

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF *nidr* AS PRACTICED BY LEBANESE CHRISTIANS, MUSLIMS AND DRUZE

Patricia Mihaly Nabti

American University of Beirut

A couple, married for ten years, remains childless, while another has had five daughters in a row but no heir to continue the family name...

A man sits at the bedside of his emaciated mother who is suffering from some terrible disease...

A student sets off for the city to take a university entrance exam that will determine whether he/she will study to be a doctor or work in the family's bakery shop...

A woman in her late twenties faces the fear of staying single the rest of her life.

Some people face such crises with fatalistic acceptance. Others, however, feel great anxiety and a need to somehow do more than is within direct human capacity to affect the situation. In Lebanon, one common response is to make a *nidr*¹, a special type of religious vow. This study analyzes the popular custom of making *nidr*, and is based on observations and questionnaires as well as interviews with both supplicants and clerics². While there are seventeen officially recognized religious sects in Lebanon, this study focuses on the five largest sects which constitute over 90% of the population: 1) the Maronite Christians³; 2) the Ortho-

¹ The term here will be used to designate both the singular and collective form of the word.

² Fieldwork included observations at the main religious shrines in Lebanon and Syria visited by Lebanese supplicants; interviews with clerics at these shrines as well as with major religious leaders of each sect; and open ended interviews and questionnaires to supplicants at these religious shrines, in a number of village communities in Lebanon and among students at the American University of Beirut during 1993.

³ A local Catholic sect.

dox Christians; 3) the Sunnī Muslims; 4) the Šī'a Muslims and 5) the Druze⁴.

Nidr, as commonly practiced in Lebanon, is a self-imposed contract which a person makes with the supernatural. The supplicant making a *nidr* requests a specific favor from the supernatural and promises to reciprocate with a specific action if the request is fulfilled⁵. A barren woman wishes desperately to conceive, for example, and prays to the Virgin Mary that if she has a child, she will give a container of oil to the local church. Her gift to the church is conditional, so that if she does not bear a child, the woman has no obligation to give the oil to the church. It is popularly believed among those who practice *nidr* in Lebanon that there is a cause-effect relationship between making a *nidr* and getting what is requested. Those who were interviewed found it puzzling to even be asked whether they believed that the *nidr* could affect the results – why else would they be doing it? Nevertheless, the supplicants did not feel that a *nidr* could determine what would actually happen, only that it would increase the probability of the desired outcome. Not only was it viewed that *nidr* is unable to harness God's will but it cannot be used as a substitute for human effort. Thus, a woman might still seek a doctor's help for infertility and a student would study long hours before taking an exam.

The shared perception of the efficacy of *nidr*, albeit limited, at the popular level is met with shared ambivalence on the part of the clerics of the different sects. While all the clerics affirmed the acceptability of *nidr* and recognized the value of linking hope and action, they all denied any direct cause and effect relationship between doing *nidr* and achieving the desired results. This is largely because the practice of *nidr* challenges the doctrine of divine will and predestiny. Furthermore, all the clerics interviewed maintained that *nidr* binds the supplicant to fulfill his or her promise if the condition is met, but does not bind God

⁴ An offshoot of Šī'a Islam considered by some as a distinct religion.

⁵ The term *nidr* may refer to other types of religious vows as well, but is most commonly used to refer to the type of religious vow which is the focus of this study.

to do what is requested. A Druze scholar took this point one step further, noting that according to Druze doctrine the perception of a cause-effect relationship between *nidr* and outcome turns *nidr* into an effort to bribe God. To avoid this, doctrine holds that a supplicant is obligated to fulfill the promise regardless of whether or not the request is met.

Another common, though not essential, element of *nidr* as practiced by the different sects is the use of an intercessor (a *šafiʿ* or *wasīʿ*). While the supplicant generally attributes ultimate power to God, the *nidr* is usually addressed to someone who lived on earth and gained recognition for his or her closeness to God - a prophet, martyr, holy person or saint. This figure is believed to have more influence with God than humans do and can thus serve as an advocate for the supplicant. Some supplicants ascribe actual power to this holy figure who is believed to have the ability to directly affect the situation, although even this is considered to be power bestowed by God. In many cases, supplicants perceive of intercessors as having greater efficacy in certain matters. Thus, one would seek the intercession of one saint for infertility, another for illness and yet another to pass an exam. There does not seem to be any consensus, however, as to the actual specialization of individual intercessors even within a particular sect.

Certain characteristics of the conditional promise are also shared by the different religious sects. The promise is meant to demonstrate faith and commitment. The greater the sacrifice, the more this faith and commitment are demonstrated, presumably making the intercessor more willing to intervene. The promise also indicates the supplicant's willingness to bear some costs for gaining the desired results, though no risk since he must only "pay" if the results are obtained. Furthermore, popular belief in all five sects holds that if the results are gained, the person is obligated to fulfill the promise and is in danger of divine retribution if this is not done. Finally, in all sects both the promise and the request are ideally clear and measurable so that there is no ambiguity as to whether the desired results have been obtained or the promise kept.

Another important area of similarity among all the religious sects is that of gender. In all sects *nidr* is practiced more by women than

men, a fact that was acknowledged by all the clerics interviewed. Also in all sects there are female as well as male intercessors that people of both genders appeal to. Many Muslims in Lebanon address their requests to the granddaughters of the prophet, Zaynab and Ruqiyya, while Christians appeal to various female saints including St. Rita and St. Theresa. It is notable that both Muslims and Christians appeal to the Virgin Mary who is the only female mentioned by name in the *Qur'ān*.

One might ask why there are so many similarities in this popular custom among the different sects in Lebanon. One contributing factor is that the concept of intercession (*wasta*) is pervasive in Lebanese culture. Lebanon is not a "do it yourself" culture. To the contrary, most people feel compelled to seek an intermediary in almost all interactions of unequal power or access. People develop a network of influential contacts they can appeal to at the airport, the post office, the various government ministries and large private institutions like universities, and they, in turn, provide that service to others in regard to matters for which they are better placed. If they do not know someone important in a particular institution they seek to identify a friend who does, so that they can have an indirect connection. *Nidr* can thus be viewed as giving a religious dimension to a common cultural practice. Rather than appeal to God directly, they seek the assistance of an intercessor who can bridge the power gap and support their appeal. A second factor contributing to the similarities is the common religious heritage of Lebanese Muslims, Christians and Druze. All three believe in the omnipotence of God, the importance of prophets and religious leaders, and the capacity of mortals to communicate with the supernatural through prayer. Finally, similarities can be partially attributed to the sharing of basic human concerns – worry about loved-ones, procreation, and survival; the anguish of feeling helpless in the face of life's crises; and the need to express appreciation for the unearned good one experiences as well as to accept the undeserved bad gracefully.

In regard to the shared elements specifically concerned with gender, a number of explanations can be given. First, according to all of the clerics interviewed, women tend to be more spiritual than men and have

greater direct responsibility for the concerns that are generally addressed in *nidr*, namely health and fertility. An additional factor may be that women view themselves as less powerful than men and thus are more likely to seek empowerment through *nidr*. Furthermore, since they are perceived as being weaker they do not lose face by admitting their weakness and seeking divine assistance, while for men the admission of such weakness would have a greater social cost. Men would be more willing to engage in secular forms of *wasta* than in *nidr* because in the former the acceptance of the services of an intermediary is based on at least the potential for reciprocity at some future date. Thus there is at least a fiction of status equality while in *nidr* the imbalance of power and admission of weakness are clear and uncontroversial despite the token reciprocity of the supplicant's promise.

Despite these important similarities there are significant differences in the practice of *nidr* among the five sects studied⁶. An important difference is in the doctrinal view of intercession. In both Maronite and Orthodox Christianity intercession is an important element of religious doctrine. The selection of saints is based solely on their personal achievement and the miracles ascribed to them, and is institutionalized in the process of canonization. Saints as well as clergy have a sacred duty to intercede with God on behalf of the faithful. The faithful, in turn, are encouraged to seek intercession rather than appeal directly to God. This is largely true of Šī'a Islam and to some extent to Sunnī Islam as well, although the pool of sacred intercessors is less institutionalized and is based on ascription through lineal descent as well as on achievement. Furthermore, in Sunnī Muslim doctrine intercession is very controversial and is interpreted by many as a violation of the oneness and omnipotence of God – of *širk* – the greatest sin. While this does not prohibit *nidr*, it does lead to the significant difference that many Muslims, particularly Sunnī Muslims, address their appeals direct-

⁶ Due to limited data on the Druze, they are not included in much of the comparative analysis below.

ly to God while there was only one case of this among the Christian *nidr* experiences compiled.

A broad area in which there is significant sect-specific variation is in the content of the supplicant's conditional promise. One can divide such promises into five categories: appreciation, self-abnegation, piety, religious revenue and charity.

The category of appreciation is concerned with ways of honoring the intercessor. While less common among Sunnī Muslims, supplicants from all the sects studied visit sect-specific shrines dedicated to religious figures, in many cases sleeping there over night. A favorite destination of Lebanese Orthodox Christians is Saydnaya, a convent outside Damascus. A nun I interviewed there noted that the convent restricts stays to one night but that even so, during the summer up to 400 people are there each night, many to fulfill a *nidr* or to accompany someone who is doing so. Maronites often go to the church or the home of St. Charbel, a Lebanese Maronite saint canonized by the Catholic church, as well as to churches in honor of more broadly recognized Catholic saints. A popular place for Lebanese Sunnīs to visit in fulfillment of a *nidr* is the Uza'ī mosque outside Beirut dedicated to 'Abdarrahmān al-Uza'ī, a locally revered holy man. For Šī'a, the most popular destination is the mosque of Sayyida Zaynab near Damascus, while for Druze the most well-known is the shrine of the Prophet Ayyūb in the Šūf district of Lebanon.

Beyond the practice of visiting shrines, the honoring of saints is most clearly practiced by Maronite Christians. It is common for Maronites to promise to wear or have their children wear the clothes of the intercessor for a day, a month or even a year if their request is fulfilled. For that purpose, certain clothing is identified with certain saints. Thus, the clothing of the Virgin Mary is always a white dress with a blue cape, the clothing of St. Charbel is a brown, burlap-like tunic, and the clothing of St. Elias is green and red. While originally only a Maronite custom, it is increasingly being emulated by Orthodox Christians.

In honoring specific religious figures, certain days have more sacredness than others so that the declaring of the request or the fulfilling of the promise are preferably timed to coincide with that sacred period. Thus Christians are most likely to wear the dress of the Virgin Mary during the month of May, her month, or on the Virgin Mary's day, August 15, while Muslims are most likely to hold a *mūlid*, a celebration of the Prophet's birth, on his birthday according to the Muslim lunar calendar.

A second category of promise is concerned with self-control and self-abnegation, inducing one's own suffering and self-denial as a symbol of commitment. A common promise among people of all the sects studied is to fast. Fasting is a regular religious practice of all these religious sects and is observed for *nidr* as it is observed otherwise by the sect. Thus Muslims prohibit drinking, smoking, sexual intercourse and other pleasures as well as food during daylight hours, while Christians limit food intake to certain types of foods, day and night, for the whole duration of the fast. In some cases, supplicants who have not regularly fasted in the past promise to uphold the prescribed religious fast (such as Lent or Ramadan) as their sacrifice, while others promise to observe a fast on days specifically designated for the *nidr*. Two Orthodox supplicants promised to quit smoking, a particularly difficult form of fasting which served, concomitantly, as an incentive to quit a bad habit. While fasting is essentially a shared example of self-abnegation, a common Christian practice not followed by Muslims, is to walk barefoot for a certain period of time or a prescribed distance – up a large number of stairs or a mountain side or from one's home to a particular religious site. Begging for money or for second-hand clothes that one then wears is another Christian form of self-abnegation. A specifically Šī'a form of self-abnegation sometimes promised for a *nidr* is drawing blood through self-flagellation on the holy day of 'āšūrā'.

The third category of promises is comprised of acts of piety or religious affirmation which directly connect the practice of *nidr* with religious teachings. This appears to be common among Muslims, but not Christians. Thus, one Muslim girl promised to read the whole

Qur'ān in one day if she passed her exam while another promised to read a particular passage from the *Qur'ān* thirty times. Another common Muslim promise is to hold a *mūlid*, mentioned earlier. It is not clear whether this falls more appropriately into the earlier category of honoring of an intercessor or this category of piety. This religious observance serves to reaffirm religious dedication to God and belief in the significant role of Muḥammad as His messenger, but the *mūlid* is generally linked to *nidr* addressed directly to God and does not explicitly express appreciation for Muḥammad's role of intercession in achieving the requested results. Both Christians and Muslims have a tendency to become more religious between the time a *nidr* is expressed and the request fulfilled, reading sacred texts and behaving in religiously sanctioned ways. Muslims, however, are more likely to incorporate such behavior into their promise than Christians.

The fourth category of promise is to give money or gifts in kind to a religious institution. This is particularly common among Christians who often promise a sum of money or a gift to a particular church, like a church bell or altar cloth, or give holy bread to the church to be used for communion. In the case of Muslims, when people visit a religious shrine as part of a *nidr*, they may leave money there but this is generally not part of the original promise.

A final category of promise is charity. This is a very common promise among Muslims, both Šī'a and Sunnī, but not among Christians in Lebanon. Thus, typical promises among Muslims are to sacrifice an animal and distribute the meat to an orphanage, to give bread to the poor, to feed ten poor people or to finance a busload of poor pilgrims to visit a particular shrine. This practice is part of Muslim tradition both in the form of *awqāf* and the sacrifice at *'id al-adḥā*. It is also expressed in a Muslim *ḥadīṭ* that "*nidr* is the charity of the stingy" – generally interpreted as a criticism of those who will not give without seeking something in return. It should be noted, however, that the Sunnī cleric that I interviewed opposed this interpretation of the *ḥadīṭ*, declaring that it is the interpretation of those who lack compassion for the human needs concerned with both giving and receiving *nidr*.

Among Christian supplicants in Lebanon, unlike their Muslim counterparts, money promised by a *nidr* is not generally given to a charitable institution. It is, instead, given directly to the Church which, in turn, supports charitable institutions like orphanages, schools or hospitals.

Another difference among the religious sects is in the manner and extent to which *nidr* is institutionalized. *Nidr* is most institutionalized by the Maronites. On the lower floor of the church of St. Charbel there are displays of *diker*, small momentos in gold and silver in the shape of arms, legs, eyes, and other body parts. These are gifts to the church which serve as testimonials to the efficacy of the saint in helping to heal people. Other artifacts include crutches no longer needed by the handicapped and hundreds of testimonial letters acknowledging the contribution of the saint in answering people's prayers. It cannot be assumed that all of these artifacts are directly related to *nidr* since *nidr* assumes a contractual relationship while in many cases people simply visit a shrine to receive its *baraka* or blessing. However, such displays clearly encourage *nidr* by advertising the efficacy of the saint in serving as an intercessor in people's appeals for help. A priest will often offer, and a visitor can always ask for, a small gift of oil and incense whose *baraka* can be taken home. The church of St. Charbel, furthermore, has a gift shop where religious items may be purchased and the clothes of the saint may be borrowed at no charge, although a voluntary contribution is usually given for the use of the clothes. Similar gift shops are also found at the home of St. Charbel and the Church of the Virgin Mary at Harīṣa. At the church of St. Charbel there is, in addition, an office called the *ṣandūq an-nidr* (a cashier for *nidr*) where those giving large *nidr*-related gifts to the church can have their gifts registered. And in every Maronite church there are locked boxes with slots alongside secondary altars dedicated to specific saints where people can light candles and give monetary contributions when they make a *nidr* or fulfill a *nidr* promise. *Nidr* is clearly a very important and highly institutionalized source of revenue for the Maronite church.

This institutionalization of *nidr* can also be observed in the Orthodox Church as well, though less so. Displays of small gold and silver replicas of arms, legs and other body parts adorn a special room at the convent of Saydnaya as they do at the church of St. Charbel. A vessel of oil for anointing one who is to be blessed is placed prominently in the center of the room. Before it is a book in which one can register requests for prayers to be said by the sisters of the convent. And in front of this is a locked box with a slot to deposit contributions. A few framed testimonial letters and abandoned crutches in the ante-room give tribute to the efficacy of the *baraka* of this famous convent. There are locked boxes for contributions in the church of the convent, as there are at side altars in some Orthodox churches, but there is no obvious place to give larger sums of money - no *ṣandūq an-nidr* - and no gift shop, although nuns ask if you would like to be given a gift of oil and incense. Not all of these religious observances necessarily relate to *nidr*, and *nidr* is not commercialized here, although it is likely that it accounts for a major part of the convent's revenues as at the church of St. Charbel. In contrast to these two Christian sects, *nidr* seems to have little direct relationship to the revenues of Islamic institutions. The giving of *zakāt*, whether in the form of money or gifts in kind, is a primary source of revenue for mosques and other institutions. It is viewed as a religious duty, however, and is not generally connected with *nidr*.

Nidr, however, is to some extent institutionalized in Islam, particularly among the Šī'ā. The practice of doing a *ziyāra* or sacred visit is particularly important among Šī'ā and formal rituals are prescribed like the reciting of a particular prayer, also called a *ziyāra* at the religious site. This recitation at Sayidda Zaynab makes reference to *nidr* and certain rituals seem to accompany it. In regard to revenue, some believers rub money along the columns of the inner shrine and then drop the money inside, and a box near the entrance to the shrine contains prayer stones and a locked box for contributions much like the boxes in Christian churches, however these elements of religious observance are not necessarily related to *nidr*. I found no testimonial letters, displays of

silver or gold *dīkr*, abandoned crutches, *ṣandūq an-nidr*, or gift shops at any Islamic religious shrine I visited. The closest equivalent of these was the place behind the shrine of Sayyida Zaynab, with possible parallels at other Muslim shrines where people could bring sacrificial animals and arrange for the actual meat or its monetary equivalent to be distributed to the needy.

A final difference among the sects is the degree and type of flexibility in upholding one's *nidr* promise. To the two Christian sects studied, holding to the details of the promise is very important. Thus it is not appropriate for a person to give the monetary equivalent of a family heirloom when the heirloom itself is promised. Individual clergy, however, are often more willing to bend on this matter. In addition, clergy are given the authority to pardon a person from his or her obligation if, in the supplicant's fervor a promise was made beyond the supplicant's capacity to fulfill it. While not a matter of vested religious authority in Islam, a *šayḥ* will occasionally be appealed to in such situations and may propose that the supplicant do something more manageable as a substitute such as fasting or feeding ten poor people. A high religious figure in Islam made it clear that in Islamic doctrine there is extensive opportunity for modification of a *nidr* promise – in the time, place, commodity given and recipient, though not in the monetary value of the obligation as long as it is within the actual means of the supplicant.

In addition to certain similarities and differences among the sects in the practice of *nidr*, certain points of convergence are noteworthy. This is particularly common between sects within the main religions – Orthodox and Maronite visit each other's shrines and adopt each other's practices like the wearing of saints' clothes. Similarly, Šī'a and Sunnī go to each other's religious sites. Points of convergence between the two religions also exist. All of the Christian clergy that were interviewed noted that many Muslims fulfill *nidr* promises at Christian institutions, particularly places dedicated to the Virgin Mary since there are no Islamic institutions in the area dedicated to her despite her significance in Islam. At Saydnaya, the story is told of a Muslim woman who ad-

dressed a *nidr* to the Virgin Mary to help her son whose face was deformed. His face healed and the woman carried a quantity of olive oil up the steps of the convent in fulfillment of her *nidr* promise. The jar fell and spilled some of the oil, but when the woman tried to wipe it up, an oil stain in the likeness of the Virgin Mary remained on the step. A small fence now surrounds that part of the step so that no one will walk on it. Reverence for Christian religious figures is not in contradiction to Muslim doctrine, since many of them are mentioned in the *Qur'ān*. Muḥammad and his descendants however, are not part of Christian tradition. Thus, it is of particular interest to know that Christians occasionally have sought the intercession of Muḥammad when their own saints proved ineffective, particularly in the birth of sons. As a result, a number of Christian males have names like Muḥammad, Maḥmūd and Ḥasan as a fulfillment of their parents' *nidr* promise.

Not all Lebanese among the five sects studied practice *nidr*. Differences in the degree of faith and the interpretation of doctrine lead to very different patterns of behavior within the different sects. To practice *nidr* requires a belief that all is not predestined, that humans can influence the actions of the supernatural through their appeals, and that even a token willingness to reciprocate will increase the probability of the desired outcome. Whether the request is fulfilled or not *nidr* serves a human need to counter feelings of impotence in the face of life's crises. In the case of Lebanon, it also serves as a cultural bond crossing over the religious cleavages that divide the people of Lebanon, and providing crosscutting affiliations in which people of different sects who practice *nidr* share a cultural bond that does not exist among those within the same sect who hold divergent beliefs on the subject. While there are notable differences in the way *nidr* is practiced among the five sects studied, the similarities and points of convergence affirm important elements of religious, cultural and human commonality. It may well be possible to capitalize on such common elements and cross cutting affiliations to weaken the cleavages and contribute to social integration in Lebanon.