The Shrine of our Lady of Ephesus: A Study of the Personas of Mary as Lived Religion

Heather Abraham

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THE SHRINE OF OUR LADY OF EPHESUS: A STUDY OF THE PERSONAS OF MARY AS LIVED RELIGION

by

HEATHER ABRAHAM

Under the Direction of Dr. Timothy Renick

ABSTRACT

In *Pure Lust*, Mary Daly claims that the Virgin Mary is an “image of total subservience, the dethroned and sapped Goddess who was converted into a vessel.”¹ Daly perceives Mary primarily through Christian scripture and other orthodox texts, ignoring her role as part of a religion lived and experienced outside of Church doctrine and dogma. This thesis explores how Mary is perceived and utilized by the laity, as opposed to the theological Mary, by specifically looking at how the Virgin Mary is imagined and experienced at the Our Lady of Ephesus Shrine in Western Turkey. Utilizing Robert Orsi’s lived religion approach and ethnographic research, this examination of the Virgin Mary will test Daly’s theologically based theory.

INDEX WORDS: Religious Studies, Georgia State University, Virgin Mary, Our Lady of Ephesus, Robert Orsi, Lived religion, Mary Daly, Meryem Ana, Marian Shrines.

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AS LIVED RELIGION

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HEATHER ABRAHAM

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts
in the College of Arts and Sciences
Georgia State University

2008
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AS LIVED RELIGION

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Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Studies
College of Arts and Sciences
Georgia State University
December 2008
DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my husband, Teoman Sagisman, in appreciation for his patience, love, and support. I also dedicate this work to my three muses—Princess Grace, Rhea Sita, and Bella Luna who remind me to enjoy the little moments of each day and, finally, many thanks to Annie, Tammy, Patty, Vanessa, Lois, and Rachel for their continual support.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the assistance and support of all the faculty and staff of the Religious Studies Department at Georgia State University. In particular I express my enduring gratitude to my thesis director, Dr. Timothy Renick, for his unending encouragement and guidance throughout this project. I also thank Dr. Kathryn McClymond and Dr. Louis Ruprecht for their insightful suggestions and direction.
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Introduction

Marian devotion appears on two levels. There is the Mary of the official theology and of the monks, which venerate her as the Virgin who was docilely obedient to the divine will. … But there is also the Mary of the people who is still the earth mother. She is venerated for her helping power in natural crises.  

Rosemary Radford Reuther

In *Pure Lust*, Mary Daly claims that the Virgin Mary is an “image of total subservience, the dethroned and sapped Goddess who was converted into a vessel.” In *The Church and The Second Sex*, Daly argues that Mary is a “remnant of the ancient Goddess of the pre-patriarchal age, who has been domesticated and enchained in Christian mythology.” Although Daly’s depictions are useful in their place, her narrow theological view of the Virgin Mary largely ignores Mary’s role as part of a religion lived and experienced outside of church doctrine and dogma. Daly’s view fails to take into account how Mary is imagined and experienced in the daily lives of those who venerate her.

In contrast, the above passage from feminist writer and religious studies scholar Rosemary Radford Reuther hints at alternative identities assigned to and constructed for the Virgin Mary. Throughout history, various understandings of Mary have been constructed through the lenses and agendas of observers and the worshippers. Theologians, religious studies scholars, and the laity can and often do have vastly different understandings of who and what Mary is and the role she plays within a particular religious tradition. Moreover, theologians and scholars often overlook or disregard how Mary is perceived, utilized, and experienced by the laity.

4 Mary Daly, *The Church and The Second Sex* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1975), 42.
This thesis will explore how the Virgin Mary is imagined and utilized by the laity, as opposed to the theological Mary of scripture and church dogma. I will specifically look at the Virgin Mary as manifested and experienced at the Our Lady of Ephesus shrine in western Turkey. This examination of Mary will test Daly’s theologically based theory of Mary as pagan divinity domesticated, subservient, dethroned, and enchained.

Of the multitude of Marian shrines throughout the world, Mary of Ephesus stands out in a variety of ways. Unlike most Marian shrines, Our Lady of Ephesus is not noted for Marian apparitions but as a site connected to the historical, physical, earthly Mary. Pilgrims who flock to the shrine believe it to be the last earthly home of the historical Mary of the New Testament and the Quran. Although sought out by millions of Christian and Muslim pilgrims annually, the shrine has received little attention from the academic world.

It is the Mary of the people or at least of the pilgrims and visitors to one fascinating shrine—that I wish to pursue in my investigation of the Our Lady of Ephesus. Exploring how the Virgin Mary is experienced at this rarely studied shrine offers us an opportunity to better understand the phenomena of lived religion and to test common feminist claims regarding Mary’s role as a “…derivative symbol disguising the conquered Goddess.” Certain feminist writers have created a narrative that places Mary in strict obedience and subjugation to the patriarchal God of Christianity. I believe that a study of the Our Lady of Ephesus shrine will offer an alternative narrative by portraying an independent, sovereign, and autonomous Mary who inspires the millions of pilgrims who visit her yearly.

In this examination, I will explore Mary as experienced at Our Lady of Ephesus from the lived religion and historical approach. Utilizing Robert Orsi’s ethnographic approach to religion,

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5 Mary Daly, Gyn/Ecology: The Metaaethics of Radical Feminism (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1990), 84.
I will explore how Mary is perceived and experienced at Our Lady of Ephesus. In chapter one, I will introduce Orsi’s approach to lived religion.

In chapter two, I will pursue an historical investigation of Our Lady of Ephesus. Utilizing primary and secondary sources, I will trace the early Church tradition of Mary’s presence in Ephesus. I will then discuss the story of the “discovery” of the Shrine in 1891 by Franciscan Priests whose sole use of Anne Catherine Emmerich’s ecstatic visions allegedly led them to the ruins of Mary’s house high atop Nightingale Mountain in western Turkey. The final part of my historical investigation will be devoted to the exploration of local traditions of the Kirkindje Greeks, Vatican reaction and recognition of the shrine, and an historical overview of pilgrimage to Our Lady of Ephesus.

After establishing the history of the Marian shrine, I will then proceed to chapter three where I will apply the lived religion approach to Our Lady of Ephesus. Utilizing ethnographic information gathered during my multiple trips to Our Lady of Ephesus from August 1995 to June 2006, I will discuss the dynamics of the shrine and the interaction of multi-traditional pilgrims who visit the shrine. A thick description of the shrine itself, the grounds, sacred springs, souvenir shops, and activities of the pilgrims will be provided to present an overall sense of the shrine’s dynamics. Finally, I will utilize information gathered from interviews with Father Tarcy Mathias, Sister Antonia, and others at the site during June of 2006. I believe the historical and lived religion approaches will reveal an alternative picture of Mary, radically different from the theological Mary described in Daly’s writings.
I. Lived Religion Approach

Above all, remember that in this book the author is talking about spiritual things from the point of view of experience rather than in the concise terms of dogmatic theology or of metaphysics. In religion, as in the natural life, the language of experience and the language of dogma or science may find themselves opposed.6

Thomas Merton, in the preface to Seeds of Contemplation, feels compelled to charge his audience to be aware of the dichotomy between religious experience and dogmatic theology. Merton understands that experience is naturally at odds with dogmatic teachings of the Church. This “language of experience” and how the experience is perceived and utilized by the faithful is what concerns and interests scholars of lived religion.

Similarly, Robert Orsi, a prominent scholar of lived religion, is concerned with how religion is used, transformed, and imagined by lay people as opposed to how religious practice is prescribed by official religious authority. For Orsi, the study of lived religion allows scholars to step out of the theological package of religious dogma and come face to face with the creative complexities and messiness of religion on the ground. It is here that scholars are confronted with how religion is imagined and used by people who are struggling to make sense of it in their everyday lives. In Between Heaven and Earth, Orsi tells us that the study of lived religion,

… is a call for attention to religious messiness, to multiplicities, to seeing religious space as always, inevitably, and profoundly intersected by things brought into them from outside, things that bear their own histories, complexities, meanings different from those offered within the religious space. It is also a call to surrender dreams of religious order and singleness or of being able to organize descriptions and interpretations of religious worlds around sets of publicly shared and efficiently summarized meanings and practices.7

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In short, the study of lived religion allows scholars to explore how religion functions in everyday life and how it is shaped, reshaped, and modeled to assist religious people in facing life’s moments of celebration, despair, commemoration, uncertainty, fragility, and mortality. Lived religion is the “study of seemingly mundane ways that individuals practice their religions and develop their spiritual lives.”\(^8\) The study of lived religion is necessarily different from traditional scholarly approaches that focus on texts. Lived religion is complex, ever changing, and is often constructed by and for the use of the laity. Lived religion cannot be studied from the armchair but must be studied on the ground, with the scholar in the trenches, observing the faithful as they practice and perform their religious devotions.

In order to study religion from a lived perspective, scholars must participate in an ethnographic approach that Orsi refers to as radical or phenomenological empiricism. Orsi defines this approach as “concerned with what people do with religious practice, what they make with it of themselves and their worlds.”\(^9\) Ethnographic data is collected in a variety of ways, including but not limited to observant participation in the community, observations recorded in the scholar’s field journal, questionnaires completed by members of a group, individual and or group interviews, surveys, and intimate face-to-face encounters with members of the community. Researchers engaged in phenomenological empiricism must be aware of their surroundings and be able to describe them thickly; they must capture not only data from participants but also the smells, tastes, and sounds of the religious encounter being acted out, for all of these things are part of the religion as experienced.\(^{10}\)

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10 Hall, 5-8.
In addition to ethnographic work, scholars of lived religion must have a strong historical and cultural understanding of the community they are studying. Scholars must familiarize themselves with past historical or ethnographic work that may have been conducted on the community or space in question and should have a firm understanding of the historical development and theological history of the tradition at hand. Scholars with firm historical and cultural knowledge of the group under study are less likely to cause disruption or distress to members of the community. Regardless of how well prepared they are, scholars participating in observation of a community are often perceived as outsiders by the communities they are studying.11

For the scholar of lived religion conducting fieldwork, the suspension or bracketing of his or her own beliefs is necessary in order to go beyond the normative and explore the experiential phenomenon that devotees encounter. Orsi argues that scholars of religion need to refrain from discriminating between what is considered good or bad religion. Scholars of religion must temporarily suspend their own worldview and focus on the phenomenon at hand. In response to a Harvard Divinity Bulletin article by Stephen Prothero entitled “Belief Unbracketed,” Orsi argues:

We need to learn precisely how to pay disciplined attention to the very practices that disturb or repel us, and that we need to do so in a way that holds our own worlds in suspension….To suspend means to develop a disciplined attitude or attentiveness to the other, but this never means the denial of self: I have always argued that research is a relationship between people (to borrow Sartre’s phrase), whether in the archives or in the field, and this means that both parties are present to each other.12

The bracketing of beliefs can be difficult at times, especially when dealing with religious actions of a violent nature, but it is crucial to understanding religion as lived.

11 Orsi, 2005, 147-149.
The study of lived religion is especially important in the post 9/11 world. The direct actors responsible for the destruction of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center, guilty of heinous terroristic acts, can be understood as violently acting out their religious beliefs. Orsi would argue that violence and paranoia are elements of religion that must be recognized and studied at the source. Scholars of lived religion have to be concerned not only with the religiously benign but also with religion as acted out violently. The danger in simply explaining the actions of the September 11th highjackers as not representative of normative Islamic practices is that it creates a fictional and incomplete picture of religion. Religion cannot be separated from politics, culture, or the social world in which it is constructed and utilized.13

The lived religion approach allows scholars to identify “what is urgent and pressing in a religious culture—what doctrines, rituals, or signs have taken on special and pointed immediacy—and it knows this because these are the doctrines, rituals, or signs that men and women have picked up in their hands and are using to engage their immediate world.”14 The religious person understands or experiences his or her religion through a cultural lens influenced by political, economic, and social factors in constant flux. In a 2002 special presidential plenary address to the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, Orsi argues that the study of lived religion,

…focuses most intensely on places where people are wounded or broken, amid disruptions in relationships, because it is in these broken places that religious media become most exigent. It is in such hot cultural moments—at the edges of life, in times of social upheaval, confusion or transition when old orders give way and what is ahead remains unclear—that we see what matters most in a religious world.15


14 Orsi, 2003, 3-5.

The study of lived religion allows the scholar to explore religion as it exists in private lives and in the public sphere and how it manifests (peacefully or violently) in the political and social world.

Lived religion, or religion on the ground, does not exist in the oftentimes neat packages and categories of religious dogma. Orsi argues the “challenge facing the discipline today, is not to find new others, but to get beyond ‘otherizing’ as its basic move.” This can be accomplished by a “disciplined suspension of the impulse to locate the other securely in relation to one’s own cosmos. It has no need to fortify itself in relation to the other; indeed, it is willing to make one’s own self-conceptions vulnerable to the radically destabilizing possibilities of a genuine encounter with an unfamiliar way of life.”\(^{16}\) Scholars of religion must embrace the different as well as the familiar and comfortable in the dynamic and ever changing religious world. Ignoring or dismissing the lived aspects of religion contributes to the problematic misrepresentation of religious traditions, practices, and phenomena.

**Lived Religion at Our Lady of Ephesus**

In this thesis, I will use Orsi’s lived religion approach to test Mary Daly’s feminist claims concerning the role the Virgin Mary plays within Christianity. The lived religion approach is helpful to the study of Our Lady of Ephesus as it assists in going beyond Daly’s strictly theologically based vision of the Virgin Mary, opening new avenues for exploration. By studying Mary as imagined and experienced at Ephesus, it is possible to glimpse how Mary is perceived outside of the canonical traditions cited by Daly and to examine how Mary of Ephesus functions in the lives of Christian and Muslim worshipers. In the process, we may see a Mary who does not marginalize or enchain women but who comforts, sustains, and liberates.

\(^{16}\) Orsi, 2005, 198.
Mary-centered religious behavior is often at odds or foreign to the dogmatic views of institutionalized religion. Although orthodox Christian and Muslim teachings about Mary deny her any salvific powers and relegate her to an important but non-divine role as the mother of Jesus, Mary has obvious importance to those who seek her practical assistance. In exploring Our Lady of Ephesus, we will encounter Christian and Muslim pilgrims who journey to Mary’s House for a variety of reasons. Some visit the shrine to connect to the historical Mary, others come to petition Mary’s intervention, and yet others come to express gratitude for Mary’s past assistance. Pilgrims, regardless of their tradition, come to Our Lady of Ephesus with individual intents and purposes. The lived religion approach focuses on the formal and informal practices, rituals, and experiences of the laity. This approach is especially beneficial in studying shrines like Our Lady of Ephesus that draw pilgrims from multiple religious traditions, since such poly-religious experiences are rarely considered in orthodox texts and dogma.

As we will see, Daly’s theological view of the Virgin Mary is largely insignificant to those who revere and venerate her. Mary as manifested at Our Lady of Ephesus draws over a million Christian and Muslim pilgrims annually. At Our Lady of Ephesus, we will encounter pilgrims of many faiths who are acutely aware of the lingering presence of the historical Mary. The pilgrims who journey to Ephesus are as diverse in religious tradition as they are in intention. By interpreting the meaning of Mary from the actions, intents, and practices of the diverse visitors to the shrine, it is possible to recognize the laity as actors in their own right who construct their own religious experience based on the culture, tradition, life events, and beliefs they bring along with them. Religion, according to Orsi, “is best approached …by meeting men

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17 Elie Remy Thierry, The Mystery of Mother Mary’s House In Ephesus (Izmir, Turkey: Acargil Matbaacilik, 1987), 11.
and women at their daily task and in the spaces of their experiences.”18 Our Lady of Ephesus provides such an opportunity.

Although sought out by millions of Christian and Muslim pilgrims annually, Our Lady of Ephesus has received little attention from the academic world. Our Lady of Ephesus is a comparatively recent phenomenon. The site was little known outside of the Izmir region of Turkey until 1906 when it received the first pilgrims from abroad. The relative newness of the site’s status as a widely popular shrine presents an opportunity to trace the birth and evolution of a Marian shrine that is in the process of finding its place religiously and historically.

Our Lady of Ephesus is also rare in that it accords scholars an opportunity to study lived religion across traditions. The dynamics of this shrine suggest that Mary is a common bond shared between two worlds that are often at odds. For pilgrims to Our Lady of Ephesus, this shared Mary is commonly experienced as an inclusive mother figure who provides a bond between the Christian and Islamic traditions. Our Lady of Ephesus acts as a bridge between Christian and Muslim adherents and, although venerated for different theological reasons, the shrine appears to provide a realistic opportunity for interreligious relations and dialogue.

In the next chapter, I will offer a historical summary of the Marian Ephesus tradition and a historical overview of the shrine and its “discovery” in 1891 by priests equipped with a copy of Anne Catherine Emmerich’s visions as their map and compass. I will then discuss the traditions of local Christians, Vatican response to the shrine’s discovery, the history of pilgrimage, diversity of pilgrims, and provide a brief overview of Mary’s position within Islam.

18 Hall, 7.
II. The History and Ephesus Tradition of Our Lady of Ephesus

There is something miraculous which can safely be associated with Mary’s house: its very existence. Despite being repeatedly broken on the rack of time, and eaten away by centuries of neglect, it stands today not only as a shrine to the Lady who lived there 2,000 years ago, but as a monument to all those who refused to let it crumble back into the earth. The house itself is the miracle.\textsuperscript{19} 

Donald Carroll

Atop a distant mountain in southwest Turkey, overlooking the ancient city of Ephesus lies a shrine hidden in mystery. Called \textit{Meryem Ana Evi} (Mother Mary’s House) by the native Turks, it is believed to be the last home of the Virgin Mary. Unlike the Marian shrines of Lourdes, Fatima, Guadalupe and Knock, which are held to be the locations of apparitions of Mary, Our Lady of Ephesus is a shrine connected to her physical historical presence. Pilgrims who journey to this shrine believe it to be the site of her last earthly residence, the place of her death, and, for some, the location from which she was bodily assumed into heaven. The importance of this shrine to many Christian and Muslim pilgrims is without question, but to understand this significance we must journey back in time to reveal its mysteries. We will explore the history of the shrine by focusing on the Gospel of John, the writings of early church fathers, the discovery of the shrine itself, the local traditions surrounding the shrine, and lastly the diverse groups of Pilgrims who visit the shrine annually.

Ephesus Tradition

The traditional belief that Mary, after Jesus’ crucifixion, came to live with and be cared for by John has its roots in a passage from the Gospel of John. In John 19:26-27 Jesus, from the cross, places his Mother under the protection of his disciple:

\textsuperscript{19} Donald Carroll, \textit{Mary's House: The Extraordinary Story Behind the Discovery of the House Where the Virgin Mary Lived and Died} (Texas: Christian Classics, 2000), 89.
When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, “Woman, here is your son.” Then he said to the disciple, “Here is your mother.” And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home. 20

To the Christian faithful, it is reasonable to assume that John would have honored Jesus’ request to care for his mother and as Church tradition holds that John’s ministry was based in and around Ephesus, it can be concluded that Mary, at the very least, may have spent some time in Ephesus. Church tradition tells us that John and Mary left Jerusalem soon after the martyrdom of St. Stephen, but because of the New Testament’s silence on their whereabouts during this time, we have to rely on early Church Fathers to expand our knowledge of the travels of John and, by extension, Mary. 21 Early Christian literature and correspondence is peppered with brief mentions that connect John and Mary to Ephesus.

In *Our Lady of Ephesus*, Father Bernard Deutsch presents evidence for both the Jerusalem and Ephesus traditions as the last residence of Mary. He argues that the Jerusalem tradition is based on much later sources whereas the Ephesus tradition is supported by many writings of the early church fathers. His investigation of early Christian literature reveals an almost universal affirmation of the sojourn in Ephesus. Tertullian (ca. 150-230) indicated that John came to Asia early. And Hippolytus Portuensis (ca 160-235) recalled that John died there. A letter of the second century from Polycrates, bishop of Ephesus, to Pope St. Victor (189-199) mentioned that John was buried at Ephesus. St. Irenaeus (b. ca. 150), a disciple of the Papias who was a pupil of St. John, stated that John wrote his Gospel while living at Ephesus, and he added, as verified and reported by Eusebius (ca. 263-339), that it was a matter of apostolic tradition that John presided over the Church of Ephesus to the time of Emperor Trajan (97-117). 22

The early church historian Eusebius writes of the apostles scattering around the Mediterranean with the advent of the persecutions in Jerusalem. “The holy Apostles and disciples of our Savior…were scattered over the whole world; Thomas, as tradition holds, received Parthia;

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21 Thierry, 4.
Andrew, Scythia; John, Asia, and with the people there he lived and he died in Ephesus.”

Eusebius again places John’s tomb in Ephesus noting that “there is also John who leaned on the breast of the Lord, and was a priest wearing the breastplate, and a martyr, and teacher. This one rests at Ephesus.”

A Catholic Encyclopedic reference to Mary’s residence in Ephesus identifies a synodal letter regarding Nestorius as a crucial piece of evidence for placing John and Mary in Ephesus. The Catholic Encyclopedia reads as follows:

As passage in the synodal letter of the Council of Ephesus reads (Labbe, Collect. Concilior., III, 573): “Wherefore also Nestorius, the instigator of the impious heresy, when he had come to the city of the Ephesians, where John the Theologian and the Virgin Mother of God St. Mary lived, estranging himself of his own accord from the gathering of the Holy Fathers and Bishops.” Since St. John had lived in Ephesus and had been buried there (Eusebius, Hist. Eccl., III, 31; V, 24, P.G.,XX, 280, 493), it has been inferred that the ellipsis of the synodal letter means either, “where John…and the Virgin…Mary lived,” or, “where John…and the Virgin …Mary lived and are buried.”

It seems to be the opinion of many early Church Fathers that St. John lived in Ephesus and by extension many infer that Mary also resided in Ephesus.

It is significant that the first churches dedicated to both St. John and Mary were built in the City of Ephesus. The existence of these churches has often been used to support John and Mary’s presence in Ephesus. Deutsch claims that the placement of these churches in Ephesus strongly supports the Ephesus tradition. Deutsch writes, “According to custom reflected in the actual canon law of that period, churches could be dedicated to the saints in those places only

23 Deutsch, 28.
24 Deutsch, 29.
25 The Catholic Encyclopedia, Volume XV, p. 470-471
26 See figure 2.1 and 2.2.
where they had lived or died or were buried. If this was the practice, then Mary and John had lived, or died, or were buried in Ephesus.”

It is also significant that the 3rd Ecumenical Council of 431 CE was held in Ephesus and more specifically in the Church of St. Mary’s. It was at this council that Mary was proclaimed Theotokos, the Mother of God. It is of some importance that the Bishops would choose this site to debate her position in the Church. In The Cult of the Virgin Mary, Michael Carroll argues that the 3rd Ecumenical Council’s debate regarding the two natures of Christ was motivated by the laity’s use of the title Theotokos in referring to Mary. Carroll claims that the theological debate led by rivals Nestorius, the Patriarch of Constantinople who favored the conjoined understanding of Christ’s two natures, and Cyril, Patriarch of Alexandria who embraced hypostatic union as a theological explanation, was ignited by the unresolved debate over Mary’s position as Mother of god, man, or Christ. Carroll writes that it was a:

dispute over Mary that ignited the entire controversy. Increasingly, at least in the East, Mary had been called by the title Theotokos, which many people of the time interpreted as “Mother of God.” Nestorius objected to the use of this term on the grounds that it made little sense to suggest that a creation (like Mary) could be mother to her Creator. For Nestorius, Anthropotokos (Mother of the Man) or Christotokos (Mother of Christ) made more sense. It was the debate over the precise meaning of Theotokos, and over the appropriateness of this term as a Marian title, that gave rise to the debate over the relationship between Christ’s two natures.

At the climax of the debate, Cyril of Alexandria was victorious, Nestorius’s views were declared heretical, and Mary was given the title of Theotokos, which Carroll argues pleased a “large segment of the Church’s new constituency” because they understood the title of Theotokos to affirm Mary’s importance and “high status in the Christian pantheon.”

27 Deutsch, 58.
29 Carroll, 1986, 85.
For the purpose of supporting the Ephesus tradition, the choice of St. Mary’s Church in Ephesus as the meeting place of the 3rd Ecumenical Council is significant. Deutsch discusses the support this Council lends to the Ephesus tradition. Deutsch asserts that in a letter sent out announcing the condemnation of Nestorius, council Fathers include a telling but brief comment describing Ephesus as “in which place John the Theologian and the Holy Virgin Mary, Mother of God were.”\textsuperscript{30} Although we have encountered brief comments about John and Mary in connection with Ephesus before, it is significant that council Fathers would associate the importance of the past presence of John and Mary in Ephesus with the announcement of Nestorius’ heresy and Mary’s official title as \textit{Theotokos}. Deutsch argues that although there is not definitive concrete proof that John and Mary resided in Ephesus, we can conclude from the writings of many early Church Fathers that it is “most obvious that people had spoken of John in connection with Ephesus, and Mary with him, long before Catherine Emmerich pointed the way for the great revival of devotion to them in that place.”\textsuperscript{31}

Although mention of Mary’s and John’s presence in Ephesus appears in commentaries and letters over the next few centuries, Mary’s connection to Ephesus was forgotten to all but the local Christian population. With the silting up of its harbor, Ephesus, an important port city and trade center for centuries, became a shadow of its former self. After facing economic hardship, earthquakes, and catastrophic soil erosion that forced a significant portion of its population to flee, the city fell into a state of decline from which it never recovered. The conquest of the Ephesus and Izmir region by Seljuk Turks, in the eleventh century CE, saw some of the surviving Christian population’s flight to the isolated mountains surrounding the Ephesus

\textsuperscript{30} Deutsch, 51.
\textsuperscript{31} Deutsch, 31.
valley. As I will discuss later in this chapter, these Christians, known at the Kirkindje, would keep the Marian Ephesus tradition alive whereas outside of the Ephesus valley, sources containing information about the Ephesus tradition were lost in the silt of the centuries until revived in the visions of an eighteen-century stigmatic Augustinian nun.

**Anne Catherine Emmerich**

Anne Catherine Emmerich’s visions of Mary’s life in Ephesus add yet another layer of mystery to the elusive ruins atop Nightingale Mountain. Emmerich’s visions, as recorded by the German Poet Clemens Brentano, were instrumental to the shrine’s ultimate discovery in 1891. Deutsch stresses the importance of Emmerich’s visions as a catalyst for the discovery of the shrine. He writes, “It is altogether proper to say that without Catherine Emmerich, Mary’s home would in all probability not be known to the world today. Without her, then, this house of the Holy Virgin, where already hundreds of thousands have venerated Mary, would still be nothing but a relatively deserted ruin, known only to a few.”

Born in 1774 in a small town in western Germany, Emmerich lived a pious but difficult life filled with poverty and illness. At the age of twenty-eight, Emmerich entered a small Augustinian convent at Dulmen as a novitiate, and one year later she took her solemn vow becoming an Augustinian nun. With the rise of Napoleon and France’s domination over Europe, the convent at Dulmen was closed by the state, leaving the destitute Emmerich alone and homeless. With nowhere to go, Emmerich remained at the abandoned convent, until her health deteriorated and she could no longer care for herself. Hearing of her plight, a compassionate

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32 Donald Carroll, 2000, 33.
33 Deutsch, 51.
woman from a nearby village took her into her home and cared for Emmerich until her death in 1824.\textsuperscript{34}

In 1812 Emmerich allegedly began to bear the stigmata, including a cross over her heart, and wounds from the crown of thorns. Witnesses to the event reported, “that as she prayed her face became flushed and she was seized by high fever. Then all of a sudden she was infused by a brightness that specifically illuminated her hands and feet, which were seen to be covered with blood, as if they were punctured.”\textsuperscript{35} After reports of the appearance of the stigmata, Emmerich began to attract visitors including the German Poet Clemens Brentano who spent the next six years recording the visions that ensued shortly after the onset of the stigmata.

Emmerich’s visions consisted of detailed accounts of the Passion of Christ and the life of the Virgin Mary after of the Crucifixion. Brentano spent six years at the bedside of Emmerich, recording and documenting her visions. His manuscripts entitled \textit{The Life of the Blessed Virgin Mary} and \textit{The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ} were published in 1842. Both books would become and remain classics of Catholic literature, but it was Brentano’s \textit{The Life of the Blessed Virgin Mary} that some believe ultimately led to the discovery of Our Lady of Ephesus.

\section*{Discovery of the Shrine}

While perhaps filled with lore, the circulated story of the modern “discovery” of the shrine is a fascinating one. In 1891, Sister Marie de Mandat-Grancey presented visiting priests to a convent in Smyrna (Izmir) with a copy of Brentano’s \textit{The Life of the Blessed Virgin Mary}. After reading and discussing Emmerich’s visions, Sister Mandat-Grancey suggested that the priests should go to nearby Ephesus and investigate the validity of Emmerich’s visions, which

\textsuperscript{34} Deutsch, 1-4
\textsuperscript{35} Carroll, 2000, 42.
included detailed descriptions of Mary’s House and its location on a mountain overlooking the ancient city. Taking up the challenge, Father Jung and his fellow adventurers embarked on an expedition they believed would prove Emmerich’s visions false. Armed with only the book to guide them, the skeptical Catholic Priests set off for the ruins of Ephesus.36

The expedition left Smyrna and traveled to the seaside town of Kusadasi where they hired a local guide, Mustapha, to take them to Ephesus. After touring the ruins of the ancient city of Ephesus and some of the area surrounding the city, Jung and his expedition spent the night in nearby Seljuk. The next morning, armed only with the accounts of Emmerich’s visions, Jung chose Nightingale Mountain as a target for exploration. At Jung’s instruction, Mustapha led the expedition on an arduous climb up side of Nightingale Mountain. Upon reaching the crest, the exhausted and overheated party went in search for water and a place to rest.37

Finding a group of Turkish women harvesting tobacco on the side of a hill, the party inquired as to where they could find water and shade in which to rest. The locals directed them farther up the mountain to the “monastery where there is a fountain.”38 Curious, as they were not aware of any monastery in the area, the expedition continued up the mountain until they came upon a well. After quenching their thirst and resting, they set about exploring their surroundings. A short distance from the well, they discovered the ruins of a small stone house.39

Remembering Emmerich’s description of the house and geographic location, Jung asked Mustapha if one could see both the Aegean Sea and the city of Ephesus from this place on the mountain. Mustapha went off to investigate and retuned with an affirmative answer; both could

37 Poulin, 22.
38 Poulin, 32.
39 See figure 2.3.
be seen only from this place on the mountain. Emmerich had described the location, the house, and the surrounding grounds in great detail.

A little way behind the summit of the rocky hill from which one could see over the trees and hills to Ephesus and the sea with its many islands. The place is nearer the sea than Ephesus, which must be several hours’ journey distant from the coast. 40

Regarding the house itself, Emmerich described St. John as building a house of stone on the mountainside where several Christian families where living in nearby caves. After several days in the area, the priests stumbled upon caves and other geological features included in Brentano’s book. In The Holy Virgins House, Father P. Eugene Poulin, a member of the expedition, writes, “I confess I was quite astonished when, at first sight, details one after another, details of great value appeared all of a sudden, just as C. Emmerich had indicated. Truth surpassed conviction. There was nothing to say.”41 Convinced they had uncovered the impossible, the expedition returned to the Convent in Smyrna (Izmir) and announced that they had found Mary’s House. Father Vervault, another member of the expedition, recorded in his journal these words: “We looked, and we have found it.”42 Reporting their “discovery,” the priests awaited further instruction from the Vatican. Reacting immediately to the report, Vatican officials authorized a secession of expeditions and ordered a thorough investigation of the ruins and the surrounding area.43

The Kirkindje Christians

After the discovery of the shrine in 1891 by Jung and his group, Catholic priests sent by the Vatican to investigate its authenticity interviewed local people from the nearby mountain

41 Poulin, 43.
42 Carroll, 2000, 60.
43 Carroll, 2000, 63.
village of Kirkindje (Sirince). To the astonishment of the priests, when asked if they knew anything about the ruins, the villagers responded that it was the home of the Virgin Mary.⁴⁴ The Kirkindje village was home to “the last group of known lineal descendants of the Ephesian Christians”⁴⁵ who converted to Christianity in the first century CE. These descendents had held fast to the traditions of their ancestors, believing that the ruins on Nightingale Mountain were in fact all that remained of Mary’s last earthly home.

Further investigations by Vatican researchers “learned that in ancient Ottoman land registers, Mary’s house was listed as ‘The Three-Doored Monastery of the All Holy.’ This would explain why the women in the tobacco field had referred to it as ‘the monastery,’ and why the villagers of Kirinca (Kirkindje) called it Panaghia-Capouli, ‘The Gate of the All Holy.’”⁴⁶ Vatican commentary regarding the Kirkindje Christians recently appeared in a Zenit article commemorating Pope Benedict XVI’s celebration of Mass at the Our Lady of Ephesus shrine on November 29, 2006. The article discusses the Kirkindje Christian’s veneration of Mary and annual pilgrimage practices to Our Lady of Ephesus.

It was the "Panaya uc Kapoulou Monastiri," as the Orthodox Christians of the area called it—the "Monastery of the Three Doors of Panaya, the All Holy," These Greek Christians used to go to the site on pilgrimage during the octave of the feast of Mary's Dormition, August 15. The Vincentian priests did some research among the residents of the area and confirmed the existence of a centuries-old devotion which recognized in the ruined chapel the place of the last residence of "Meryem Ana," Mother Mary.⁴⁷

When interviewing residents of the Kirkindje village, Vatican investigators were astounded to learn that, like their forefathers, the Kirkindje continued to perform the arduous ten-

⁴⁴ See figure 2.4.
⁴⁵ Deutsch, 43.
⁴⁶ Carroll, 2000, 73.
hour pilgrimage to Nightingale Mountain in commemoration of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary. Deutsch argues that this

...annual pilgrimage was an event which, if not recognized for what it really was, defies any other explanation. Those Christian peasants, all Greek schismatics, held to the local traditions of their forefathers despite the contradictory doctrine of the whole orthodox Church, which favored the Jerusalem tradition. They celebrated the Holy Sacrifice and commemorated Mary’s Dormition at Panaya contrary to their own liturgical books. They were thus alone in that unique belief and practice. With them it was not merely a tradition of Mary’s Dormition in Ephesus, but also a belief in the same house which Catherine Emmerich had envisioned from afar, and which the Lazarists later discovered.48

The Kirkindje continued their annual pilgrimages until the fall of the Ottoman Empire. During the struggle to establish the Turkish Republic, the Christian population fled the area, and the village was repopulated by Muslim Turks who also embraced the ruins as a holy site connected to Mary. The Kirkindje Christian population was relocated to Greece as refugees, where they were dispersed into various parts of the country.

The testimony of the Kirkindje Christians is of importance because it allows us to trace the shrine’s religious and historical significance through the unbroken local tradition confirmed by Vatican investigations. Even though lost to the outside world, Our Lady of Ephesus has a long local history as a pilgrimage-site connected to the life and death of the Virgin Mary.

Vatican Response and Papal Visits

Although contested by some Christians who claim Mary’s place of death as Jerusalem, Pope Leo XIII formally recognized the site as an official place of pilgrimage in 1896.49 His successor, Pope Pius X, granted a plenary indulgence for the remission of sins to pilgrims who

48 Deutsch, 44.
49 Deutsch, 98.
make the journey to Mary’s House. Pope John XXIII visited Ephesus in 1931 while he was a Papal Legate to Bulgaria, but he did not climb Nightingale Mountain to visit Mary’s house. He remained in the city of Ephesus visiting St. Mary’s church while his delegation made the difficult climb to the shrine. Pope Paul VI made the first papal visit to the Shrine in 1967, bringing with him a bronze lamp as a present for the “Blessed Virgin.”

Pope John Paul II visited the shrine in 1979 where he celebrated an outdoor mass for thousands of pilgrims. The official Meryem Ana guidebook reports that Pope John Paul II was presented gifts among which “was a magnificent edition of the Koran in two volumes, in Arabic with a parallel French translation the work of Sheik Si Hamza Boubaker, rector of the Moslem Institute and the Paris Mosque. In presenting this, the Seljuk (Selcuk) municipality wanted to underline that the Koran too, honors Jesus and his mother, Mary.” In November 2006, Pope Benedict XVI celebrated mass at Mary’s house and proclaimed her a link between the Christian and Muslim faiths. On December 6, 2006, the Vatican released a translation of Pope Benedict XVI’s remarks regarding his recent visit to Our Lady of Ephesus. The Pope reflected on the history, authenticity, and importance of the shrine to both Christians and Muslims.

Archaeological investigations have demonstrated that this place has been since time immemorial a place of Marian devotion, loved also by Muslims, who go there regularly to venerate her whom they call Meryem Ana, Mother Mary. In the garden next to the shrine I celebrated holy Mass for a group of faithful who had come from nearby Izmir and other parts of Turkey, as well as from abroad. We felt truly ‘at home' in ‘Mary's House,’ and in that atmosphere of peace we prayed for peace in the Holy Land and throughout the world ….

50 Carroll, 2000, 75.
51 Deutsch, 71.
52 Carroll, 2000, 81.
53 Seljuk Municipality, The House of Virgin Mary (Izmir: Turkey, 2004), 44. Seljuk (Selcuk) is the municipality under whose jurisdiction Our Lady of Ephesus falls. In 2004, they produced a guidebook to assist Pilgrims with their visit to the shrine.
Despite much Papal attention and ceremony, Our Lady of Ephesus has not received official Vatican affirmation declaring it the site of Mary’s death and Assumption. Although Our Lady of Ephesus lacks official standing, pilgrims continue to flock to western Turkey to visit the modest stone house high atop Nightingale Mountain.

The History of Pilgrimage to Our Lady of Ephesus

The first organized pilgrimage, outside of the local Kirkindje Christians, to Our Lady of Ephesus took place in 1896. Thirteen-hundred pilgrims departed from Izmir in two trains arriving in Ephesus two hours later. Out of the thirteen-hundred who traveled to Ephesus, only the strong of body and spirit were able to make the arduous two to three hour climb up the mountainside; the others awaited in prayer in the ruins of the ancient city. “In 1898 and each year following until the war, similar pilgrimages took place, each with equal or greater enthusiasm than the preceding. By 1914 the pilgrims had totaled about twenty thousand.”

Pilgrimage to Our Lady of Ephesus halted with the entrance of the Ottoman Empire into World War I. Conditions in the area worsened after the Ottoman Empire signed the 1920 Peace Treaty of Sevres with the Allies, which unleashed a civil war between ethnic Greek and Turkish citizens of the Ottoman Empire. During the ensuing years, civil infighting made pilgrimage to Our Lady of Ephesus impossible to all but the locals. Conditions improved slightly after the sultanate was abolished and the Republic of Turkey was formed in 1923. Although limited pilgrimages occurred during the years of political instability, pilgrimage was both difficult and dangerous. Pilgrimages to the shrine were all but non-existent until after World War II when the

55 Deutsch, 98.
56 Deutsch, 99.
Turkish government initiated a road project that would allow for the safe and easy travel to and from Nightingale Mountain.

In 1950, there was a resurgence of Catholic Christian Pilgrimage to the Ephesus Shrine when Pope Pius XII, in the *Munificentissimus Deus*, formally declared the belief of the Assumption of Mary as Catholic dogma. “We pronounce, declare, and define it to be a divinely revealed dogma: that the Immaculate Mother of God, the ever Virgin Mary, having completed the course of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul into heavenly glory.”57 A small-organized pilgrimage to the site on the day of the pronouncement of the Marian Dogma caught local and international attention.

Since 1950, the number of both Christian and Muslim pilgrims has increased annually. According to Deutsch, the number of annual visitors to Our Lady of Ephesus has multiplied astoundingly since Pope Pius XII’s proclamation. The 1950 pilgrimage, organized to coincide with the solemn declaration of the Assumption, numbered around thirty, whereas in 1956 Our Lady of Ephesus saw 20,000, 1957 saw 37,000 visitors, and in 1962 133,000 visitors ascended Nightingale Mountain.58 Since 1988, Our Lady of Ephesus has received over a million visitors annually.59

**Diversity of Pilgrims**

Pilgrims to Mary’s House are as diverse in religious traditions as in intent. According to Father Tarcy, the officiating Capuchin Priest at Our Lady of Ephesus, roughly fifty percent of pilgrims are Christian—whether pious pilgrims or tourists who converge on Ephesus from cruise

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57 Pope Pius XII, *Defining the Dogma of the Assumption: Munificentissimus Deus* Papal Encyclicals [www.papalencyclicals.net/Pius12/P12MUNIF.HTM](http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Pius12/P12MUNIF.HTM), (November 1, 1950).
58 Deutsch, 104.
59 Thierry, 11.
ships docking at nearby Kusadasi. Tarcy mused that he can always pick out the cruise tourists as they are walking up the mountain path because of their jolly demeanor that usually changes to a quiet respect as they reach the sanctuary area and intuitively realize that they are on sacred ground.60

The second largest group of pilgrims Tarcy encounters are Muslims who make their way to Mary’s house to venerate the woman they regard as the paradigmatic Muslim woman. Tarcy estimates that at least forty percent of pilgrims are Muslim, and he noted that they are often the most pious pilgrims he encounters. Although venerated by both Christians and Muslims, Mary plays differing roles and has different meaning for the Christian and Muslim Pilgrims, as I will describe in the next section. Non-pilgrim tourists make up the remaining visitors to Our Lady of Ephesus, which is a destination regularly included by many organized tour groups visiting ancient sites along the western coast of Turkey.

In 1950, Pope Pius XII declared, “The holy House should be a Marian center which is unique throughout the world, a place where Christians and Moslems of all rites and denominations and of all nationalities can meet each other to venerate the Mother of Jesus, and make true the prophecy, ‘All generations will call me blessed.’” 61 On April 4, 2003, Archbishop Bernardini celebrated a dedication Mass at Meryem Ana. Bernardini declared, “The house of the Virgin Mary of Ephesus is known as a place where people of different faiths and different cultures pray together, without problem, side-by-side. The Blessed Mother receives in her embrace everyone.” 62 He also noted that Mary’s house “radiates a spirit of peace and brotherhood.” 63 Our Lady of Ephesus is a religious site that draws people of differing faiths on

60 Father Tarcy, personal interview, Ephesus, Turkey, 12 June 2006.
63 www.cathstan.org/news
a daily basis. Muslims and Christians pray and perform their devotions side by side, sharing sacred geography in peace and harmony. In order to better understand the nature and resonance of this encounter, a short discussion of the role of Mary in Islam is warranted.

**Mary in Islam**

As *Theotokos* or God Bearer, Mary is an important figure in Christianity yet she also plays a prominent but distinctive role in Islam. In *Mary the Blessed Virgin of Islam*, Dr. Aliah Schleifer explains Mary’s theological standing in Islam:

> For most Christians, Mary is the Mother of God, yet for Muslims, she is a perfect saint and focus of intercessory hopes, she exercises no indispensable role in the economy of salvation. For while Islam and Christianity concur in affirming a perfect Creator God, they differ, as their rival Marys show, on how that God touches individual souls and brings them to perfection…For Muslims, the Blessed Virgin is not *theotokos*, the woman that bore God Himself and gazed in love upon Him as He lay in straw. Instead she bears witness to the presence of the God who need not ‘come’ into the world, because He has never been ‘absent’ from it.64

The veneration of Mary by Muslim and Christian pilgrims has its origin in both the New Testament and the Quran. Although Mary plays an important but not extensive role in the New Testament, she has a much more prominent position in the sacred text of Islam. Mary is mentioned no fewer than thirty-four times in the Quran, and she is the only woman in the Quran to have her own chapter or *sura*. *Mary*, the title of the nineteenth *sura* of the Quran, includes much detail about Mary’s life before, during, and after the Annunciation.

Many of the Quranic stories concerning Mary and Jesus are foreign to Christian ears and sensibilities. Even though there are many differing accounts, the Quran and New Testament also share similar stories about Mary. In the following Annunciation accounts from *sura* 19:14-21 and Luke 1:30-34, Mary’s reactions to the heavenly messenger are strikingly similar.

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And when she saw him she said: ‘May the Merciful defend me from you! If you fear the Lord, leave me and go your way.’ ‘I am the messenger of your Lord,’ he replied, ‘and have come to give you a holy son.’ ‘How shall I bear a child,’ she answered, ‘when I am a virgin, untouched by man?’ ‘Such is the will of your lord,’ he replied. ‘That is no difficult thing for Him. He shall be a sign to mankind,’ says the Lord, ‘and a blessing from Ourself. This is Our decree.’

And the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now you shall conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and be called the son of the Most High and the Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David.” Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin.”

In the Quran, Jesus is repeatedly referred to as “Jesus son of Mary,” reaffirming the importance of the Mother and the son as interrelated. Mary is unimaginable if disassociated from her Son, but the reverse is true, as well. “The two, Mother and child, are bound together as one in their representation of the best of human virtues, among which is the reciprocation of concern and affection which God has decreed between parent and child.”

Although Muslims refute the divinity of Jesus, they understand him to be one of the most important of Allah’s Prophets. The Quran speaks of Jesus’ role as a prophet favored by Allah. “The angels said to Mary: ‘Allah bids you rejoice in a Word from Him. His name is the Messiah, Jesus the son of Mary. He shall be noble in this world and in the next, and shall be favored by Allah. He shall preach to men in his cradle and in the prime of manhood, and shall lead a righteous life.’” He is seen as a paradigmatically pious figure who preached, even from the cradle, spreading the word of Allah.

Although Jesus and Mary are revered, the Quran clearly rejects the Christian concepts of Jesus’ divinity and of Mary as *Theotokos*. According to John Alden Williams,

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67 Schleifer, 46.
68 *The Koran*, Sura 3:45.
The idea that he was the son of Allah is sternly rejected, the doctrine of the Trinity is held to contradict God’s Oneness, and since Jesus did not die on the cross and there was no collective guilt of man for which he could atone, there was no Atonement and no Resurrection. As People of the Book, the early Christians are held to have deliberately falsified the scripture he brought, and to have worshipped the Messiah blasphemously.69

The Quran explicitly denies the Christian trinity and the divinity of Jesus or Mary. “Unbelievers are those that say: ‘Allah is one of three.’ There is but one God. If they do not desist from so saying, those of them that disbelieve shall be sternly punished. … The Messiah, the son of Mary, was no more than an apostle: other apostles passed away before him. His mother was a saintly woman. They both ate earthly food.”70

Although Mary has no salvific powers in Islam, she is one of the most revered women in the Islamic faith. In various hadiths, Mary is discussed as being one of the four ‘Perfect Women’ in history. Mary belongs in an exclusive group of women who are considered ‘Perfect’ because of their strength of faith and submission to God.71 In Mary the Blessed Mother of Islam, Schleifer argues that, unlike the traditional Orthodox Christian understanding of Mary, the Mary of Islam is an important figure in her own right.

Mary, in traditional Sunni Islam is an important figure in herself. Her position is not just that of the most exalted category of women, but she is ranked in the highest category of all human beings. In fact, from the perspective of those scholars who consider Mary to be a prophetess, she is considered equal to this aspect of her son Jesus. And to those who focus on Mary’s outstanding spiritual achievements, she is seen to have been blessed with stages of spiritual development that approach those of the Prophet Muhammad. In no case is Mary seen solely as the mother of Jesus.72

For Muslims, Mary is a paradigmatic servant of God and an example for all humanity to emulate.

Mary’s importance to both Christianity and Islam is of particular significance to our understanding the Our Lady of Ephesus shrine, in that she can be viewed as a significant bridge

70 The Koran. Sura 5:74-75.
71 Schleifer, 11.
72 Schleifer, 95.
between the two religions. As we will see, pilgrims to Our Lady of Ephesus practice their
devotions alongside one another and do so in relative harmony and peace.
Figure 2.1: Ruins of St. John’s Basilica

Figure 2.2: Ruins of St. Mary’s Church
Figure 2.3: Our Lady of Ephesus 1891
Our lady of Ephesus as it was when discovered in 1896.

Figure 2.4: Kirkindje Christians
Kirkindje Christians during 19th century pilgrimage to Our Lady of Ephesus.
Seljuk Municipality, 26.
III. Our Lady of Ephesus

Mary can be presented as the living experience of the living faith of believers, in the universe of myth and symbol rather than in that of logic and concept. The notion of Mary the Virgin, the Mother of God, the Bride of the Spirit, and so on, has emerged in a magnificent Marian mythology, and now our Lady lives in the deepest heart of humanness that finds expression only in the symbol—in the images that surge and tumble in the unconscious, archaeological layers of our psyche.73

Leonardo Boff

Mary is an elusive figure impossible to simply define, for she has played many roles in the lives of those who have bowed their heads in request and supplication. In her many persona, Mary has provided guidance to the lost, solace to the sick, and granted boons to those in need. Mary is a most approachable figure embraced as mother, sister, daughter, and friend. In The Maternal Face of God: The Feminine and Its Religious Expressions, Leonardo Boff explores the many changing faces, incarnations, and roles that Mary has played over the last two millennia. Boff argues that Mary’s persona changes to meet the needs of her devotees. He writes, “Each new generation finds itself in Mary, projecting its dreams, its sociocultural ideals, upon her. In her, each new generation discovers the revelatory path of the feminine archetype that crowd our unconscious.”74 Mary, among the most human of historical and scriptural figures, welcomes the masses and participates in the daily lives of her followers who embrace her as one who has experienced and transcended human fragility. According Leonard Boff,

The faithful who kneel before the statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary must be enabled to see beyond the symbol, to the history of this unique woman of our world, who shared in the life of everywoman. She waited for her husband to finish his work, she prepared his meals, washed his clothes, supported him during the long days of labor and in times of sickness, she cleaned, swept, sewed, she put the house in order, she sat down with her husband in the evening for long conversations. … She visited neighbors, comforting

74 Boff, 251.
them in their trials, bearing with the dull and laughing with the merry. The Blessed Virgin Mary experienced the trauma of widowhood, then watched in paroxysm of anguish, her heart torn asunder and pierced by seven swords, the death by torture of her beloved son.75

For those devoted to her, Mary is a compelling figure who provides solace, reassurance and hope. According to the International Marian Research Institute, eighty percent of all Catholic shrines are dedicated to the Virgin Mary, and most Marian shrines “have their origins in some extraordinary person or event that makes a particular place a center of devotion and pilgrimage.”76 Our Lady of Ephesus is a distinctive Marian shrine in that it is not primarily known for Marian apparitions or the healing of the sick. Although apparitions and numerous healings have been reported, Our Lady of Ephesus’ primary importance lies in its connection to the historical life of the Virgin Mary.77 Pilgrims to Our Lady of Ephesus share in the experience of Mary’s life on Nightingale Mountain; they see and touch the house where she is believed to have lived, drink the water from her well, walk in her foot-steps, and feel the same Aegean breeze on their cheeks. At Our Lady of Ephesus, Mary is not confined to the space of the shrine itself. Pilgrims experience and commune with Mary’s presence throughout their journey up Nightingale Mountain, during their walk up the tree-lined pathway from the parking lot, and in the natural setting which seems almost to cradle the shrine in its fragrant air and verdant surroundings.

**Description of the Shrine**

Our Lady of Ephesus is located high atop a mountain overlooking the ancient ruins of the city of Ephesus. Today, the journey from Ephesus to Mary’s house is a meandering ten-minute

75 Boff, 252.
77 See next section for an account of reported healings.
taxi ride up to the summit of Nightingale Mountain. Before 1951, this journey would have been an arduous three-and-a-half-hour hike across the plain of Ephesus and up the steep mountainside to Mary’s house. With the close of World War II and ensuing renewal of pilgrim activity to the shrine in 1946, Turkish officials recognized the need for developing road systems to Nightingale Mountain. In 1948, tourist minister Halim Aylot approached Archbishop Descuffi of Izmir to discuss his plans to build a nine-kilometer road that would wind up the mountainside and allow for ease of travel to the shrine. The road, built by Turkish soldiers, took three months to complete and was “viewed as a monument to the benevolent attitude and generous understanding of the government toward Our Lady of Ephesus.”

Traveling to Our Lady of Ephesus, whether by vehicle or on foot, is an incredible experience. At the base of Nightingale Mountain stands a bronze seven-foot statue of Mary, arms raised in a welcoming gesture. As the road winds up the mountain, pilgrims are confronted with the breathtaking view of the Ephesus valley below. The road ends at a large tree-enclosed parking lot dotted with cars and buses. Thousands of pilgrims, who opted out of the difficult hike, embark here daily to begin a leisurely walk up the tree-shaded pathway leading toward Mary’s house. Along the way, pilgrims pass by a gendarmerie station and through a modest commercial area lined with a dozen small kiosks and a cafe. Pilgrims are greeted by the fragrant aroma of freshly baked Turkish pastries and the spicy perfume of olive and peppercorn trees. Another large bronze statue of Mary, arms extended, welcomes the pilgrims to the olive-tree-lined stone avenue that leads to the shrine. The avenue also acts as an orientation guide for first-time pilgrims. Amid the olive trees are informational signs providing rules of conduct and

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78 Deutsch, 91.
79 See figure 3.3.
historical information in nine different languages. To the left is the outdoor terraced garden used by officiating priests when conducting open-air Masses for large groups or celebrating one of Mary’s Feast Days. Further up the shady pathway, pilgrims get their first glimpse of Mary’s house peeking out from behind branches of overhanging trees.

Modest in appearance, the Our Lady of Ephesus Shrine, known simply as Meryem Ana or Mother Mary’s to the native Turks, is an unimposing L-shaped stone structure. Archeological excavations at the shrine have revealed an early first-century foundation that has carried at least four different structures throughout the centuries. Today’s structure was rebuilt on the old foundation using stones found on and around the mountain. Old gnarled trees flanking the entrance and exit ways appear as if they are growing out of the foundation, creating an illusion of living stone. The arched stone doorway of the house welcomes visitors into the seventh-century entrance vestibule where pilgrims may sit in quiet repose, or light candles before entering the Catholic altar room featuring another bronze statue of Mary. The vestibule, a natural space for lingering in prayer, has several small wooden benches, votive stands, and kneelers for the pilgrims’ use. The stone floors are sporadically covered with colorful Turkish kilims creating a warm and inviting space.

During my 2006 trip to Our Lady of Ephesus, I observed several pilgrims who maintained extended prayer vigils in the vestibule. One woman in particular appeared to be highly agitated and fearful, silently crying as her lips moved in prayer. I noted that her prayerful presence in the vestibule lasted for more than four hours. I saw her again the next day, and she appeared transformed from the day before. I heard one of the nuns inquire about the health of

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80 Informational signs are posted along the avenue in: Turkish, Arabic, English, French, Spanish, German, Italian, Greek and Japanese. See figure 3.2.
81 Seljuk Municipality, 51. See figures 3.3 and 3.4.
82 See photo of interior. See figure 3.5.
her daughter, and the woman jubilantly hugged her in response, exclaiming that her daughter had given birth to a healthy boy early that morning and that she had returned to thank Mary for her intervention in a troublesome labor. Later, as I entered the shrine, I observed the woman again, but she was no longer lingering in the vestibule area. Instead, I found her in the altar room kneeling before Mary’s altar audibly expressing her gratitude.83

Pilgrims leaving the vestibule enter into the altar room through another stone archway and encounter a curiously damaged statue of Mary. During the fighting of World War I and the ensuing struggle for Turkish sovereignty, the statue of Mary had mysteriously disappeared. Discovered in a nearby ravine by Turkish Muslim soldiers posted at an artillery installation on Nightingale Mountain, the statue was recovered and returned to Christian shrine officials in 1926.84 Careless treatment of the statue, by persons unknown, resulted in the loss of both arms and much of the statue’s nose. Even though damaged, shrine officials decided to return the statue to the altar without repair. Pilgrims who view her damaged state are reminded of the dangers and sufferings one confronts in everyday life and perhaps of the suffering of the historical Mary.

The altar surrounding this statue is decorated with seasonal flowers and is lit by four large beeswax candles flanking the altar table. In a niche to the left side of the altar resides the lamp Pope Paul VI presented to Our Lady of Ephesus in 1967. Candles and lamps illuminate the altar room, creating a soft warm atmosphere. Another larger niche on the left of the altar holds a plaque commemorating the visits of Popes Paul VI and John Paul II. Alongside the plaque is a beautiful mosaic icon of the Virgin Mary. To the right of the altar, pilgrims are presented with a

83 Observations of author, Ephesus, Turkey, June 2006.
84 Deutsch, 89-90.
niche that displays yet another iconic representation of Mary, and continuing on to the right pilgrims encounter a third arched doorway that leads into what I will refer to as the Quran room.

The Quran room is a small elongated room that is believed to have been Mary’s bedchamber. In this room, verses from the Holy Quran pertaining to Mary are prominently displayed on the walls. Pious Muslims enter the bedchamber, recite the Quranic verses, and stand in silent prayer and contemplation before exiting the shrine. Regardless of religious traditions, pilgrims to Our Lady of Ephesus enter the shrine through the Christian altar room and exit through the Quran room. The L-shaped design of Our Lady of Ephesus presents Christian and Muslim pilgrims with what is, for many of them, a unique opportunity to encounter the sacred space of the other.85

After exiting the building of the shrine, most pilgrims spend time on the shrine grounds. Many bring refreshments and take advantage of the grassy areas surrounding the outer perimeter of the shrine while others follow the path to the sacred springs located a short distance away. The sacred springs, which many believe possess healing powers, will discussed at length in the next section.

**Author’s Observations and Pilgrims’ Experiences**

In the summer vacation months, Turkish Muslim pilgrims flock to *Meryem Ana* en masse to pay tribute to Mother Mary. Some come as members of organized tours led by guides, others simply travel by car with their families, and yet others come as solitary pilgrims. In June of 2006, I observed and talked to many Turkish Muslim pilgrims about their reasons for visiting the shrine, how they perceived Mary, and the role she plays in their religious lives. Interestingly, all of the Muslim pilgrims I spoke to said that they enjoyed encountering Mary in the Christian

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85 See diagram of Our Lady of Ephesus. See figure 3.6.
space as well as in the Quran room and they didn’t perceive any conflict in honoring Mary in both sacred spaces. Even though most couldn’t communicate with the non-Turkish pilgrims, they still felt a sense of communitas with their fellow pilgrims. One elderly woman told my interpreter, that Mary “was happy to have her Christian and Muslim children visit together.”

Christian reaction to Muslim pilgrims was a mixture of surprise and confusion. Over the course of a day, I observed many Christian pilgrims passing through the shrine. Christian reaction to the Quran room was varied. Some wondered out loud to their companions why Muslims were at the shrine and why excerpts from the Quran were present in a Marian shrine. Those who had hired guides were soon informed of the importance of Mary in Islam; the others left the shrine not fully understanding the dynamics of the interreligious interaction that was occurring around them.

Through my husband and interpreter, Teoman Sagisman, I spoke to many Turkish Muslim pilgrims, inquiring as to what had brought them to Our Lady of Ephesus. Their responses were as fascinating and diverse as they were surprising. One woman, accompanied by her young son, remarked that according to family tradition, visiting Meryem Ana three times was understood as being the same a making Hajj. She went on to say that this was her second visit and that this tradition had been passed down from her mother who had made many visits to Meryem Ana before her death. Surprised by this response, I listened as she explained that it was common for poor communities to pool their resources together in order to send one learned male from the village on Hajj to Mecca. This chosen man would represent the entire village and the villagers would therefore have performed Hajj by proxy. Here, though, was a new tradition. Because of the economic pressures, the pilgrimage destination was changed, allowing the woman to experience a pilgrimage journey to a sacred space connected to a Quranic figure.

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86 Pilgrim comments to author and interpreter, Ephesus, Turkey, June 2006.
economically prudent pilgrimage replaced the ideal but economically impracticable Hajj to Mecca. This is an ideal example of religion being molded to fit the needs of the faithful—of lived religion diverging from dogma. For Muslims, Hajj is mandatory, yet for many, it is financially impracticable, if not impossible. By changing the destination and the number of pilgrimages necessary, this family tradition created an opportunity that allowed members of the family to participate in and experience a religious pilgrimage. Unfortunately, I did not find another pilgrim who confirmed this practice.

Some Muslim pilgrims talked of visiting the house so that they could learn about an historical figure from the Quran. Others came to ask Mary for a boon. One young woman sheepishly commented that she had come to ask Mary’s assistance in the upcoming Turkish national college boards. A thirty-something Turkish man related that in his youth, he had come to Mary’s house to light a candle and ask for assistance in finding a good wife. Twenty years later, he had brought his son to the shrine to perform the same ritual. A female guide stated that she had brought twenty-seven Orthodox Sunni Muslim women from Ankara to visit the shrine. She explained that they were there to connect with a figure from the Quran but did not come for the purposes of a religious pilgrimage. She was adamant that Mary, although highly revered, was not to be worshiped and pilgrimage was a rite of worship. The purpose of their trip to Our Lady of Ephesus was to expose the younger girls in the group to an historical Quranic figure. Visiting Mary’s house was part of an educational process that opened discussion between the younger and older generations. Mothers and daughters experienced the journey and toured the shrine together discussing the events of Mary’s life as related in the Quran. Other pilgrims came seeking healing miracles associated with the sacred water of Mary’s spring.
After leaving the shrine, pilgrims encounter a flight of stone steps that lead to the “sacred” springs located a level below. Pilgrims gather at the sacred springs to imbibe, bathe in, and bottle water from Mary’s spring. When the shrine was discovered in 1891 by Father Jung’s expedition, priests found a spring bubbling up from the floor of the house. Because it contributed to the instability of the shrine’s foundations, it was rerouted away from the house and is accessible from the lower level of the grounds. The spring water is available to pilgrims by faucets positioned in four consecutive stone-arched niches in the retaining wall supporting the foundation of the shrine area above. During my many visits to Our Lady of Ephesus, I have seen pilgrims participate in a variety of different rituals at the springs. Some pilgrims splash water on their faces and drink the water; others fill containers and pour the water over their heads, drenching their entire body in the process. Pilgrims suffering from ill health are often brought to the spring in hopes of a miracle. It is common to see family members bathing their elderly or ill relatives and assisting them in drinking large amounts of the water. Many can be seen carrying off large containers of water for use at home.

A short distance from the spring, a stone wall covered with twelve large metal grids comes into view. The grids are a fairly recent addition installed to hold the strips of cloth and paper Turkish pilgrims traditionally leave at the site. During my first visit to the shrine in 1995, I observed copious amounts of cloth tied to tree branches along the pathway leading up to and from the shrine. Because of the threat these strips of cloth and paper posed to the trees, shrine officials constructed this grid system that would allow Turkish pilgrims to continue their tradition in a safe and concentrated place. Many of the strips have prayers written on them asking Allah or Mary for assistance or thanking them for their protection and guidance. In 2006,

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87 See figure 3.7.
88 See figure 3:8.
89 Discussion with Father Tarcy. Ephesus, Turkey, 12 June 2006.
I observed that non-Turks had begun to participate in this tradition. Many of the notes tied to or tucked into the grids where written in English, French, Spanish, Italian, and German. In an *Asian News* article, Father Tarcy talks of this Turkish tradition and of Turkish devotion to the shrine.

They arrive alone, with relatives, in organized groups, on school trips and even in army units. In line with their traditions, they tie strips of cloth to the tree branches: this is their prayer, raised to Heaven to obtain special graces or to be liberated from Evil. And so the olive trees and creepers are always decorated. And in these days of December it is above all Muslims who are close to us, who come to pray up here.  

In *Our Lady of Ephesus*, Father Deutsch discusses this tradition and how the strips of cloth attached to poles and trees act like streamers, giving the illusion of tall bouquets of flowers hanging down from the trees.  

In a 2006 article for the *New York Times*, Scott Spencer describes his encounter with the colorful wall of wishes and prayers.

As I walk, I come across a wall where 12 metal grates hang, each the size of a large window. The grills are a kind of spiritual message board, upon which visitors leave evidence of their transformations. Hundreds and hundreds of handkerchiefs, doctor’s bills and prescription forms have been left behind, all fluttering in the soft, perfumed breeze. One visitor, lacking anything more tangible to offer up, has left behind one of his socks.

These abundant and diverse “leavings” are physical manifestations of the prayers, requests, needs, and hopes of the pilgrims who visit Our Lady of Ephesus. Passing by the grids, pilgrims intersect with the avenue leading away from the shrine, toward the merchant area and parking lot.

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91 Deutsch, 109.
Modest, Muslim-owned kiosks dot the pathway between the shrine grounds and the parking lot. Trinkets commemorating the pilgrims’ visit to Our Lady of Ephesus hang from every inch of the shops. Muslim prayer beads hang alongside Catholic rosaries. Turkish nazâr boncugu dangle from cloth images of the Virgin Mary. Nazar boncugu are common adornments found in most homes, businesses, buses, and cars in Turkey. They are traditionally round or tear-shaped and made of blue or turquoise glass with a pronounced eye in the center. These decorative eyes are believed to provide protection from the evil eye, jealously, or envious thoughts. Merchants at Our Lady of Ephesus combine this traditional Turkish icon, commonly inscribed with Islamic prayers, with images of Mother Mary.

Statues of Mary are widely available in a range of sizes, colors, and poses. Small doll-sized Muslim prayer rugs with Meryem Ana Evi embroidered on them are available for purchase, as are various books, magnets and throws featuring images of Mary and her house. Sacred water is one of the most popular of souvenirs. Available in small decorative bottles labeled as containing sacred water from Mary’s house, these are smartly packaged as the perfect gifts for pilgrims to give their loved ones.

During my visit to the shrine in 2006, I observed a group of American pilgrims picking up small pebbles from the grounds around Mary’s house. Some pilgrims appeared quite choosy, picking up and discarding inferior pebbles and suddenly settling on an acceptable stone with glee. Inquiring as to the purpose of collecting the pebbles, I was told that the pebbles presented an opportunity “to have a natural reminder of Mary’s house.” These portable pieces of sacred space provide the pilgrim with a connection to the natural space of Mary’s shrine. The same pilgrims, pebbles jangling in their pockets, proceeded to the souvenir kiosks to purchase man-

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93 See figure 3.9.
94 Pilgrim comments to author, Ephesus, Turkey, June 2006.
made reminders. Souvenirs, whether man-made or natural, provide pilgrims with comfort after they leave the shrine.

In *Between Heaven and Earth*, Robert Orsi discusses the purpose souvenirs play in the lives of the devout.

Marian souvenirs connect moments and sites of experience—here and there, now and then, the place of Mary’s special presence and here at home. They are conduits of power. Such objects cannot be understood apart from the phenomenology of presence. What makes them desirable and valued, the reason that people want to give and receive them, is the experience, in and through these objects, of presence.95

In the absence of the sacred, souvenirs purchased at the site can act as a bridge connecting the pilgrim to the memory and presence of the space to which they are connected. For many pilgrims, Mary’s essence is present in the sacred water, statues, Islamic prayer beads, *nazăr* boncugu, pebbles, and rosaries sold at the gift shops.

Our Lady of Ephesus is staffed by a wonderful group of priests and nuns, all of whom are at the very least bi-lingual and some of whom speak a smattering of three or more languages. During my visit to the shrine in June of 2006, Father Tarcy Mathias, officiating priest at Our Lady of Ephesus, graciously spent time with me and discussed at length the importance of the shrine.96 Tarcy, a Capuchin priest who has resided at Our Lady of Ephesus for more than seven years has assisted many pilgrims in their quest to commune with Mary. In a 2006 article for *Asia News*, Mavi Zambak interviewed Father Tarcy, who revealed his understanding of Our Lady of Ephesus and the pilgrims the shrine attracts.

I am convinced that Mary’s spirit continues to live here and it can be felt. An intense inner peace enfolds those who come here, be they engaged, married or otherwise, widows or divorced, men or women, young and old people who after many struggles, efforts and suffering feel welcome here. Felling truly at ease, they can rest, like members of one family whatever religion they belong to….When our Muslim brothers and sisters come to Meryem Ana Evi, they do not come as tourists and mere visitors: they come here to pray.

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95 Orsi, 2000, 60.
96 See figure 3.10.
Perhaps this is the only place in the world where people of the two great religions, Islam and Christianity, can pray together without tension. Even those who do not belong to any religion, but who appreciate the value and meaning of silence, of peace, of encounter and reflections, willing stop by here, as a relief from secularism, and they find comfort.97

Father Tarcy expressed to me his love and fascination for the diverse multitude who visits Our Lady of Ephesus annually. After spending many hours observing the faithful performing their religious devotions, Father Tarcy and I sat on a bench and talked about the shrine, the pilgrims, the sacred spring, and a tiny but intriguing room I noticed just adjacent to the shrine’s exit. Inside this small room, I noticed multiple crutches, braces, and other implements used to assist the injured. Father Tarcy explained that the contents of the room were left as ex voto offerings by pilgrims who found renewed health or received a boon that they attributed to their visit to Our Lady of Ephesus. Ex voto offerings are given by the devoted in appreciation, gratitude, devotion, or as a fulfillment of a vow. Over the years, Our Lady of Ephesus has also received valuable offerings such as rings, bracelets, necklaces, and monetary donations from grateful pilgrims.

Although the shrine was not established as a site connected with the occurrence of miracles, over the decades miracles have been reported at Our Lady of Ephesus. Some are attributed to the healing waters and others to Mary’s love and concern for her devoted. After leaving Ephesus in June of 2006, my husband and I returned to his family home located about two hours north of Ephesus. Upon our arrival, we were greeted by neighbors who inquired about our trip. When they learned that we had been to Meryem Ana, they invited us to their home for tea for a continued discussion. Seated on their balcony overlooking the Aegean Sea, our hosts began to tell of a miracle they associate with Our Lady of Ephesus. Our hosts, Tufan and Gulten, related the healing miracle that Tufan had experienced sixteen years before. In 1989,

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Tufan suffered a debilitating stroke that left him paralyzed on the right side and with very little movement on the left. After months in the hospital Tufan’s prognosis remained bleak. Gulten and her sons were told that Tufan would not recover and that they should prepare for the worst.

Gulten, a pious Muslim, was determined to nurse her husband back to health. She and her sons decided to take Tufan to Meryem Ana to seek Mother Mary’s assistance. Gulten related how she and her sons carried her husband from the parking lot to the shrine where they prayed and then to the springs where they bathed him in the sacred waters. After returning home, they continued to bathe Tufan daily in the copious amount of water they had brought along from the shrine’s spring. Tufan’s strength began to improve within the first few days, and within a month he was moving his right arm and leg. Gulten and Tufan visited Meryem Ana regularly for the next year and Tufan’s health saw rapid improvement. Within a year of his discharge from the hospital, Tufan had made a complete recovery. Both Tufan and Gulten attribute his recovery to divine intervention via prayer and the healing waters of Mary’s spring.98

In an article for the Irish Times, Lara Marlowe interviewed Irish nationals about miracles they had experienced at Our Lady of Ephesus. Marlowe wrote of several reported miracles including one involving Liam O’Sullivan:

A wheelchair-bound Irish cancer sufferer was ‘cured’ after a visit to the house. … Six years have passed since an Indian-born Capuchin priest, Fr Tarcy Mathias, gave Holy Communion to O’Sullivan, under the canopy beside the house where Mass is celebrated. Mr. O’Sullivan suffered from leukaemia. He’d undergone chemotherapy and relied on his English wife Avril to wash, feed, and clothe him. Mr. O’Sullivan fell to his knees before the altar inside the Virgin’s house. “I asked Mary for a better quality of life,” he said. “The whole place went cold, like a freezer. It was a lovely feeling. I just improved and improved, and now you see the end product.” The O’Sullivan’s moved to nearby Kusadasi, and today Liam is an extremely active 69-year-old. He never returned to the doctors who told him he was going to die.99

98 Pilgrim comments to author, Ephesus, Turkey, June 2006.
O’Sullivan is only one of many Irish visitors to Our Lady of Ephesus who have made Turkey their permanent home. Marlow reports, “Father Tarcy has developed a special bond with the Irish community on Turkey’s Aegean coast. He stated, ‘They love me very much. They pray with me. They accept me as one of their own.’ He has lost track of the number of Irish weddings he has performed, and Irish houses he has blessed.”¹⁰⁰ When Marlow asked Father Tarcy about the miracles reported at Our Lady of Ephesus, he responded: “The house of Mary itself is a miracle…Other things are the consequence of that. There are many cases, especially among our Islamic friends, of people who come to pray here and within a year or two they come back with a child. If it’s a girl they call her Meryem (the Muslim name for Mary), and if it’s a boy they call him Isa (the Muslim name for Christ).”¹⁰¹ Marlowe also wrote of a Turkish Muslim woman who was so thankful for the birth of her daughter that she had her baptized in the Christian faith.

Father Tarcy discussed the challenges that go along with maintaining a sacred space that is shared by two traditions. He expressed his deep concern and conviction that all pilgrims be made comfortable and welcome. Chuckling to himself, Father Tarcy then began to tell me of the changes shrine officials had to make to the annual August 15th celebration of the Feast of the Assumption. Tradition at the shrine called for two Masses to be held at 10:30 and 12:00 noon respectively. Over the years, the feast began to draw more and more Muslims who wanted to participate in the celebration. Eventually, the celebration was changed to include a 10:30 ecumenical liturgy of the Word in which all pilgrims could participate. Immediately following the ecumenical liturgy, pilgrims participate in the feast of fresh fruits. A bounty of fresh fruit is blessed and then consumed by all pilgrims regardless of tradition. Following the ecumenical services, the officiating priests then celebrate a Catholic Mass at noon that is strictly for

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participating Catholics. Sister Antonia joined our conversation and spoke of how difficult it had been to turn away the Muslim pilgrims who wanted to participate in the Mass. Sister Antonia and Father Tarcy are grateful for the compromise that had been reached. Each believes the uniqueness of the shrine creates a distinct challenge not experienced at other Marian shrines.

The willingness to accommodate pilgrims of both traditions requires compromise and creative imagination so that all who wish to participate, regardless of religious tradition, in the celebrations at Our Lady of Ephesus are accommodated. Our Lady of Ephesus’ location in a Muslim country allows for a unique blending of faiths and practices. Although officially a Catholic Christian Shrine, the staff and officials of Our Lady of Ephesus work in association with the Muslim community to create a harmonious and inclusive space for religious expression. This unique willingness to accommodate and adapt to the needs of the pilgrims allows the two religious communities to interact and create a positive shared religious experience. By reimagining religious traditions, shrine officials support and encourage the continuation of an interreligious community where pilgrims honor each others’ beliefs and participate in mutual celebration of the life and continued spiritual presence of a Jewish woman who may have lived in the modest stone house two-thousand years before.
Figure 3.1: Statue of Mary
Statue of Mary at the foot of Nightingale Mountain. Author, June 2006

Figure 3.2: Informational Signs
Avenue at Our Lady of Ephesus. Author, June 2006.
Figure 3.3: Front View of Our Lady of Ephesus
Author, June 2006.

Figure 3.4: Eastern View of Our Lady of Ephesus
Author, June 2006.
Figure 3.5: Interior of Our Lady of Ephesus

Figure 3.6: Diagram of Our Lady of Ephesus
Carroll, 2000, 45.
Figure 3.7: Sacred Springs
Keskin Color A.S., 2006

Figure 3.8: Grids
September 3, 2006.
Figure 3.9: Kiosk
Author, June 2006.

Figure 3.10: Father Tarcy and Author
Author, June 2006.
When I finally left this Catholic environment to go to college, my first encounter with the modern world was not a good one, especially in my religion major. Although I admired and loved my professors, I simply could not recognize in any of my religion classes anything that my family and I knew in the old neighborhood as religion. My world was either absent from what was being called religion in academic scholarship and theology or else it was identified as primitive, atavistic, folkloric – something of the past, not the present.  

Robert Orsi

In the above passage, Robert Orsi reflects on his first academic encounter with religion outside of Catholic School. His bewildered and confused reaction to the academic world of religious studies is telling in its foreignness to one who understood his formative years to be religiously centered. The existing disconnect between the religious world of the laity and many facets of the academic study of religion is problematic in that it often causes scholars to miss the ongoing creative changes that occur at the root of all religions. Living religions are dynamic, ever-changing, and never stagnant. The study of lived religion is concerned with what individuals and groups “do” with religion and how it is imagined and reimagined to accommodate arising needs. Lived religion is concerned with how religion is utilized and practiced among the laity, outside of institutionalized boundaries.

Mary, one of the most complex and utilized of religious figures, regularly plays non-traditional roles in the lives of her followers. In the hands of her faithful, Mary is frequently manipulated or transformed into something new that can be used as a tool to fulfill a religious purpose or need. The personal Mary of the people is often diametrically opposed to the dogmatic Mary affirmed by official Christian doctrine.

As we have seen, pilgrims to Our Lady of Ephesus understand Mary as fulfilling a variety of roles. For many, she is the granter of boons, the comforter, the healer, the friend and confidant, and the all-inclusive mother who gathers her wayward children in peace. Mary’s earthly life allows her to understand the anxiety and pain of motherhood, the suffering and the death of a loved one, as well as the joys of life. Because of her earthly suffering, Mary has compassion for humanity and is not removed from the pain and distress of her followers. For other pilgrims to Ephesus, Mary is a historical figure of the New Testament or the Quran. Our Lady of Ephesus provides a tangible connection to sacred history for those who believe she lived and died on Nightingale Mountain.

Exploring Mary of Ephesus from the lived religion approach has revealed a rich and dynamic figure much different than the enchained, dethroned, and subservient Mary presented by Daly. In exploring Mary’s role in the lives of her faithful, we have encountered a Mary who inspires and comforts and is in turn transformed by and according to the needs of her followers. As we have seen in chapter two, Mary initially received the Christian title of Theotokos, not from textual authority but from the laity who granted her the title and eventually forced the Church to debate Mary’s official role within the Christian Church. In The Cult of the Virgin Mary, Michael Carroll asserts that Mary’s elevation within the church was in direct response to the needs and desires of the laity. Carroll writes:

In the eyes of most Christians, the only important result of the Council of Ephesus would have been that Mary’s relatively high status in the Christian pantheon was affirmed. Thus, I suggest that at Ephesus the Church showed itself willing to make Mary a far more important [figure] than she had previously been, and that this was a response to the fact that Mary was a figure who appealed to a large segment of the Church’s new constituency.103

103 Carroll, 1986, 84.
Throughout Christian history, the laity has often been instrumental in designing, creating, and conferring on Mary a variety of persona and titles, some of which eventually informed official Christian theology. In addition to conferring titles and assigning roles, Mary’s faithful are often instrumental in creating and preserving Marian-centered traditions.

As we have seen, the Kirkindje Christians embraced Our Lady of Ephesus as the last earthly home of the Virgin Mary, even though it ran contrary to the Jerusalem tradition supported by Greek Orthodox teachings. Our Lady of Ephesus, known to the Kirkindje as “The Gate of the all Holy,” played a vital and central role in the religious lives of the Kirkindje Christians. Deutsch described the Kirkindjes as,

…those Christian peasants, all Greek schismatics, held to the local traditions of their forefathers despite the contradictory doctrine of the whole orthodox Church, which favored the Jerusalem tradition. They celebrated the Holy Sacrifice and commemorated Mary’s Dormition at Panaya contrary to their own liturgical books. They were thus alone in that unique belief and practice.

The Kirkindje Christians did not understand their beliefs and practices to be unique; they were simply participating in and preserving the traditions of their forefathers. For the Kirkindjes, the annual pilgrimage to Our Lady of Ephesus was an opportunity to commune with the sacred. The close proximity of Nightingale Mountain to the Kirkindje village presented the isolated villagers with an opportunity to commemorate and celebrate Mary’s life and Assumption on the very mountain in which they believed she had lived. The Kirkindjes didn’t concern themselves with the apparent contradictions between the teachings of the Greek Orthodox Church and their own religious practices. Centuries of performing pilgrimage to the shrine in celebration of Mary’s feast days created an authenticity that needed no sanction from the Orthodox Church. The Kirkindje Christians continued their annual pilgrimages to Nightingale Mountain until 1922

104 Deutsch, 43.
105 Carroll, 2000, 61.
106 Deutsch, 43.
when they were forced to leave Turkey and resettle in Greece. During my 2006 visit to Our Lady of Ephesus, I asked Father Tarcy about the Kirkindje Christians and was surprised to learn that some of their descendants, although scattered throughout Greece, continue to honor the traditions of their ancestors and perform pilgrimage to Our Lady of Ephesus, participating in the annual Feast of the Assumption.

In chapter three, we encountered a Turkish woman whose family adopted the practice of making pilgrimage to Our Lady of Ephesus as a substitution for performing Hajj to Mecca. Performance of Hajj, one of the five pillars of Islam, is required of all Muslims, yet the economic burden of doing so makes it impossible for many. Inherited religious traditions, especially ones steeped in history, are susceptible to change when they are no longer relevant or possible. When confronted with a religious tradition that is impractical or burdensome, some begin to look for ways to reshape the tradition so that it fulfills the religious obligation in a new and practical way. The reimagining of religious traditions is not predictable because it involves a variety of “people working on their worlds in specific ways, at specific times and places.” Changes in religious traditions transpire as a result of an arising need that is influenced by historical, economic, political, and cultural contexts. In Between Heaven and Earth, Orsi writes:

Religious cultures function as one of the primary mediators between historical circumstance and individual experience and response. Religions have provided [people] in the turbulent and distressing circumstances of life in society over time—with a repertoire of feelings and orientations with which to take hold of their world as it takes hold of them. Anthropologist Michael Jackson writes that “our concept of culture must...be made to include those moments in social life when the customary, given, habitual, and normal is disrupted, flouted, suspended, and negated when crises transform the world from an apparently fixed and finished set of rules into a repertoire of possibilities, when a person stands out against the world and, to borrow Marx’s vivid image, forces the frozen circumstances to dance by singing to them their own melody.”

107 Deutsch, 44.
108 Discussion with Father Tarcy, Ephesus, Turkey, 12 June 2006.
110 Orsi, 2005, 169.
By tapping into their cultural and religious imagination, this family reimagined the Hajj and constructed a new tradition of pilgrimage. They not only altered the focal point of the pilgrimage but also stipulated an increase in the number of pilgrimages required. For this particular Turkish family, the performance of three pilgrimages to Mary’s House would fulfill their religious obligation without creating an economic burden. It is of interest to note that of all the many important religious sites in Turkey, Our Lady of Ephesus is the only one that is directly connected to an historical figure from the Quran. Mary’s prominent role in the Quran gives this new and reimagined Hajj some weight and legitimacy.

It is Mary’s faithful who constructed the sacred space at Our Lady of Ephesus. With each pilgrim’s journey to Nightingale Mountain, Our Lady of Ephesus’ validity as the last home of the Virgin Mary becomes more secure regardless of church claims or history to the contrary. During my conversation with Tarcy in June of 2006, I asked him if he believed that this tiny modest home was the last early residence of the Virgin Mary. Father Tarcy responded, “No, I am not absolutely convinced that this was her home. It is possible, but I think that it is more important that the Blessed Mother resides here in the present.”

Scott Spencer, in his New York Times article on Our Lady of Ephesus, reported Father Tarcy’s comments regarding the authenticity of the shrine. Tarcy stated, “The Miracle of this place is that people come here and are changed. That is Mary. That is why all the talk about whether or not this was once really her house – it means nothing. She is here right now. … When people come here they feel special grace. They may pray for their needs.”

Lara Marlowe, of the Irish Times, received a similar response from Father Tarcy. Marlowe wrote,

There’s an eastern flavor to the priest’s philosophy: “We are not human beings trying to be spiritual, but spiritual beings called to live human lives,” he says. Ultimately, “The

111 Discussion with Father Tarcy, Ephesus, Turkey, 12 June 2006.
evidence means little to me.” Father Tarcy concludes. For him, Mary was “the cosmic mother,” and he believes this was her house “because thousands and thousands of people have come here and experienced something.”

For Father Tarcy, Our Lady of Ephesus obtained the status of sacred geography through the continuous support and belief of the faithful, and so it is the pilgrims who ultimately provide authenticity. After her 1959 pilgrimage, M. Laura Leddy wrote the following poem in honor of Our Lady of Ephesus. It is one pilgrim’s expression of the love and devotion inspired by Mother Mary’s House.

**Our Lady of Ephesus**

Little House of Our lady  
Restored and standing anew  
From centuries’ devastation  
On a mountainside she knew.  
She came to you for haven  
From a land beset with strife  
Far from the stress and tumult  
That threatened her holy life.

You sheltered her in her sorrows  
Quietly soothing her fears  
Filling the lonely hours  
Throughout her declining years.  
Warmth from your hearthstone fire  
Its light on the walls aglow  
Brought to her peace and comfort  
That only she could know.

Little House she still remembers  
Your gracious and loving care  
And comes on light rays from heaven  
To the dim lit chapel there.  
Eyes have beheld her beauty  
Minds have been freed from all fear.  
Hearts rejoice in message  
Of Our Lady standing near.¹¹⁴

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¹¹⁴ Deutsch, 1965, 130.
Viewing Mary of Ephesus through lived religion and ethnographic approaches has revealed a multifaceted Mary. By looking at the Our Lady of Ephesus shrine through the lens of ethnographic data, at least four distinct Marys are revealed: the experiential Mary, the transformative Mary, the historical Mary, and the shared Mary.

The experiential Mary is sought out when pilgrims require practical assistance in facing the ordinary and urgencies of everyday life. Pilgrims turn to Mary for solace and guidance and experience her as a caring mother, grantor of wishes, provider of comfort, divine intercessor, mediator, confidant, and healer.

The transformative Mary’s malleability allows Pilgrims to create new narratives and practices providing alternative solutions to unachievable religious directives, and provides pilgrims with the necessary tools to produce new religious traditions so that they may continue to participate in their immediate and religious worlds.

For Christians and Muslims, the historical Mary is present in the shrine and the surrounding natural setting. As they walk on her mountain, pilgrims may experience a collapse in time and encounter a Mary who is ever present yet at the same time deeply entrenched in religious history. She is a figure that for Christians and Muslims is a historical link to the divine narrative that plays out in the New Testament and Quran.

Finally, Mary of Ephesus is the shared Mary who belongs to both Christian and Muslims alike. As a poly-religious shrine, Our Lady of Ephesus is curiously peaceful—one; where Christians and Muslims have achieved a harmonious co-existence not present in many shared sacred spaces throughout the world. Whereas the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron and the disputed Ayodhya religious site in India have been sites of continuous contestation and violence, Our Lady of Ephesus welcomes Christian and Muslim pilgrims in safety, peace, respect, and
harmony. In this post 9/11 world, tensions between Christian and Muslims are explosive, yet the peaceful interaction of religious worlds at Our Lady of Ephesus has not been disturbed.

As we have seen, Mary, as revealed and experienced by her faithful at Our Lady of Ephesus, is radically distinct from Daly’s theological Mary. She appears to be neither enchained nor dethroned but rather she is embraced as an autonomous, significant, and potent force in the lives of her faithful. Mary’s performance in the lives of the devoted may be contrary to the dogmatic role she plays within Christianity and Islam, but to the laity, Mary, as the approachable all-inclusive mother figure, is lovingly available and dedicated to her faithful. Mary is not religiously “fixed” but is ever ready and adaptable to the needs of her followers. As William Cantwell Smith so eloquently wrote, “All religions are new religions every morning. For religions do not exist up in the sky somewhere, elaborated, finished and static; they exist in men’s hearts.”

Mary, at Our Lady of Ephesus, exists, is imagined, and reimagined in the hearts and minds of her faithful.

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