1 Introduction: Faced with Symbols

In the obscurity of the Maronite cave of Saint Anthony in North Lebanon an array of cooking pots is displayed upside down on the humid rocks. Placed on top or underneath them are fragments of letters, pictures, and items of babies’ clothing. The pots are all different, varying in size and shape. The lady in charge of the gift shop at the monastery explained that these pots are left there in prayer by believers who wish to conceive children. “Why pots?” I asked. The shop keeper stared at me in silence obviously unsettled by my question. “Pots symbolize the womb” she answered as she placed her hand on her own abdomen with a hint of disbelief at my ignorance.

The shop keeper is a native of the area and possess inside knowledge of this traditional practice. To her, the very question is absurd: The pots belong to the cave and clearly symbolize wombs yearning to be filled. The symbol is not questioned: rather, it is accepted, taught, elaborated on, and handed down from generation to generation. To the extent that it becomes ‘invisible’. As she walks into the cave every evening to put out the candles, the ever-growing pile of pots appears as a continuation of the grey rocks. They are objects of familiarity and comfort, of certainty and of clarity. Though the question of the intruder is answered, it is at the same time silenced and dismissed.

Our faith systems rest on symbols – material, ritual and linguistic. Some of them are common and unchallenged like the breaking of the bread, or the use of water for purifying and cleansing. However, despite their depth and surplus of meaning, repetition and habitude run the risk of rendering silenced certain symbols. Many have remarked how with time these symbols tend to flatten out and shrink, making of the loaf of bread, a crumb and of the bath, a droplet (see Guiver in Gordon-Taylor and Day 2013). Yet, these are not the only symbols in our life of faith. A more intricate body of symbols built into our everyday life buttresses our relationship with God and defines our understanding of life and its meaning (de Haardt 2013). Many of these practices and objects are passed on across generations, and are adopted without hesitation, and one inhabits them and performs them without a second thought, until a question arises. What are those activities and objects and why are they part of our faith system? Why pots? Why candles? Why kneeling?

Desire for certainty and for comfort leads one to dismiss these questions and silence the interrogation. However, my thesis is that it is precisely this question, this moment of uncertainty and ambiguity, that brings the symbol to life and gives it its meaning as it leads the performer of the symbol into becoming.

This chapter looks at what happens to symbols such as these pots when a question arises. In other words, when they are taken out of their faith systems and sub-
jected to a different system of belief and inquiry that does not share in these symbols. To do so I consider a particular group of Lebanese women who socially and religiously move in and out of the various matrices of meaning that faith weaves. These women originally come from Antiochian Orthodox Churches (Atiyyeh 2005; Hunt 2007) or Maronite Churches (McCallum in O’Mahony and Loosley 2010, 25–40; Galadza 2007, 291–391) and have joined the Lebanese Protestant Churches (Badr 2005) by virtue of marriage. Every year, it is through marriage, that many new female members of the congregation are added to the tiny Reformed Church in Lebanon. The great majority of these women come from these Eastern Churches. Bound by their own social obligations and abiding by tradition, these women must then join their husbands’ church, where they are expected to act as Protestant congregants, without any official initiation or prior exposure to the Reformed faith and tradition.

By joining the Reformed Church, these women never completely leave their mother church, nor do they convert to the new tradition, but they keep moving — physically and virtually — between the two and in-between the two or three traditions (Nasrallah et al. 2012, 270–284). They could participate in the Orthodox liturgy on Wednesdays and the Protestant service on Sundays, they could celebrate Easter with the Maronites and Christmas with the Reformed or visit Orthodox pilgrimage sites and Reformed conferences. The constant movement and exposure to both (or more) traditions translates itself in creative ways in the liturgical lives of these women, and the way in which they manage and perceive objects and rituals as they redefine and reconstruct their own liturgical lives (Nasrallah et al. 2016).

Like the shop keeper in the monastery of Saint Anthony, these women grew up in homes and families where certain objects are considered normal and certain rituals are simply part of daily life. “Media are intrinsic to religion” (Meyer 2006, 12) in general, and each religious tradition has its own set of objects, practices and linguistic symbols or media; symbols that point to some further reality and connect on a deeper level of existence. Yet, unlike the case of the shop keeper, the objects and rituals of the women considered here are constantly put in question, as a radically different spirituality presses itself upon their faith life.

## 2 Women in-between Traditions

To understand what happens to the liturgical lives¹ of these women and the matrix of symbols in this particular situation, ethnographic methods were used. Along with their public practices of faith, their private and domestic practices were investigated. Participant observation, in-depth interviews, discussions, filming, and spiritual biographies were collected to understand what these women do to reach out and commu-

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¹ By liturgical lives we refer to worship practices that are not confined to the walls of the church, see Barnard, Cilliers, and Wepener (2014).
nicate with God. Public and private, formal, and everyday practices were all taken into consideration. This study benefited from developments within the social and cultural sciences in order to understand why certain people do, what they do as they communicate with God.

A rich array of practices emerged as each woman displayed or described what she does, where she goes and what she possesses. What is distinctive in the mother traditions of these women is that they are all intrinsically highly symbolic. Rooted in the Syriac tradition, the Maronite spirituality embraces the symbolic and remains close to the material world; the world is seen as creation transformed, as inspired by Ephrem the Syrian and is appreciated in its materiality. As for the Antiochian Orthodox tradition, with its focus on the incarnation in approaching the material and performative world, liturgical rituals as well as Icons and objects, are seen as window into heaven or the divine world. The women considered here grew up in homes where mothers and grandmothers decorated the domestic space with a multitude of holy objects. They witnessed priests sprinkling and blessing these objects. As children, they were taken to visit monasteries, light candles, kneel in front of altars and sample sweets baked for feasts. These “normal” practices and “authorized” (Meyer 2011a, 27) objects are “transmitted and shared” from generation to generation. Many of the women owned Icons, images, or statues that were given to them by their mothers. Most decorate their homes or cook according to recipes learned at home. However, these acquired objects and learned practices do not exactly copy or repeat what had been learned as a child or what is practiced by other members of the family. In their new liturgical environment, these women have their own way of dealing with objects and their own way of practicing rituals. I mention some examples here:

Greek Orthodox Nada does not have an elaborate home altar as the one in her mother’s or sister’s home. Instead, she owns one Icon of the Theotokos hung over a door and a number of small souvenirs such as a rosary, a cross, and a bottle of oil collected from monasteries. These objects migrate from one place to another periodically, disappear in a drawer to then be replaced by other objects. The collection is complemented by a Van Dyke Bible² and a few leaflets from the local Protestant church. Every time she acquires a new object, she waits, thinks, and rethinks where to place it, only to move it again or even throw it away.

Maronite Lara elaborated her own censing ritual at home. She retained some traditions from her childhood, introduced new ones and merged Protestant teachings on censing practices. While she cooks food for religious feasts, she is selective and creative in how to do it. She does not observe all the Maronite fasts, instead she adapts the fasting menu to her own family’s needs and wishes, sometimes even neglecting an entire fasting season. Although she grew up praying with the rosary regularly, she now uses it to decorate her mirror and occasionally glances at it while conversing with God in a more ‘Evangelical’ manner.

² The van Dyke Bible is the official Arabic Protestant translation.
Looking in their homes, or at their practices, one sees similar themes from their mother churches, that have been adapted or that have evolved. Their collection of items is always changing, and their rituals vary. There is movement and dynamism in these symbolic practices and objects as well as a degree of discomfort, particularly as the women explain and perform to a Protestant researcher, or in front of their Protestant husbands.

3 Disorientation and Reorientation

3.1 Disorientation

Inherited practices and objects tend to ‘disappear’ in the piety of people. Icons and objects merge with walls and furniture; rituals flow with the rhythm of the day and the year. The signifier merges with the substance it signifies, creating a synthesis, as Birgit Meyer puts it, which veils the material and physical aspect of a symbol. “On the other hand, objects and rituals ‘appear’ if this synthesis is cracked” (Meyer 2011b, 63).

In other words, the symbol and the thing symbolized become one when taken for granted, yet when the synthesis between the two is challenged, the symbol and the thing symbolized, or the world it orients its user towards, begin to separate. As a result, one ends up with a useless object or an empty ritual: a handful of ashes, a deformed candle, or an aesthetically displeasing image. When the “synthesis is cracked” the symbol stops working (Morgan 2011, 142).

Despite recent developments within Protestantism that hold a revised position towards media or symbols present in other Christian traditions³, traditionally and in the Lebanese context, Protestantism seems to suggest a direct relation with God which can only be obstructed by objects and rituals (Meyer 2012, 26). Ever since its advent in the nineteenth century, Lebanese Protestantism has challenged objects and rituals in the life of Eastern Christians. The images, pilgrimages and home rituals of Middle Eastern women fell under attack by American and British missionaries who dismissed these as “superstitious” and depicted the women as “hopeless subjects of missionary labour” (Jessup [1873] 2005, 47). This attitude continues today, within two forms of Protestantism (Sabra 2001, 101–115): a Pietist form as well as a Cultural form. Inheriting Enlightenment values, cultural Protestantism dismisses objects and rituals based on an assumption that we only know through our minds (Meyer and Verrips 2008, 20–30), not our bodies nor our emotions. Pietist Protestantism on the other hand does not wholly reject emotions, but it has been critical of emotions depicted in the lives of the Virgin Mary, or the Saints. The women considered here have interacted with these attitudes within their husbands’ Church. The

³ Knowing that the Protestant tradition like all other religious systems is built on symbols as well: material, ritual, and linguistic even if they look, feel, and sound different.
Protestant approach that claims to be a direct relationship with Christ alone, be it through the mind (cultural) or thorough the heart (pietist) clashes both with the incarnational and performative Orthodox attitude, as well as with the anthropological material Maronite position. The emphasis on ‘direct relationship’ creates dissonance in the women’s daily practices. The objects and practices emerge as ‘indirect’ or ‘mediated’ relationships, and the women are suddenly confronted with the material and physical aspects of their symbolic world.

The objects and practices are thus defamiliarized or demystified. Subjected to the Protestant logic and discourse, these symbols become insignificant and the women whose faith is expressed through them lose their direction and become – at least temporarily – disoriented (Chauvet 1995, 86).

The collections of things and practices lose their charm and in a sense their power to communicate with the divine and establish connections. The more the role of the human hand is obvious, the weaker their claim to offer truth (Latour 2002, 18). However, despite their emergence as highly questionable if not dangerous things, they are not discarded or eliminated. On the contrary, this situation of estrangement from their symbols triggers the women into experimentation, in a quest for reorientation. The objects and rituals, though questioned and now confronting the women with a possible uselessness or even obstructiveness, are re-evaluated.

### 3.2 Reorientation

Though the synthesis between object and what it symbolizes is broken, the objects are rarely totally emptied of their ‘holiness’. Under the Protestant tradition’s questioning and challenging gaze, one starts seeing the wood, the paint, the metal hooks and even the dirt covering an icon. It is, after all, wood and paint made by a human hand and bought with money. The ritual starts to feel repetitive, and even religious words and terms become confused. However, the women refuse to consider that it is just wood and paint. There remains something more than just the wood and paint, the wax and wick, oil, and cotton, that make up the objects. However, that ‘something more’ is not totally identified with the object or practice, nor is it taken for granted.

In an attempt to connect with that ‘something more’, the women resort to experimenting with varying their rituals and moving their objects around their homes.

It was observed for example that Leena, one of the respondents, changed the configuration of her home altar more than five times within four years. With every change there was a logic inspired both by the Protestant discourse as well as Leena’s own developing convictions. Certain Icons were dismissed, others incorporated, and some acquired a more prominent and central place. The logic guiding this experimentation is dynamic, as interaction with the Protestant sola scriptura and solus Christus alternates with visits to Orthodox monasteries or Maronite Churches.
In the same way, many women vary their home rituals. They introduce new elements, change the order, try different postures, and say other words. By trying out different rituals, combining a candle with a Bible or censing the home whilst chanting a Protestant hymn, the women attempt to find a new way of reaching the divine, whose contours are being drawn and redrawn as new insights are glimpsed in the tensions within the various traditions. Objects and rituals are changed and altered all the time. They are restless and unresolved. And it is through these movements and this ambiguity that they start to address the women in a more pressing manner and to draw attention towards something beyond them.

This movement, or flux, is reminiscent of Bruno Latour’s concept of de-freeze-framing. While discussing images in art, science and religion, Latour restates the second commandment of the decalogue not as a destruction of images but rather as a refusal of what he calls freeze-framing. By freeze-framing, Latour means “extracting an image out of the flow, and becom[ing] fascinated by it, as if it were sufficient, as if all movement had stopped.” (Latour 2002, 26). In Latour’s logic, active images are moving images, while frozen or stable images invite idolatry. He claims that frozen images – mental or physical – attract attention to themselves rather than point beyond themselves. In addition, Latour and many with him (Morgan, Meyer) remind us that there is no such thing as a world without images, without media or without symbols. No matter how iconoclastic one is, one destroys a symbol only to replace it with a different one, sometimes from a different category only to treat it in the same way, i.e., to be fascinated by it to the point of a new form of ‘idolatry’. Idolatry is that moment when one totally confuses the referent with that which it points to, so that words or objects are seen to ‘contain God’ or rituals to ‘control the divine presence’ (Saliers 1984, 38).

On the other hand, Latour discusses how it is only when images are broken, when their constructed nature is revealed, that they start pointing away from themselves. ‘Broken’ images are images that can address the onlooker, the user, by deflecting the gaze towards what is beyond the image. With this in mind, we notice that the women in question are addressed through this questioning of their images, and through the variation and movement of their symbolic objects and practices. Here, it is not an iconoclasm that attempts to wipe away all images, but a continuous appraisal and reappraisal of existing objects and practices. This variation redirects the attention, as Latour points out, but it is also a means of discovery and knowledge. In a similar way, Theodore W. Jennings, writing about ritual knowledge, believes that ritual knowledge is activated through variation. “If there is no variation in the ritual performance, we would have to conclude that there is here neither search nor discovery but only transmission and illustration of knowledge gained elsewhere and otherwise” (Jennings 1996, 326).

Changing the place of their objects, varying their rituals, the women are working out the new meaning of their symbols. Their homes become transformed into laboratories or workshops of liturgical experimentation or tinkering (Grimes, Latour, Lévi Strauss, Barnard, and others). The ambiguity around the meaning of their objects
and their validity, the challenge launched towards their practices, as well as their own changing convictions, keep the objects and rituals moving and flowing, they thus acquire an ever-renewed meaning, and address the user by their ambiguity: of presence and absence, construction, and truth.

4 Power in Ambiguity

The thesis is, consequently, that these symbols are (re)made active because of their ambiguity not despite of it. Objects in general are potent, they can even talk (Datson 2004) particularly through their very ambivalence. According to Sheryl Turkle, “objects help us make our minds, reaching out to us to form active partnerships” (Turkle 2007, 308). Yet these collections and rituals have their own potency in their brokenness and movement. And it is in this particular aspect that they are interesting to us. In the liturgical lives of these women, they become their theology, they provide for the experience of God’s presence, they form the women, and they create connections.

The objects featuring in the loose collections or organized altars of the women are classically tools for worship and ritual. The practices are mostly borrowed from what Rappaport calls ‘canonical practices’ (Rappaport 1979 1999), i.e., formal and stylized practices seen in historically established settings. However, the women in this case pick and choose objects and rituals as they see fit and then mix items and practices that are not normally encountered together. By doing this, the women change the ‘original’ meaning of the symbols and create their own new system of meaning while remaining conscious of the provisional nature of this meaning. The symbols have been challenged, the signifier and the substance signified have separated and any new meaning is temporary. Yet, the search is on.

Through changing and varying, through choosing and mixing, the women ‘reason’ about important doctrinal concepts, not through words and reflective actions, but through redefining their relations to certain objects and their place in their life: by symbolizing.

These, literally ‘handmade’ theologies, take several shapes in the various arrangements of the collections. Every woman forms her own theology through her selection of objects, through what she leaves out and what she places at the centre of a collection, and how she performs certain practices. The fact that most of these arrangements keep changing form and display is a sign that these theologies are always in the making, but also that God is not understood as static but rather as dynamic and involved. With each move and variation, a phase of the development of these theologies is seen but is never conclusive.

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4 Theology understood as pondering, reasoning, and discussing God.
Saying that these objects and rituals are a form of theology might seem alien to a culture that is conditioned to think of theology as an academic discipline expressed with words and verbal language. Yet, when material objects, practices and performance are perceived as symbols of the same category as words and language, one can appreciate that, just as we reason with language, we also reason by manipulating objects and performing actions (Johnson 2007). These are in the words of Don Saliers “an expression and a vulnerable exposure of what we believe about God and the world, and what we are prepared to live and die for” (Saliers 1982, 37).

Instead of words on paper, this theology is ‘written’ or formed with objects and movements which define who God is and how God works through their quality, be it natural objects, aesthetic objects, objects related to healing, personal objects, etc. In these changing *bricolages*, the women express their own dynamic understanding of God. He can be at the same time Holy and Other in Orthodox Icons, as well as feminine, human, and tender in images of the sacred heart (Morgan 2008) and/or also a crucified saviour testified to in a displayed Bible, or an empty cross. Latour reminds us that “if the medium is the message, slightly different types of media (and mediation) will produce enormous differences in types of messages” (Latour 1998, 424). If the arrangements of the women and the quality and selection of objects is always changing it is also the message, the theology that is changing.

Not only do the women ‘write’ their theology with these material and performative symbols, but they also experience God’s presence through them in a certain way. Many theologians as well as cultural theorists (Meyer, Morgan, Latour) have discussed how media, images, or symbols ‘allow’ the experience of God’s presence since they are understood as holding their referent within them. Symbols can be “crucibles of experiences and places of epiphany” (Saliers 1982, 40).

Yet, looking at the situation at hand, these symbols seem to also work sacramentally because of their ambiguity in an interplay of presence and absence. This understanding of sacramentality is similar to that proposed by Louis Marie Chauvet’s theology of sacramentality as expressed in *Symbol and Sacrament* (Chauvet 1995) and borrows from Paul Ricoeur’s conception of presence in absence.

Hence, on one level “sensational forms [...] make the transcendental sense-able” (Meyer 2006, 9) and “they effect or make present what they mediate.” (Meyer 2012, 26) This is particularly pertinent since most of the objects are pictures, they make the divine present in a more visual way. David Morgan comments on pictures of Jesus, saying: “the picture is taken as a medium that generates the spiritual presence of Jesus through a mutual gaze of seeing and being seen” (Morgan 1998, 7).

However, on another level – a more theological level – in the experience of the women we are considering, presence is not automatic and unquestioned. The synthesis between God and the objects, as explained earlier, is cracked. God is not essentially, incarnationally, or salvifically merged with the objects. The objects are superfluous and optional for God, Christ is everywhere in the conviction of these women and does not need objects. But still, the women would propose that God can be ‘seen’ in these objects because of the challenge of his absence. It is in the uncertainty and
‘optionality’ that God is present for the women rather than in the certainty and familiarity of the medium. As Latour says: “the more human-work is shown, the better is their grasp of reality, of sanctity, of worship [emphasis original]” (Latour 2002, 18).

Instead of destroying the symbol, questioning it and reconsidering it makes it active. The women try not to trap God’s presence in the objects, yet God is there. It is in the cracks, the ‘brokenness’ of the objects that God seems to be simultaneously present and absent. These material objects, these “ordinary everyday matters can also be as meaningless as always and nevertheless offer a view of something else” (Brinkman 2012, 43). The ambiguity then functions in a sacramental and generative way.

In addition, these ambiguous symbols play a role in forming selves and leading into becoming. Not only is God experienced as present, but the women are also led into becoming present in the face of ambiguity. Meyer reminds us that media “organize vertical encounters of religious subjects with the transcendent” but they also “induce a particular sense of the self and one’s being in the world – if you wish a particular identity” (Meyer 2006, 21). Moreover, it is said that “we construct images, but images also construct us” (Brinkman 2012, 51).

The women experience with all their senses the texture, smell, colours, and taste of their objects which both enchant and disturb them. They enchant them with their beauty and holiness and disturb them with their ‘profanity’. And it is this unease, this estrangement before meanings previously assumed as understood, that forms the subjects and leads them into becoming: as subjects who become agents in the makeup of their own liturgical lives. Tradition is no longer a guarantee for certainty; on the contrary, personal decisions concerning the most ‘trivial’ of things should be constantly taken. Objects are questioned, rituals examined, and the meaning of systems is put under construction. Church, tradition, or community cannot assist in meaning-giving. The women are forced to be ‘present’, not as spectators or users but totally present in the face of another presence (or absence). All this creates agency,⁶ responsibility, and ownership of one’s symbolic system of faith.

Moreover, this personalized and dynamic symbolic system built with objects, rituals and elements of discourse gleaned and redefined through the interaction with various liturgical and symbolic worlds, helps in establishing connections. In these bricolages, these women work out their lived experiences, the inherited historical traditions as well as their social networks in relation to God and their faith. Scholar Kay Turner emphasizes that in a home altar a woman “assembles a highly condensed, symbolic model of connection by bringing together sacred images and ritual objects, pictures, mementos, natural materials and decorative effects which represent different realms of meaning and experience – heaven and earth, family and deities, nature and culture, Self and Other” (Turner 1999, 27). In the case of the women in this research we see this ‘symbolic model of connection’ as well. In the collections and rit-

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⁶ It is proposed that altar-making in the home gives women agency in Eastern Churches in general, see Weaver (2011).
uals, connections are established between all the aspects of one’s life and between the various traditions the women belong to.

The women’s ‘broken’ images and symbols direct them to what is beyond, to God. These same images and symbols create subjects who are open to the reality and presence of God in ambiguity. Yet, the connections are not only vertical. All aspects of the lives of these women find connections through these personal and dynamic symbolic systems. When one brings into contact elements from different liturgical traditions in one home altar; when one connects family history with images of the sacred, when one brings items of the past with practices from the present, connections are established. Many women cherish images that once hung in grandparents’ homes, they decorate these with pictures of their children, bringing together different generations through the image. Some have shown altars where elements collected during pilgrimages live side by side with books brought from Protestant Churches as well as gifts received at the occasion of a wedding, baptism, or confirmation. They become one collection where a van Dyke Bible can sit next to a statue of the Virgin Mary from a Maronite church, and a bag of holy oil from an Orthodox Monastery.

Many of the items in the collections are gifts from family members and friends and as Marcel Mauss says, “gifts retain something of their givers” (Turkle 2007, 312). They are also connected to certain events. Some come from weddings, baptisms, feasts, funerals, or medical operations. They connect the women spatially to these different spaces and pilgrimage sites. A lady explained “I visit places and experience things and collect. Now what to do with these things? I put them in the altar…this remind me of this place and that remind me of that [...].” This connecting of various types of images and objects helps create and organize memory (Morgan 2011).

In the same line, Birgit Meyer explains that “to many people, religious sensory regimes allow them to make sense of – and regain their senses in – our increasingly fragmented and distracted world” (Meyer 2006, 23). Yet, what is fascinating in these ‘religious sensory regimes’ or symbolic systems of faith, is that they are not stable and not obvious and self-explanatory. They are constantly put into question and re-considered, activating the power of the symbolic.

5 Conclusion

If only, some say, we could do without any images. How much better, purer, faster our access to God, to nature, to truth, to science could be! Others respond: “Alas (or unfortunately), we cannot do without images, intermediaries, mediators of all shapes and forms, because this is the only way to access God, Nature, Truth and Science” (Latour 2002, 16). In this chapter, I have attempted to show how symbols, in the form of objects, practices, or even words permeate our lives. Through the example of the women who live their liturgical lives in-between liturgical traditions and therefore different symbolic systems, I have shown how symbols become active or ‘living’ when challenged or put into question. What I have described is an example of a response
to the ‘breaking’ or challenging of one’s symbols by re-discovering new meanings in ambiguity. When the symbols are challenged, they emerge as objects or movements that are external to their referent, to the divine. Yet, the freedom to appropriate them, to select and adapt them, is found, and through this, new symbolic meanings are created.

Ambiguity unleashes the power of the symbol rather than destroying it. My thesis is therefore that it is the job of theologians to keep symbols in the realm of the ambiguous and unstable, lest they become fixed ‘idols’. To do so, theology should engage with the everyday life of believers, tracing the systems of symbols that are built into their world and stirring the waters. The challenge that theology should present is not aimed at destroying symbols, but rather at keeping them moving, ‘de-freeze-framing’ them, revealing their ambiguity in order to make them active in the lives of believers, as partners towards faith rather than as objects of faith.

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