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Spiritual ambiguity in interfaith humanitarianism: Local faith communities, Syrian refugees, and Muslim–Christian encounters in Lebanon and Jordan

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Abstract

Literature on faith-based responses to forced displacement has described, but not fully unpacked or theorized cross-religion humanitarian aid in 'South–South' contexts. This article interrogates the various ambiguities, particularly spiritual ambiguities, inherent in faith-based humanitarianism where local providers are the minority religion. In unpacking these, we identify three modes of faith-based aid to Muslim Syrian refugees by local churches and Christian charities in Lebanon and Jordan: hospitality, humanitarian, and spiritual development. These may present successively deeper opportunities for fostering openness to spiritual pluralism. We argue for greater appreciation of what we call spiritual ambiguity in interfaith humanitarianism. While humanitarian space is always shaped by a web of power relations, it is vital to develop new, more nuanced ways of thinking about cross-religious faith-based humanitarianism beyond Western neo-colonialism or refugee strategizing.

Keywords: Humanitarianism, Muslim-Christian, Syrian Refugees, Lebanon, Jordan

1. Introduction

Since the early 2000s, scholars have addressed faith-based responses to forced displacement from the Global South, analysing perspectives of external donors, host communities, Global North aid workers, and the displaced (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2011a). Cases of faith-based humanitarian aid to those of a different religious identity have been described, but not fully unpacked or theorized, particularly in locally led 'South–South' cases. This article interrogates the various ambiguities, particularly spiritual ambiguities, inherent in faith-based humanitarianism where local providers are the minority religion. In unpacking these, we identify three modes of locally led ('South–South'), faith-based

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humanitarian response to Muslim and Christian Syrian refugees by churches and Christian religious charities in Lebanon and Jordan. These are a hospitality mode, humanitarian mode, and spiritual development mode. Our data allows us to analyse how Christian humanitarians across nine denominations understand and conceptualise Muslim–Christian, forced migrant-aid provider encounters. Further research would be needed to fully assess how Syrians, particularly Muslim Syrians, see these encounters. But we do not foreclose the possibility that forced migrants are spiritual agents, even in situations simultaneously shaped by aid dependency for daily needs, as the refugee studies literature shows how agency and dependency co-exist.

Bringing the literature on faith-based humanitarianism directly into conversation with the literature on religious pluralism for the first time, we ask: how do local Christian faith communities support Muslim refugees and to what extent might these practices offer or curtail opportunities for fostering a richer spiritual pluralism between Christians and Syrian Muslims than the *modus operandi* of Christian–Muslim coexistence already found among Jordanians and Lebanese? Following Eck (2006), we understand such pluralism as active, *equitable* engagement with, openness towards, and curiosity about the habits, rituals, and faith of others, across religious divides. Interrogating humanitarian aid as a vehicle for possible generation of spiritual pluralism across deep religious identity divides, this article adds a new dimension to the discussion of faith-based humanitarianism in Jordan and Lebanon (Ager, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Ager 2015; Eghdamian 2017; Wagner 2018a). It also further extends enquiry on how the Syrian civil war has impacted Muslim–Christian coexistence in neighbouring countries (Can 2017; Dağtaş 2018).

We argue for greater appreciation of the *multiple layers of ambiguity, particularly spiritual ambiguity, found within interfaith humanitarianism*. The implications of interfaith humanitarianism for faith and lived spirituality are not yet fully analysed by existing literature on faith-based humanitarianism, which highlights sensitivities towards (and is often critical of) Christian evangelism of non-Christians (cf. Wilson 2011; Ngo 2018; Wagner 2018b) or stresses collective identity over faith or ritual (Orji 2011; Kpughe 2017; Wilkinson 2018), including how actors strategically politicize identity in cross-religious humanitarian encounters (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2011b; Horstmann 2011). For Christians serving Muslim refugees in Lebanon and Jordan, lived religious ritual, faith commitments, ethical subjectivity, and individual as well as collective identity are inextricable from giving of themselves. For Christians, these encounters are always ambiguous, not only because of a power disparity between those helping and those receiving aid but also because aid provided by churches and Christian charities may be seen by providers, recipients, and the wider host community as brushing up against the boundaries of Muslim and Christian communal identities, habitus and tenets of the faith. In Jordan and Lebanon, there is a *modus vivendi* between Christians and the Muslim majority which includes the maintenance of firm identity and some social boundaries between the groups and little discussion of faith, ritual or theology among the laity.

Traditional, long-established churches and associated charitable bodies in Jordan and Lebanon seek not to transgress this *modus vivendi* in their respective societies while simultaneously seeking to reach out and transcend religious and national boundaries as faithful Christians called to love their neighbour. Those newer churches and charities with a more evangelical orientation optimistically see forced displacement as having latent spiritual

potential for Muslim refugees to explore Christian beliefs. However, they too approach transgression of the Muslim–Christian identity boundary with caution, often supporting Muslim exploration of Christian faith without formal conversion.

We first position our argument about ambiguities of spiritual pluralism in interfaith humanitarian encounters in Lebanon and Jordan within parallel literature on faith-based humanitarianism and religious pluralism, highlighting the particularities of Christian minorities in a Muslim majority, Arab context. We then set out the contexts, comparing experiences of Syrian refugees and patterns of day-to-day Muslim–Christian coexistence and competition in Lebanon and Jordan. We subsequently present three modes of response by churches and religious charities before analysing the ways in which these modes are shaped by ambiguity, simultaneously fostering and foreclosing potential Muslim–Christian spiritual pluralism beyond day-to-day coexistence in Jordan and Lebanon. We argue that these ambiguities operate across multiple levels: between guests and hosts, amongst local faith communities and within individual hearts.

2. ‘Interfaith’ humanitarianism and ambiguities of spiritual pluralism

Within a growing literature on faith-based humanitarianism, several scholars have attended to its ambiguities. Our case studies both support and further nuance their observations. For example, [Caldwell \(2017: 5–7\)](#) has noted that ‘private and public acts of care and kindness’ are often ‘shaped by a practical philosophy of goodness and kindness’ rather than theological tenets. We also observed the ‘practical philosophy’ of Arab hospitality, particularly in Jordan where Bedouin values resonate. However, our evidence, particularly from Arab evangelical churches, both supports and problematizes Caldwell’s argument that Western-centric notions of ‘faith’ do not adequately capture such actions. For a Christian minority, faith is a key part of identity distinction from the Muslim majority and how they describe their actions. [Halvorson \(2012\)](#) describes the fusion of material aid and spiritual values, problematizing distinctions between them. We also observed blurring, particularly but not exclusively among evangelical churches engaged in teaching, offering prayer and emotional support, and fostering community building. However, we also saw practices of distinction-making between the material and spiritual, particularly among traditional churches offering informal hospitality within the community but also faith-based charities engaged in more formal aid distribution. [Nguyen \(2013\)](#) highlighted the Christian genealogy of international humanitarianism which echoes even in ostensibly ‘secular’ NGO practices. Similarly, in Jordan and Lebanon where religion is so central to public and private life, nearly all charitable work is ‘faith-influenced’ ([El Nakib and Ager 2015: 4](#)). As others have observed, Lebanese and Jordanian Christian actors offering hospitality or formal aid distribution sometimes strategically echo international humanitarian discourse with funders ([Kraft 2015](#)), but not always.

However, another layer of ambiguity we discuss here has not yet been captured: how do Lebanese and Jordanian Christians both show ‘care and kindness’ ([Caldwell 2017](#)) and engage with Syrian Muslims spiritually across religious and national identity divides in

contexts where exclusive religious identity difference is woven into the economic, political, and legal fabric of society? Exceptionally, Kraft's (2017) nuanced study of Syrian Muslim refugee religious encounters with Lebanese Evangelical churches engages with this complexity. In addition to receiving humanitarian aid, social care and access to community networks through church services, Bible studies, and social events, they also received spiritual and emotional support: trauma counselling, private prayer, and religious teaching in response to Syrian curiosity about Jesus and the *enjeel* (New Testament). Kraft (2017) demonstrates that while many Syrian Muslims engaged with local church conversion processes, few officially adopted a new Christian identity. As she explains, some Syrians, 'embraced Christian practices, found encouragement in Christian beliefs, and enjoyed Christian rituals, although without any distinct change to their identity as Syrian Muslims and even only for a brief period' (Kraft 2017: 233). Such 'mixing and matching' (Sinha 2009) of religious practices and ideas among Syrian refugees is a consequence of multiple overlapping factors: a traumatic break with former identities and past lives due to violent displacement; a new social context of greater religious freedoms and opportunities to explore other beliefs; and support of a new religious community and its leaders. Studies show that displacement and trauma can result in increased religious coping strategies articulated as everyday spiritual experiences (Currier et al. 2013). Theological beliefs about human suffering, trials of faith and God's will, which enable individuals to make sense of their trauma, underpin these coping strategies (Hasanov and Shirinov 2017). Some refugees and migrants may find strength in religious exploration outside their own identity, which either replaces or is integrated into their belief system to help them adapt and adjust to their new environment (Winland 1994).

Kraft's work begs important questions about the complexities of interreligious engagement under conditions of forced displacement. Questions of faith and navigating spiritual ambiguity happen not just among the displaced, but also among those helping them (cf. Scherz 2018). We build upon Kraft's insights as we attempt to understand, using a broader range of examples from Lebanon and Jordan, how or if faith-based humanitarianism poses opportunities for an openness to greater spiritual pluralism with Muslims among Christian humanitarians, among congregations and within individual hearts of leaders and laity.

We understand spiritual pluralism as a rich spiritual and interpersonal connection between people, across faith and identity (religious, national, and social class) divides. It is grounded in the life lived side by side in shared space (Bahloul 1996) and 'everyday civility and coexistence ... based on shared experiences and common economic and political institutions' (Rabo 2012: 90–1). But it also features active curiosity and empathy about the 'spiritual depths' of the Other, beyond religious practices and curiosity and reflexivity about one's own faith and values. We use curiosity, openness, and empathy as essential criteria, rather than mixed or shared practices or identities. Extending Tweed's (2008) observation that religions are always in motion, we think openness to spiritual pluralism is also ever-in-motion, waxing, and waning.

Spiritual pluralism in its richest manifestation includes deep inter-religious engagement where participants deal consciously with religious content, their own and that of their interlocutors—ritual, texts, law, theology, places of worship, 'potentially incommensurable' values, and ontological beliefs (Corstange 2012: 121). This may take many forms:

interfaith theological discussions, joint rituals, shared worship spaces, and folk religious borrowing. We are interested in how people ‘do the hard work’, facing uncompromisable issues head-on, allowing new spiritual, philosophical, or theological questions to be asked.

The Eastern Mediterranean is an interesting place to explore these things because analysts and residents often praise its ‘religious mosaic’ as unique (Riis 2007), a legacy of trade, migration, and multicultural empires. Members of the Levantine multireligious mosaic have lived in close proximity, fought, ignored, traded, helped, and sometimes inter-married for centuries (Gutkowski 2016; Makdisi 2019). Everyday relations may include cooperation, close friendships or intermarriage but most often reflect ‘cosmopolitanism-light’, where ‘cultural and religious diversity is tolerated but not fully embraced, apathetically acknowledged but not fully understood or respected’ (Larkin 2013: 109–10).

3. Context: Muslim–Christian coexistence in Lebanon and Jordan and the Syrian refugee crisis

During autumn of 2018, we carried out 25 key informant interviews, in Arabic and English, in Lebanon and Jordan, with local religious leaders (across nine Christian denominations) and eight faith-based NGOs working with Syrian refugees and host communities. Informants were identified and approached through our previous research networks and snowballing techniques; interviews were conducted on church premises, cafes, and in offices. Given the sensitivity of the topic, some informants preferred to remain anonymous, so in these interviews, we refer only to the denomination and location. Interviews with academics, journalists, and members of civil society were further substantiated by observation at six aid delivery sites in Beirut, Beqaa, Amman, Zarqa, and Mafraq. Interview data were contextualized and triangulated by qualitative textual analysis (Kuckartz 2014) of Arab and Western civil society, government and INGO reports on Syrian refugees and their host communities and Arabic- and English-language media sources in Lebanon and Jordan, to achieve resonance, authenticity, and credibility in interpretation (Whittemore, Chase and Mandle 2001).

Long-standing parameters of Muslim–Christian ‘coexistence’ and state-religion arrangements shape what types of spiritual pluralism Syrians and their hosts find possible to imagine and enact. In Jordan, the large Sunni majority (97 per cent) is publicly hegemonic, with approximately 150,000 Christians (1.8 per cent), 14,000 Druze, and small numbers of Shi’a and Bahai (OIRF 2019). The 1928 *Organic Law for the Emirate of Transjordan* established Islam as the religion of state and monarch, as well as freedom of conscience for minorities (Chatelard 2010: 477). The Jordanian constitution (1952), similar to Lebanon, followed the Ottoman *tanzimat* system, granting rights to Christians on a communal basis (Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholic [Melkite], Armenian Orthodox, Latin [Roman Catholic], Anglican, Maronite, Syrian Orthodox, Evangelical Lutheran, and Seventh Day Adventist), and other Christian churches have subsequently been granted official status (Presbyterian and Free Evangelical). However, Sunni Islam fully saturates

public life and everyday habitus, with minorities, including Christians, adopting most features of this (Droeber 2012). Lebanon's public life, conversely, is religiously diverse, with 17 different Christian (34.9–19.3 per cent Maronite and 6.8 per cent Greek Orthodox) and Muslim (65.1–29.4 per cent Sunni, 29.4 per cent Shia, and 5.5 per cent Druze) sects and a number of refugee communities—Armenians, Palestinians, and Syrians (Salloukh et al. 2015: 14).

In Jordan, Christians have been over-represented in state institutions, including parliament, government ministries, and the army, with East Bankers benefiting from positive discrimination for Christians (Gandolfo 2008: 449–55). A complex system of interdependence between the churches and the monarchy developed which allows the churches a certain degree of autonomy but where they also support the regime both practically and discursively through their social institutions (hospitals, schools, orphanages, retirement homes, dispensaries, and maternity clinics), filling gaps in welfare provision (Chatelard 2010: 501). In contrast, in Lebanon, there is a sectarian power-sharing democratic system based on confessional quotas with a Maronite President, Sunni Prime Minister, and Shi'a speaker of the House. Inherent religious diversity has been celebrated as a source of Lebanese cosmopolitanism, embodying Chiha's 'Unity in Diversity' philosophy, yet at times, it has been demonised as a catalyst for communal violence and fragmentation (Larkin 2012: 24). Lebanon's tumultuous history attests to both pragmatic shared coexistence (*al-ʿaysh al-mushtarak*) alongside episodes of sectarian violence shaped by substate loyalties, class struggles, and regional geopolitics. The Lebanese state was born out of religious and political compromise (National Pact 1943; Ta'if Accord 1989) and it continues to embed sectarian dynamics through its allocation of public services, economic resources and personal status laws (Makdisi 2019).

While Jordanian churches have lost much of their communal authority since the middle of the 20th century, they have helped people maintain Christian identity in a Muslim state (Gandolfo 2008: 441), flagging Christian presence in the public sphere which has become increasingly Islamized since the 1980s. Similarly, within Lebanon, Christian confessional authorities remain formidable loci of power through personal status courts (marriage, divorce, and inheritance), the education system, wealthy religious endowments, and employment of clerics. Christians have more public influence than in Jordan due to the larger size of the Christian community, Lebanon's religiously diverse public sphere, and the Maronite presidency within the power-sharing system. There remains a significant interdependence between traditional Christian leaders and the Lebanese State as they are invested in preserving a political system that maintains their power and privilege (Henley 2008; Baroudi and Tabar 2009).

Both Lebanon and Jordan share powerful state and social discourses about harmonious Muslim–Christian coexistence which in practice have limits. In Jordan, there are long-standing controversies around: intermarriage and the application of inheritance law; pressure (real and feared) on Christian women to convert to Islam; the national Ministry of Education curriculum which privileges Islam (Chatelard 2010: 499); demographic Christian decline due to migration and low birth rates; and since the 2005 Al-Qaeda attacks in Amman fears of jihadist violence. Unlike Jordan, Lebanese Christians do not fear erosion of their faith or cultural identity but rather their demographic demise due to

migration and lack of employment opportunities, which are bound up with post-Ta'if state weakness and state corruption.

How both states and civil societies have responded to Syrians and how Syrians experience life in Lebanon and Jordan has shaped relationship between guests and hosts, in turn setting parameters for when, how and if Christian openness to spiritual pluralism becomes possible. There are important similarities between the two states. Both have hosted waves of victims of forced displacement since the 1948 Arab–Israeli war, but neither is a party to the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees or its 1967 protocol (Yahya 2018). They both host high numbers of Syrians per capita—1.5 million in Lebanon (a quarter of the population) and 1.3 million in Jordan (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees UNHCR, 2021)—mainly in urban areas, often among other forcibly displaced. The long duration of the Syrian war has exacerbated ongoing economic crises, straining social cohesion and integration, with Lebanese fearing violent spillover and East Banker Jordanians fearing loss of power vis-a-vis refugee populations, including Palestinians and Iraqis (Yahya 2018). While Syrians have found themselves the recipients of informal aid in the local communities in which they live, they are also subject to unscrupulous landlords and employers, with limited opportunities to express collective grievances. However, there remain key differences between the two states' approaches.

The Jordanian government has adopted a clear legal and policy framework towards Syrian migrants, working in conjunction with UNHCR and other global civil society organisations to establish five refugee camps and manage the provision of subsistence, housing, and education and to regulate employment. Jordanian civil society organisations, including those which touch on religion, operate in a more highly regulated environment than in Lebanon, which impacts Faith Based Organisations (FBOs) working with Syrians. In Lebanon, sensitivities over three decades of Syrian interference in Lebanon, and a refusal to adopt a robust state-led framework towards Syrian migrants have combined to produce a chaotic environment where NGOs and civil society organisations, including churches and FBOs, drive much of the aid response to Syrians in urban settings (Beirut, Tripoli, and Zahle) and informal tented settlements in the Beqaa and Northern Akkar (Fakhoury 2019). This ambivalent Lebanese policy, which Nassar and Stel (2019) label strategic 'institutional ambiguity' exacerbates Syrian uncertainty and precariousness, fragmenting humanitarian responses while enabling local actors and FBOs to have greater latitude to act, beyond the purview of the state. This permissive and fluid Lebanese climate is also reflected in refugee attitudes, with some Syrians (Sunni Muslim) during our research expressing a preference to live in Christian majority neighbourhoods and villages or to seek aid from churches rather than from mosques. Such responses certainly reveal pragmatic refugee calculations but arguably they also suggest an openness to pluralistic encounters, despite ongoing sectarian fears and tensions.

4. Data: FBOs

Lebanese and Jordanian Church and Local Faith Community (LFC) responses to Syrian refugees are varied and dynamic across the nine denominations we studied, often

reflecting diverging attitudes of leaders and congregations, theological traditions of inter-religious engagement, and transnational networks and funding. Such encounters also attest to the complex intersection of ‘Pan-Arab hospitality’, in which Syrians are conceived as guests (with accompanying obligations) and particular histories and patterns of Lebanese–Syrian and Jordanian–Syrian relations (Mason 2011). From our research, three distinct church and LFC responses can be observed: a hospitality mode, humanitarian mode, and a spiritual development mode. These are not exclusive and at times overlap but they reveal particular modes which shape the trajectories and boundaries of pluralistic encounters.

4.1 Hospitality

‘Arab hospitality enabled Lebanese doors to be opened to Syrian refugees. The love of Jesus allowed for Lebanese hearts to be opened’. (Baptist Pastor, Ras Beirut)

While Arab hospitality is a significant public discourse utilised to explain and champion local responses to Syrian refugees, studies have also warned of its detrimental capacity to act as a social control mechanism in which ‘hosts impose their rule over guests by enforcing spatial boundaries and choreographies’ (Wagner 2018a: 37). As Derrida and Dufourmantele (2000: 81) suggest, absolute hospitality (unlimited openness without reciprocity) is always in negotiation with the lived reality of conditional hospitality in which ‘exclusion and inclusion are inseparable in the same moment’. This tension is very evident in the response of a number of traditional established churches in Lebanon and Jordan (Maronite, Greek Orthodox, and Syrian Orthodox) in which hospitality is selective (favouring Syrian Christian refugees), conditional, and clearly demarcates spatial and communal boundaries.

In both Jordan and Lebanon, since the onset of the Syrian conflict, churches have provided Syrian Christian refugees with immediate shelter (in church buildings), food, and social provision, legal advice and education. The Chaldean Diocese at the Parish of St. Elias in Beirut ran programs to help refugees with rent, medical expenses, religious catechism but also education with a new school serving over 100 children (Brockhaus 2018). Syrian Armenian refugees from Aleppo, have also been supported in the Eastern Beirut suburb of Bourj Hammoud, through long-established Armenian networks, churches and political parties like Tashnak, keen to revive the ‘Armenian identity of Bourj Hammoud and maintain its influence within the municipality’ (Madoré 2016). Indeed, middle-class Syrian Christians have been more readily assimilated into Lebanese society due to their class background and pre-existing social connections. The situation in Jordan is different, however, as Syrian and Iraqi Christians have often seen Jordan as a temporary, transit point while rural Muslims are better able to assimilate. For example, a Syrian Orthodox priest in Amman, whose church helped 430 Orthodox families from Iraq and Syria, confirmed that refugees from Mosul, in his opinion, were unable to ever return ‘as they can no longer live with Muslims (from Mosul)’ as they are rejected as ‘kafir and non-believers’. Consequently, most of these families are trying to permanently immigrate ‘to Australia, to Canada, to America’.

In the traditional churches of Jordan and Lebanon, the same level of hospitality towards Syrian Christian refugees has not been extended to Syrian Muslim refugees over the long term. In Jordan, the reasons are complex: limited church funds, fear of Daesh, fear of being accused of proselytism (which is illegal) or of exploiting Muslim vulnerability. As the Syrian Orthodox father in Amman explained, 'We don't like to speak about religion with the Muslim [refugees]. Just the relationship is social . . . it's not about religion- because they are sensitive about this'. In Lebanon, there is less fear over religious sensibilities but more emphasis on historic national sensitivities, with wide held resentment over Syria's role in the Lebanese civil war and Syrian influence in post-Ta'rif politics. A national poll conducted in 2013 to gauge Lebanese attitudes towards the refugee influx, unsurprisingly found 61 per cent of Lebanese were not comfortable with Syrians living as close neighbours but this rose to 78 per cent amongst Maronite respondents (Christophersen et al. 2013: 7). The antipathy and prejudice towards Syrian refugees, despite Lebanon's historic ties and organic connections, is exacerbated by contemporary Lebanese fears over the Syrian impact on their economy, religious demographic balance, and fragile power-sharing arrangements. Some Lebanese Christian leaders have politicised such fears, with the Maronite Patriarch Beshara al-Rai, urging quicker repatriation of Syrian refugees, who are 'snatching (the Lebanese people's) daily bread from their mouths, throwing them into a state of poverty and deprivation' (cited in Francis, 2017). Economic frustrations were also expressed by Jordanian Christian leaders, who felt that others were exploiting and manipulating Syria aid money rather than focusing on local needs. Bishop Archimandrite Innokentios of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate in Jerusalem and Madaaba, critically recalled,

In Madaaba, NGOs neglected education for Syrian refugees. At our school we provided evening classes and activities for refugees . . . Our Christian communities are under growing pressure but still we provided aid and support. Unlike the mosques and Muslim communities who were taking a cut from refugee aid, we received nothing in return.

Traditional church responses are perhaps best characterised as haphazard, with the time-limited provision of emergency accommodation and food support rather than strategic outreach. Yet these highly visible historic churches do provide silent reflective spaces for Syrian refugees in need of quiet contemplation and prayer. As one Reverend from a Lutheran church in Amman recounted:

In our church services, every Sunday if you come to the service, we experience some young veiled women [Muslim refugees] coming into the church, lighting a candle, sitting for sometimes the whole service, and then they quit peacefully. So, I find also this is a very good way of helping people . . . welcoming without any single words, and some of the women coming are of Iraqi and Syrian backgrounds. They are not shy at all to come with their full dress (hijab), and the candle holder is near the altar. So, to me this speaks much more than words. Sometimes counselling . . . it is not only words. Just sometimes if you put your hand on the troubled person it is a kind of counselling . . . spiritual counselling. And always, I find new faces coming. So, we are not converting Muslims, but we are telling everyone coming here: you can feel spiritually safe.

For this Christian leader, his church building provides a welcome sanctuary for Syrian Muslim refugees to enter anonymously, listen to the service, light a candle, or just to still their hearts and minds. This is a consequence of both Arab hospitality and a Christian theology of love, offering acceptance and non-verbal support while excluding any attempt at proselytism or conversion. Fliche (2013: 165) writing on Turkish Muslim attendance at St. Antony's church in Istanbul similarly observes what he calls 'exopraxy' or 'religious practice at the place of "the other"', as Muslims (particularly women) often come to light a candle or pray about health, family problems, or protection from evil. This may be a transgression of religious norms, but such Muslims welcome the opportunity to 'pray without any desire to convert', demonstrating 'practices of hope do not care about denominational boundaries.' (Fliche 2013: 172) Syrian refugees in Amman may be similarly enacting religious practices of hope, but while traditional churches offer free access to their premises and sanctuaries, they do not readily provide easy entry into the church community. As the Lutheran pastor explains,

I was surprised at some [church members] saying 'why are the Muslims coming here? Maybe they are coming to explode the church!' But now they are used to it . . . When you have smaller congregations, many congregants feel that this is their own property. Even if other Christians would come and affiliate, they feel that they are threatened because they could lose some power.

The conversation reveals the internal challenges for such churches to overcome religious prejudices and extremist stereotypes, reflecting Arab Christian fears of jihadism and marginal status throughout the Levant. Traditional churches often view religion as a static communal identity marker and commit to safeguarding Christian communal rights within their respective political systems. This reflects the legal reality of both Jordan and Lebanon, where personal status laws (marriage, divorce, child custody, inheritance) are subject to denominational religious courts and conversion from Islam is prohibited by the Jordanian authorities with Sharia courts having the authority to prosecute proselytizers and strip converts ('apostates') of civil rights. In Lebanon, religious conversion is also discouraged but not legally punishable. How traditional churches in Jordan and Lebanon engage with Syrian Muslims is therefore understandably circumspect. Conservative, under-resourced and keen to maintain goodwill among their existing congregations, many of the traditional churches upheld Arab hospitality and Christian charity, opening church doors but not community boundaries, showing empathy without spiritual curiosity and maintaining a respectful spiritual distance from Islam which protects the religious status quo between groups.

4.2 Humanitarian

'Of course, they are coming because we are giving them aid and food parcels, but this is also how Jesus responded. He fed the hungry, he didn't just tell them stories'. (Pastor, Evangelical Church of God, Beirut)

Secondly, Arab Christian communities have provided humanitarian assistance to Syrian refugees over the longer term. Some churches have incorporated aid delivery within their public ministries (home visits, church collection centres), while others have

sought to create or work alongside institutionalised FBOs. The localisation of aid and the proliferation of FBOs reflects both an international impetus for better funded and locally led responses (Charter4Change 2015) and Western recognition of the increasing value of cultural awareness and spiritual sensitivity (Ager et al. 2015). FBO responses, however, remain diverse and multi-layered, with varying organisational goals, theological traditions, staff religiosity and donor bases (Lyck-Bowen and Owen 2019). Thaut (2009, 331) identifies three Christian FBO approaches: (1) *Accommodative Humanitarianism* where organisations with religious roots but no explicit Christian mission are difficult to distinguish from secular agencies; (2) *Synthesis Humanitarianism* which seeks to balance Christian ethos and secular goals emphasising justice and human rights; and (3) *Evangelistic Humanitarianism* which focuses on spiritual transformation, where humanitarianism accompanies evangelism. Such a taxonomy covers responses in Lebanon and Jordan, but activities may also shift over time, adapting to constraints and opportunities. Indeed the work of Lebanese and Jordanian humanitarian FBOs challenges secular-religious boundaries and outcomes, reflecting what Ngo (2018: 1278) calls ‘enchanted humanitarianism’, where ‘sanctification and secularisation processes’ are entangled.

From our research, a number of observations can be made. First, established FBOs provide short-term humanitarian aid to both Muslim and Christian refugees in collaboration with Western agencies, either *ad hoc* or through long-established, parallel church aid agencies (Roman Catholic Caritas, International Orthodox Christian Charities), hospitals, and schools. These kinds of FBOs, while inspired and motivated by religious faith, see aid provision and prayer, ritual and sacramental life as entirely separate domains. Keen to avoid charges of proselytism, they maintain the long-standing Muslim–Christian communal status quo in both countries, calling this ‘respecting coexistence.’ The Jordanian state has long relied on such social services provided by traditional churches and also Islamic Awqaf and the Muslim Brotherhood to fill gaps in social welfare provision (Chatelard 2010: 500–1). There are strong incentives for Jordanian FBOs to adapt or appear to adapt to a liberal secular humanitarian model of aid provision by upholding ‘communal inclusivity/neutrality’. Such signalling helps attract Western funding, complies with charities’ legal obligations, and maintains amenable community relations with the Muslim majority. However, due to the scale of the Syrian refugee problem and parallel economic crises in Lebanon and Jordan, both states appear relatively less stringent in monitoring Christian religious activities surrounding aid delivery and policing communal boundaries.

Secondly, particularly in Lebanon because of its more religiously permissive environment, new FBOs have emerged to professionalise and ‘secularise’ religious humanitarian delivery—using LFCs to deliver aid and training, monitoring, and enhancing their existing infrastructure. They function as mediating actors translating secular humanitarian language into appropriate religious terms and repackaging religious LFC discourses for a broader international audience (Kraft 2015). Such FBO networks are more acceptable partners for international donors and INGO sponsors—linking global funders to local implementers (Kraft and Smith 2019). One such Lebanese FBO is MERATH (Middle East Revive and Thrive), the relief and community development arm of the Baptist Society or the Lebanese Society for Education and Social Development. During 2018–2019, MERATH through a local partnership with over 20 Lebanese churches provided food

assistance to 50,000 Syrian refugees; 30,000 winterization kits; and provided 1,000 refugees with medical assistance. 1,500 children received non-formal education in nine learning centres in Lebanon. MERATH in one of their recent publications argues that the challenge of proselytization and impartiality can be overcome through ‘clear partnership agreements’ which ‘hold LFC’s accountable to humanitarian guidelines and standards’ and ‘clearly defined separation of religious activities from humanitarian work’ (Lahoud, Stephens and Shindeldecker 2017: 10). However, the physical separation of the humanitarian and religious realm can be difficult, confided one Pastor from a MERATH partner church in Beirut. ‘It’s a challenge when our church building also became an aid distribution centre. Refugees don’t distinguish and often neither do our servers (*khaadimat*)’. An even more pressing concern, continued the Pastor, was how to decouple humanitarian and spiritual oversight,

We also had the difficult issue of baptism. What should we do when Syrian refugees ask to be baptised? Biblically – Jesus commanded it and we can’t refuse for those committed to faith, but we cannot be used to support asylum cases to the West. We decided early on, we will baptise Syrians, but we do not provide letters or certificates. This is a spiritual act of faith, we are not changing people’s official identity or status.

The topic of baptism was raised by numerous Lebanese Christian leaders with diverging responses and attitudes. Some stressed it remained a holy sacrament linked to church membership; one Reverend showed us multiple recent Syrian baptism certificates; another insisted on sending Syrians to non-aid-providing churches to be baptised; while a Nazarene Pastor suggested this spiritual rite should be disentangled from humanitarian aid delivery. A Catholic priest in Jordan stressed that they do not baptise refugees so as not to antagonize the Muslim majority.

Finally, FBOs have emerged which see religious values and spiritual transformation as humanitarian goals (cf. Scherz 2018). In the words of one such Lebanese FBO leader, ‘We touch humanitarian need, we touch the social, we touch the emotional and the spiritual. We believe if we stay at the humanitarian level—that we do not impact the lives of these people [Syrian refugees]’. As in Jordan, these FBOs are administratively distinct from churches, set up by local Christians, sometimes in partnership with Western churches and INGOs. They reject what they see as a detached, secular approach to humanitarian aid embodied in UNHCR programmes. Instead, FBOs like Heart for Lebanon (HFL) a non-denominational Christian organization, explicitly state their mission as creating ‘faith-defining environments’ which meet the ‘physical, emotional and spiritual needs’ of refugees. Consequently, alongside their FBO structure, HFL has started ‘Two Syrian Muslim Born Believers Worship Gatherings’ (churches) in Lebanon including the building of the Hope Ministry Centre in the Bekaa (HFL Website). This \$4 million complex, partially opened in October 2019, includes a 250 seat chapel, coffee shop, aid distribution centre and school for educational programmes. HFL leaders reject the reductive ‘evangelistic humanitarianism’ label instead proposing that their ministries are to ‘advance peace, justice, and equality and to empower the marginalized and rejected.’ (HFL Website) In the words of HFL staff member, Daoud Arnaout:

As an FBO we don't believe in converting people. That's not our goal – we believe that's God's work – but our work is to deliver the message. And to reconcile . . . to do peace reconciliation. We believe the basis is in the Bible, and we are teaching these groups.

HFL's 'gathered services' may push the boundaries and perimeters upheld by some humanitarian FBOs at pains to differentiate their humanitarian role from the spiritual role of a church, yet it also shows the wide spectrum of Christian responses.

4.3 Spiritual development: Parallel and integrative

The final mode of faith-based response in Lebanon and Jordan is spiritual support through parallel or integrative church services, alongside material support. This balance of activity is found predominantly among newer, Protestant churches rather than traditional churches, where hospitality or humanitarian modes predominate. The newer churches received large numbers of Syrian refugees, looking in the words of one Lebanese Evangelical pastor, 'for aid but often returning and staying for services and Bible studies.' He explains,

In our church, we were dealing with both spiritual and physical hunger. The Syrians who came to faith struggled to fit into our church service, so we thought it better for them to meet separately, for them to learn, pray and do Bible study together.

The emergence of parallel Syrian meetings facilitated by local churches is often explained by Christian leaders as supporting new Muslim background believers, unfamiliar with Christian liturgy or forms of worship. Lebanese Baptist and Evangelical church leaders confided that Bible studies worked better in small home groups and a large number of female Syrian converts required same sex-gatherings and female leaders. The parallel approach is often adopted by churches that also provide material aid. As a pastor of a newer Jordanian Evangelical church with substantive humanitarian projects (school, relief and widows' ministry, sewing centres, and medical clinics) explains:

They call us a church underground . . . and when the Muslim people come to the church, I believe the church is like a hospital without formal existence. And those people they need special attention . . . I believe the ministry has to be this, especially for Muslim people, they have to be in their congregation, in their network. So that Jesus can be among them.

Though this phenomenon is present in Jordan, it should be noted that it has been more common for refugee clerics to establish historic churches not previously found in Jordan (Assyrians, Syriac Catholic, Iraqi Chaldean).

A number of pastors, however, readily acknowledge that segregation of Syrian refugees and Lebanese/Jordanians (as well as Iraqis and other refugees in the case of Jordan) in different meetings was a natural consequence of their own congregations' national and class-based prejudices and mistrust of Syrian beneficiaries. One pastor from an independent church in Sabtiyeh, highlighted Lebanese suspicions, unresolved historic hurt, and socio-economic disparities.

Lots of local churches have responded but there are mixed feelings among the congregations and those who have not went through an inner healing process to deal with their feelings towards Syrians . . . Very few churches decided to receive Syrian refugees into their congregations. Those that did integrate, that came at a price, it meant many Lebanese Christians would walk away. Seeing refugees in church, they come from camps with no running water, they don't have opportunity to shower, they come with fleas – all these things made people say 'wait a minute what are we doing!' The rejection was both a resentment of the past but also a class issue.

This Lebanese Pastor and several Muslim clerics viewed the Syrian refugee crisis as a test of faith, challenging the limits of Christian hospitality but also the practical application of forgiveness to former enemies and occupiers. In Jordan, migration is understood in terms of economic challenge and diversity, with yet another wave of refugees impacting the society. The parallel approach is therefore both strategic and pragmatic, facilitating Syrian refugee interest through less public and more informal gatherings while simultaneously maintaining existing Lebanese and Jordanian gatherings. This model creates significant interpersonal interaction between Christian leaders and Syrians, but this may not facilitate deeper and wider relationships within church congregations or between Syrians and host communities. The support of auxiliary 'Syrian meetings' may follow similar patterns and liturgy of the sponsoring church but as one Beiruti Nazarene Pastor also conceded they will also 'reflect their own cultural background and heritage, as Muslims seeking to follow Jesus.'

The final, most marginal church response is an integrative model, where Syrian refugees are invited to attend the same services, meetings and Bible studies as Lebanese and Jordanian congregants. One former Baptist church in Hadaath Beirut, renamed Resurrection Church Beirut (RBC) now hosts 1,300 congregants, in three sites, with around 70 per cent attendees Syrian refugees (Kashouh 2018: xiv). The Lead Pastor, Hikmat Kashouh, explains that an integrative approach, despite the challenges and discomfort, began a process of internal transformation and structural change for his church. He recounts, 'Syrians were our enemies for so many years' which made it difficult to invite them into our churches. 'You discover how much you need a conversion yourself in order to share your faith with others. *We* were transformed and *they* were transformed' (Interview, *Sat7 Report* 2019, June). For Pastor Kashouh, integration is understood as reciprocal, in which by accepting, receiving and forgiving Syrians, Lebanese could also find personal healing and spiritual restoration. He recounts an emotive and symbolic exchange when he publicly washed the feet of a Syrian community leader,

As I got close to his feet, I saw the feet that stepped on our childhood and destroyed Lebanon. I remembered [our] war and all that happened to us . . . I felt that God bowed down and started to clean my wounds. I learned a great lesson. When you bow down to wash the feet of your enemy, God bows down to heal your wounds. And I discovered that the most powerful tool in evangelism is forgiveness.

For some evangelical churches, such as RBC, the power of forgiveness and personal transformation are key tenets of faith which helps in Kashouh's words, 'to create real community among those of multi-ethnic and multi-religious backgrounds'

(Kashouh 2018: 103). Therefore, Syrian refugees are not only integrated within RBC's services and ministries but are being assimilated within the church leadership structure. While RBC remains an outlier in size and scope, there are smaller evangelical churches in Lebanon and Jordan that integrate Syrian refugees, reflecting an understanding of the Christian community based on shared faith rather than communal identity and accepting pluralism within the church as part of a collective faith journey.

5. Discussion: Spiritual ambiguity in interfaith humanitarianism

While all three modes of cross-religious humanitarian activity provide opportunities for Lebanese and Jordanian Christians to live out their faith commitments to serve their neighbour, they also provide successively deeper opportunities for the possible generation of spiritual empathy and curiosity about Muslims among Christian host congregations. First, the hospitality mode practised by the traditional churches builds interpersonal empathy but limits deep spiritual exchange. We found that Lebanese and Jordanian Christians considered the faith and practices of Muslim Others already 'known', taken for granted and not engaged, in favour of protecting the host community's social status.

Secondly, those operating in a humanitarian mode offered greater opportunities for friendship between Syrian Muslims and host Christians, while side-stepping questions of religious content or differences in value commitments between guests and hosts. An exception was Heart For Lebanon, which straddled humanitarian and spiritual development modes as its work evolved. In contrast, for those operating in a spiritual development mode, their holistic humanitarianism remains grounded institutionally in the church, like traditional churches. Home visits or aid collection in church halls broke down social and religio-spatial barriers for Syrian Muslims entering Christian churches resulting, ultimately, in increased refugee attendance at church services. Access to humanitarian aid, a desire to show gratitude or perception that attendance is expected may be initial drivers, but Syrians also confirmed the importance of communal solidarity (with other refugees and host Christian friends) and emotional support—through having someone listen to their stories and experiences and offering them a prayer.

Thirdly, the spiritual development mode opened space for new practical and ideational 'mixing and matching' (Sinha 2009) for individual Syrian Muslims in new spaces, particularly novel for Jordan (cf. Rababah and Smadi 2016: 111). Active Muslim participation in Christian religious rituals and activity is better understood as a spiritual agency, reflecting a spectrum of personal motivations, some material, some spiritual, rather than as strategic performance/conversion borne out of evangelization (cf. Ngo 2018; Wagner 2018b), which flattens out complexity. For some Syrian women such meetings offered new emancipatory and educational spaces beyond their own traditional, conservative backgrounds. As one female Syrian refugee explained, 'We didn't know anything about Christianity. We are seeing new things and learning. In Syria, we didn't get out much like this' (cited in Kraft 2017: 230). However, the parallel approach reveals the limits of a deeper spiritual pluralism posed by existing Christian–Muslim relations in both states; national

boundary-marking by refugees and their hosts; and the painful history of Syrian–Lebanese relations. All of these make serving Muslim Syrians ethically ambiguous for Lebanese and Jordanian Christians. The integrative model offered the possibility for the deepest level of Christian–Muslim faith engagement. Besides fostering social and spiritual equality between old and new congregants, this model offers a two-way process of changing hearts, whereby host Christians must also come to terms with their own faith commitments and what it means to follow Jesus.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, this article has argued for greater recognition of what we call spiritual ambiguity in interfaith humanitarianism. All three modes of humanitarian assistance function within the pre-war *modus vivendi* of Muslim–Christian relations in Lebanon and Jordan. However, the spiritual development mode raises questions about what happens below what is most publicly visible about Muslim–Christian relations, particularly in Lebanon where civil society operates more freely in religious matters. While humanitarian space is always shaped by a web of power relations between multiple actors, embedded in inherent inequalities between Global North and South and among actors within Global South contexts, it is vital to develop new, more nuanced ways of thinking about cross-religious faith-based humanitarianism beyond Western neo-colonialism/evangelism or political strategizing by parties to the conflict.

Drawing on a range of cases of local Christian humanitarian aid to forcibly displaced Syrian Muslims and reading these through a lens of spiritual pluralism, we identify two levels where seeds of openness to spiritual pluralism were being planted, even in contexts where fundamental power inequalities between hosts and forced migrants persist. The first was at the community level. Encounters between Syrian Muslims and their Christian hosts were not marked by mutual spiritual curiosity about each other’s traditions which we earlier suggested is inherent to spiritual pluralism, where both Islam and Christianity were explored on equal terms in a context of power parity between Syrians, Lebanese, and Jordanians outside conditions of forced displacement. The humanitarian relationship and its inherent power dynamic create disparity and unevenness, which also goes against the ideal of Arab hospitality, where there is equality/reciprocity between guest and host. Scholars and practitioners typically think equality is necessary for authentic religious pluralism. However, we also found that an unequal, non-dialectical approach that privileges the exploration of Christianity may actually produce less conflict within host communities in ways that could also benefit the forcibly displaced not only materially but also emotionally, socially, and spiritually. Secondly, we see spiritual pluralism not just as collective but as an individual, in the ‘mixing and matching’ of ideas, feelings and social habits. Scholars of forced displacement rightly warn of the dangers of ‘disaster evangelism’ in which conversion becomes a survival strategy in the context of traumatic loss and dislocation (Olivio Ensor 2003). However, it is important to also acknowledge analytically that spiritual exploration may also be an expression of agency, power, and hope, even in contexts of inequality and vulnerability, while at the same time acknowledging that mutual spiritual exploration of Islam was limited.

More research would be needed to confirm these findings in communities over time, in Lebanon and Jordan and other case studies, as well as how the displaced navigate evolving relationships with their hosts. Should Syrians return home, perhaps these experiences might aid social reintegration after the sectarian polarisation of the civil war. The acquisition of deeper knowledge of the *enjiil* and Christian values, in Kraft's words, 'seemed to be promoting more tolerance than conversion.' (Kraft 2017: 231) More research is needed to confirm this, as well as how or if, such humanitarian encounters have eased Lebanese–Syrian tensions or promoted a more open attitude towards social diversity in Jordan long-term.

Thinking beyond this article, we suggest that episodes of forced displacement through war offer opportunities to reflect on evolving religious coexistence and spiritual encounter over time. We agree that wars 'reveal' previously obscured power configurations within societies and may 'set in motion' political, economic and social transformations (Barkawi and Brighton 2011) and also that violence 'shapes religion' (Meral 2018). Beyond this article, it would also be interesting to ask about a range of cases: how might forced migration shape, disrupt or reconfigure possibilities for spiritual pluralism for both guests and hosts at the individual, community, and state level? What patterns of everyday life and relations with the state continue or are disrupted? What forms of power (social, political, economic, religious, and spiritual) are exposed through forced migration, and what does this reveal about the ebb and flow of national and religious coexistence?

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