their Muslim counterparts.⁷

However dialogue between Lebanese Christians and Muslims in Australia are not likely to advance in the foreseeable future as participants indicated an enforced separation. Yet both Maronites and Muslims of Lebanese background face similar questions and issues as they grow up in multicultural Australia. There is obvious groundwork that needs to be initiated.

Conclusion

The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) heralded an era where the unity of the Church would be built on diversity of cultures within a communion of faith, hope and love:

The Church learned early in its history to express the Christian message in the concepts and languages of different peoples... this kind of adaptation and preaching of the revealed word must ever be the law of evangelisation. In this way it is possible to create in every country the possibility of expressing the message of Christ in suitable terms and to foster vital contact and exchange between the church and different cultures.⁸

This implies that symbols, devotions, customs and traditions adopted by ethnic Catholics vary in meaning and significance, and yet are acknowledged by the Church as important in one’s faith expression. For the young Maronites of this

⁶ Patriarchal Maronite Synod, ‘Introduction: A Prophetic Mission in the Heart of the Church,’ 2006: paragraph 38.

⁷ Patriarchal Maronite Synod, ‘Introduction: A Prophetic Mission in the Heart of the Church,’ 2006: paragraph 39.

⁸ Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, edited by Austin Flannery O.P. (N.Y: Costello Publishing, 1982), article 44.

study participation at a Maronite Catholic Divine Liturgy that included Aramaic, contributed to a Maronite Catholic identity. Other defining characteristics of the Maronite religion were emphasis on family, connection with Lebanon, an Antiochean Rite, particular emphasis on Maronite Saints including Saint Charbel and the importance of the Virgin Mary.

The Maronite Church was instrumental in consolidating a sense of strong Lebanese group unity and exclusivity by portraying Maronites as a ‘true’ type of Christian against other denominations and as separate to a Lebanese Muslim identity. Maronite faith influenced the participants’ morals and values which in turn determined their social life and decision-making. The participants held Lebanese Maronite views regarding sexual morality and gender relations, displaying a critical stance towards Australian culture and values in these respects. Meaning in life was found through Church teaching and friends were usually young adults who were Lebanese and Maronite.

This study has demonstrated how Maronite ethnic religion remains highly salient for the second generation young Maronite adults under certain situational contexts. Its nature is focused on maintenance of Lebanese culture, moral imperatives, social networks and Church community. The religious participation of Australian Maronites tended to be accompanied by a high degree of ethnic identity and consciousness, suggesting that Church participation may be strongly linked to the issue of ethnicity for these young Maronite adults.

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