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**Muslim Pilgrims at the House of Mary in Ephesus.**

**Considerations on ‘Open Sanctuaries’.**

Manoël Pénicaud

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**Abstract:**

At the end of the 19th century, French Catholic missionaries discovered in Ephesus (Turkey) a site considered to be where the Assumption of the Virgin Mary took place. After the proclamation of this dogma by the Vatican in 1950, this holy place knew a remarkable development, spontaneously attracting thousands of Muslims with special devotion to the mother of the prophet Jesus. Nowadays the phenomenon is even more substantial. Muslims are more numerous than Christians. Many Muslim women visit the shrine every day for help in giving birth. The Catholic Capuchin friars who administer the site adopt a posture of ‘interreligious hospitality’, being both hosts and hosted by the majority Muslim population in Turkey.

This chapter is a contribution to the Pilgrimage Studies and the shared sacred sites in the Mediterranean. How this sanctuary has been open to followers of different faiths? And how space is negotiated between them and also with tourists? This monograph shows specific and general considerations about this long-term phenomenon of trans-border circulation.

**Key words:** Pilgrimage; Interreligious Hospitality; Christian-Muslim interactions; House of Mary; Virgin Mary

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This chapter concerns the sharing of sacred space in the sanctuary named “House of Mary” (*Meryem Ana Evi* in Turkish), located close to the antic city of Ephesus, on the west coast of Turkey. This Catholic shrine is regarded as a possible site for the Assumption of Mary, celebrated on the 15th of August<sup>1</sup>. According to certain interpretations, after the crucifixion of her son, she would have followed the apostle John until Ephesus where she would have spent her last days (John 19; 26). French missionaries first discovered the holy site in the late 19th century. After a development interrupted by the World War I, it grew in popularity in the 1950s. Then large numbers of Muslims spontaneously started to come to pray in the House of Mary.

Why Mary? She is a pivotal figure both for Christians and Muslims, but differently. For the former, she is the Mother of God (*Theotokos*, in Greek; this dogma was proclaimed during the Ephesus Council in 431). For the later, she is the mother of the prophet Jesus (*Isa*, in Arabic) who will have a significant eschatological role to play at the end of times. She is the only woman in the Qur’an to be referred to simply by name, whereas all the other female characters are described as the daughter, wife or sister of a given man, or using various other descriptions. What’s more, Mary is the central character in two Surahs (3: “al Imran” and 19: “Mariam”), which gives us an idea of her theological significance. Indeed, the Qur’an presents her as a model of confidence in God. Her name is mentioned even more often in the Qur’an than in the entire New Testament (34 times and 19 times respectively). The Qur’an also mentions several elements that are typical of the Christian

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<sup>1</sup> The Assumption is the term given to the Christian dogma and belief that at the end of her life, Mary went directly to heaven without experiencing death. Christian Orthodox call it “Dormition”.

tradition: the birth of Mary, her presentation at the Temple, the Annunciation and the Nativity of Jesus. In other words, Mary embodies the qualities of a universal mother who transcends religious boundaries. For many centuries and to this day, Muslims still enter Christian holy places to pray the holy figure of Mary. This is the case at Ephesus, but not exclusively. Several recent studies show similar cases in Jerusalem, Algeria, Lebanon, Egypt, etc. (Albera 2014; Aubin Boltanski 2008; Hermkens, Jansen and Notermans 2009; Keriakos 2012; Stadler 2015).

On a theoretical perspective, the present chapter is a contribution to the Pilgrimage Studies and to the emergent field of Shared Sacred Sites in European and Mediterranean contexts. Increasing recent studies reveal that believers from different faiths sometimes cross religious boundaries because of the power and efficiency of holy sites officially affiliated with only one religion (Albera and Couroucli 2012; Albera, Penicaud and Marquette 2015; Barkan and Barkey 2014; Bigalow 2010; Bowman 2012b; Key Fowden 2002; Valtchinova 2010; Zarccone and Hobert 2016). Despite theological differences, the three monotheistic faiths share a number of elements in terms of beliefs, rites, figures and holy places. These crossovers, however, are not devoid of ambiguity (Hasluck 2000; Zarccone and Hobert 2016) and can lead to appropriation, conflict, partition and division. The history of Ottoman Empire is full of cases of ambiguous coexistence, oscillating on a spectrum from hospitality and toleration to interreligious hostility. The work by Karen Barkey shows how diversity made and added to the Empire: “The boundaries that were established, however, never functioned as rigid and impermeable markers of difference (Barkey 2008:62).

The case of the House of Mary is directly conditioned by this Ottoman heritage. It is one of these shared holy places attended –more or less pacifically- by both Christians and Muslims. What can explain this “interreligious hospitality”? How this sanctuary has been « open » to followers of different faiths? And how space is negotiated between them and also with tourists? I will describe and analyze this sharing, in order to show how different narratives and ritual practices are articulated in the same site.

## 1. Visions, discovery and foundation of the House of Mary

The city of Ephesus is located close to the Aegean Sea, 80 kilometers from Izmir, the old and cosmopolitan Smyrna (Georgelin 2005). Nowadays Ephesus is an archeological and touristic site, close to the Turkish city of Selçuk. The House of Mary is located in a mountain, 9 kilometers away from there.

In the late 19th century, French Missionaries from Izmir discovered the site following the descriptions in the reported visions of Anna Katharina Emmerick (1774-1824) who has been beatified in 2004 by Pope John Paul the Second. She was a Roman Catholic Augustinian nun leaving in Dülmen, Germany, in the beginning of the 19th century. Known as a stigmatic, she was bedridden for years and had a lot of visions of the Jesus and Mary's lives that were written between 1816 and 1824 by the German and romanticist poet Clemens Brentano (Brentano 1852). According to these contested visions, Anna Katharina Emmerick gave a detailed description of the last Virgin's home, located on a hill above Ephesus: "*Mary did not live in Ephesus itself, but in the country near it. (...) Mary's dwelling was on a hill to the left of the road from Jerusalem, some three and half hours from Ephesus. This hill slopes steeply towards Ephesus; the city, as one approaches it from the south east seems to lie on rising ground... Narrow paths lead southwards to a hill near the top of which is an uneven plateau, some half hour's journey*"<sup>1</sup>. Then this mystical narrative spread in the Roman Catholic world and contradicted the main tradition locating the tomb of the Virgin at Gethsemane, on the East entrance of Jerusalem (Stadler 2015)<sup>2</sup>.

In 1881, a French priest, father Julien Gouyet, discovered a small building on a mountain overlooking the Aegean Sea and he believed that it was the house of Mary described by Emmerick (Gouyet 1898). But most people did not take this discovery seriously. Ten years later, two French

Lazarist missionaries from Izmir, Father Poulin and Father Jung, read the book by Brentano and decided to do research in Ephesus, saying that they never knew about the work of Father Gouyet. In July 1891, they finally re-discovered the same site above the city of Ephesus. All details are described in a book whose aim is obviously to legitimate the holy site of Assumption. In this book, we see how they were very suspicious at the beginning and how they became absolutely certain of the “truth” of their discovery, a way to convince their readers (Poulin 1999). An interesting point, which is mentioned as a prove, is that the Christians Orthodox from the nearby village of Kirkindjé came every year to this ruined chapel. On the 15<sup>th</sup> of August, they celebrated the Dormition (Assumption) of Mary and they called the place *Panaya Kapulu* (“Doorway to the Virgin”, in Greek). This fact was a strong argument to confirm the hypothesis that it was an ancient place dedicated to Mary.

The sudden interest of French missionaries for this hill intrigued the Ottoman administration. Despite administrative and politic difficulties, the superior of the French Hospital of Izmir -Marie de Mandat-Grancey- bought the land that became a French and Catholic property in 1892. This appropriation accentuates suspicion of Ottoman power which try to break the contract, to no avail. Despite the fact that the research of the Mary’s Tomb is strictly forbidden, French missionaries built a road and modest buildings, but no church. In December 1892, the archbishop of Izmir, Mgr Timoni, visited the site of Panaghia Kapulu and became a strong partisan of its “authenticity”. Three years later, Pope Leon XIII and Vatican recognized the site as a Catholic holy place, but not the official one of the Assumption. This phase was the first step of the officialization and heritagization of the House of Mary (Penicaud 2014b).



The sanctuary of *Panaghia Kapulu* in ruins, after its discovery in the late 19th century © Massignon

Within a few years, the holy site became quite famous not only in Turkey, through religious press impacts. The entrepreneurs of the pilgrimage try to promote the case of Ephesus against the tradition of Jerusalem. Then, the House of Mary became firstly a regional center of pilgrimage. Not only for Catholics but also for Greeks, Armenians and Protestants, according to Father Poulin (1999:162). The pilgrimage grew until the First World War when the hill is devastated. During the Greco-Turkish War (1919-1922), that triggered the tragic population exchange between the two countries in 1923, Smyrna was occupied by the Greek Army then taken by the Turkish one after a tragic fire. The college of the French missionaries was destroyed and most of European communities left the country. This was the end of the cosmopolitanism of Smyrna (Georgelin 2005). In Ephesus, the Christian pilgrimage was over. The land of Panaghia Kapulu was even confiscated by the new Turkish administration, but French missionaries managed to get it back in court of cassation in 1932.

We see how the sanctuary, since its discovery, was the place of strong conflicts of appropriation and ownership between the Catholic Church and the Ottoman then Turkish authorities.

## **2. The re-opening of the Holy Place in the 1950s**

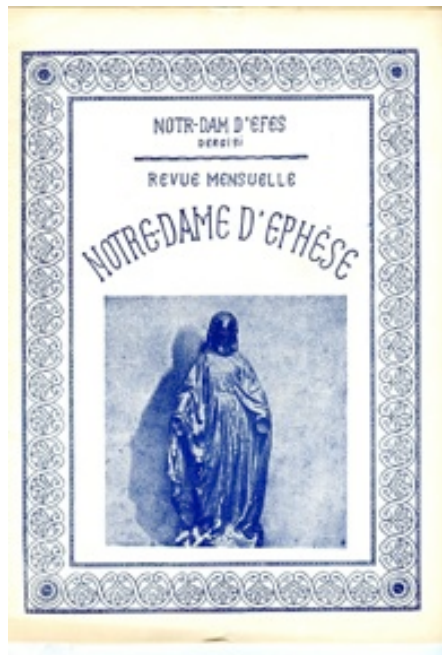
In 1950, the proclamation of the dogma of the Assumption by Pope Pius XII gave a new impulse and a second life to the site House of Mary that is one of the two presumed places. From limited aura and magnetism (Preston 1992), the sanctuary knew a phenomenal success. In 1951, year of the 60th anniversary of the discovery, the restoration of the chapel and its official opening by the state marks a decisive turning: the Marial site is declared "national". To this end, the Turkish State bought the land and built an asphalt road which significantly facilitated access to the holy place. This enterprise reflects clearly the new Turkish cultural policy to develop the touristic attraction of the whole Ephesus, first of the ancient city and of the House of Mary indirectly. Indeed thousands of tourists from all over the world already came to visit the archaeological sites and this represented obviously a huge economic interest. In that context, while Christian heritage was often discredited in Turkey (Tapia 2015), the House of Mary has benefited from the protective and international aura of the antique city of Ephesus- one of the jewels of Turkish archaeological heritage. Renamed *Meryem Ana Evi* ("House of Mother Mary", in Turkish) -and no longer under its Greek name of *Panagia Kapulu*- the sanctuary was suddenly dynamized by a double impulse: dogmatic (Catholic Church) and political (Turkish State). The "Turkization" of its name is symptomatic of the nationalization of a site that was not before.

During the 1950s, two new religious entrepreneurs play a significant role in the development of the House of Mary and specially towards its opening to Muslim visitors: Mgr Joseph Descuffi, archbishop of Izmir on the one hand and Louis Massignon, Islamologist and professor at College de France in Paris on the other hand. Precursor of Christian-Muslim dialogue, the latter worked hard to the "épheisation" -on its own terms- of the French Catholic networks to make known the importance of Ephesus (Penicaud 2016). He dedicated his life to studying and understanding Islam. He was also a Catholic believer, but few people know that he was secretly ordained as a priest in 1950 -in the Catholic Melkite Rite- by a special dispensation from Pope Pius XII. Mgr Descuffi and Pr. Massignon met in 1951 in Turkey and immediately shared the same ideal. The former wrote a few days later: "I



*bless Providence that allowed me to meet you in Izmir and to appreciate your heart of enlightened apostle and so eager to reconcile Islam, Orient and Christianity. [...] We have found the promising gold ring of this alliance in Hazreti Meryem Ana, whose maternal gaze is turned towards our desolate Orient*"<sup>3</sup>. Then the Massignon's archives in Paris show that they started to work together to the ecumenical and Muslim-Christian reconciliation under the Ephesian sign of Mary. One of the unexpected effects of the reopening of the holy place is the important and spontaneous influx of thousands of Muslims with special devotion to the mother of the prophet Jesus (*'Isa*). In 1952, Louis Massignon wrote for instance: "*And much to the concern of sacristans of Ephesus, these Muslims do dabiha (sacrifices) on the threshold of the Marian church. But as the Pope, by a special letter to the Archbishop of Smyrna [...] ordered him to open the Marian church "to anyone, even non-Christian, with a special devotion to the Virgin Mary" (which is eminently the case of Islam, to which she and her son are the only pure and sinless beings), we let them do*"<sup>4</sup>.

The development of the sanctuary is also valorized in an ecclesiastical journal published by the diocese of Izmir: *Our Lady of Ephesus*. Published in seven languages (French, Turkish, Greek, Spanish, English, German and Italian), this promotional tool attracted many pilgrims. The journal also held an accurate count of the number, origins and motivations of visitors. The success was also powered by miraculous healings. Furthermore according to this journal, miracles affected not only Christian but also Muslims: "*03.31.59. A Turk from Izmir whose daughter was tired for months says she is now very well since a prayer for his health at Meryemana*"; "*7.21.59. [...] A Turkish lady, whose hand and arm were strongly affected by eczema that had resisted to all therapeutic treatments, came to Meryem Ana with her doctor. She washed her arm with water and she left cured.*" This way to put in exergue the attendance of the religious Otherness is characteristic of shared sacred space. To relate the miracles concerning Muslims is a way to increase the "spiritual magnetism" of the sanctuary (Preston 1992): Mary would indiscriminately heal the faithful of any religion.



“Our Lady of Ephesus”, August 1957 © Massignon

The same journal *Our Lady of Ephesus* gives a sense of a striking visitors heterogeneity: in September 1957, for example, there was 4661 pilgrims and some of them come from Libya, Norway, Spain, Australia or New Zealand. A group of « 45 Turkish women from Cyprus » is mentioned, very probably Muslim ones. Like in other Mediterranean sanctuaries, especially in the Ottoman Empire, the interfaith dimension is a recurring phenomenon (Albera and Couroucli 2012; Barkan and Barkey 2014; Hasluck 2000). In Ephesus, Muslims became even more numerous than Christians. For instance, the pilgrimage of the 14th of August 1960 gathered 2000 Muslims and 600 Catholics. But that did not disturb the Christian identity of the sanctuary, confirmed by papal visits of Paul VI in 1967 and John Paul II in 1979 and Pope Benedict XVI in 2006 who stated: “*From here in Ephesus, a city blessed by the presence of Holy Mary -who is loved and venerated by Muslims- we raise to the Lord a special prayer for peace between peoples. In this part of the Anatolian peninsula, a natural bridge between continents, let us implore peace and reconciliation.*”

### 3. The contemporary Shared Pilgrimage

The international dimension of the House of Mary has grown until today and has recently been reaffirmed by Pope Francis, during his official visit to Turkey in December 2014, when he claimed: *“This land is important for every Christian [...] because of the presence, near Ephesus, of what a venerable tradition considers the house of Mary, the place where the Mother of Jesus lived for a few years, center of the devotion of many pilgrims, not only Christians but also Muslims, coming from all over the world.”* Each year, hundreds of thousands of people visit the shrine with very different motivations and expectations. The heritagization that began in previous periods is fully carried and accentuate the visitors heterogeneity. In fact, people can be pilgrims and/or tourists, Christians or Muslims, believers or non believers. Meryem Ana Evi has become an important pilgrimage site but also an economic center of religious heritage in Turkey.



Muslim visitors on the esplanade of the House of Mary © Manoël Pénicaud

What looks like the typical circulation into the sanctuary? At the end of the serpentine road built by the Turkish State in the 1950s, the site entrance is protected by a cab and a barrier where visitors have to pay. Once the vehicles parked, one enters the sacred perimeter where respectful behavior is explicitly required. On the left hand, an archaeological site is described by touristic guides, then a ramp lined with olive trees and large panels recounting in ten languages the narrative of foundation: from the visions of Anna Catherina Emmerick to the discovery of the holy place. After a few steps, visitors cross a first statue of Mary that some pilgrims salute with devotion. Then one cross

the esplanade dedicated to Summer outdoor Masses, just before the epicenter of the sanctuary. Modest in size, the house of Mary -built of brick and restored in the 1950s- stands under an old plane tree. The entrance is controlled by guards who manage the flow of visitors waiting patiently outside. The interior is quite exiguous, so that only a limited number of people can enter. Some come to pray and wish to remain there a certain time to soak up the “power of the holy place, others are just passing through. Photographs are strictly forbidden inside, but some visitors always try to do it. In the hall, a marble plaque honors the memory of the first entrepreneurs of the sanctuary (fathers Jung and Poulin, Mgr Timoni, Marie de Mandat-Grancey and Mgr Descuffi), near a portrait of Anna Catherina Emmerick. In a corner, a few crutches attest miraculous healings. On the right, visitors -mainly Muslim women- who want to cover their head can borrow scarves. The main room is a small chapel where the statue of Our Lady of Ephesus thrones above the altar. Religious presence is provided by Capuchin friars who take turns from morning to night, keeping the calm for prayer. Then a third piece, smaller, is regarded as the room of Mary described by Emmerick. One comes out on a shady esplanade equipped with burning candles-very which attract most of the pilgrims. An interesting point is that interfaith diversity is officially valued, because any visitor -pilgrim or tourist- can read on a sign of the importance of Mary in the Koran. Verses are cited in four languages (Turkish, English, French and German) to valorize this Christian-Muslim conjunction ignored by a large number of visitors who might be surprised by the Muslim attendance. The visitors then go down the stairs to the holy “spring of Mary”. Next they arrive to the wishing wall about ten meters long and two high. Composed of hundreds of thousands of pieces of cloth, paper or plastic knotted on a hidden metal grid, it is the main "attraction" of the outdoor circuit. Curious, disconcerted or initiated, all visitors stop there to read or write a wish or be photographed in front of this heterogeneous devotional “clusters”. Both playful and devotional, this polyvalent wall leaves no one indifferent. The tour ends with a passage to the unique gift shop that faces a restaurant, where a few soldiers are guarding the site day and night.

Both tourists and pilgrims simultaneously share the sanctuary. However the former can be believers and therefore become somehow “pilgrims” during their prayer. And vice versa: the latter can at any time adopt a tourist habitus (Turner and Turner 1978) for instance using their camera (Penicaud 2014c). Without reopening the anthropological debates on tourism and pilgrimage (Cohen 1992; Brown 1999; Badone and Roseman 2004; Reader 2014), a strong resonance appears between the touristic opening of sanctuaries and the crossing of religious boundaries. As we saw, the House of Mary is spontaneous and massively attended by Muslims. It seems particularly open to different audiences, which joined the theory of pilgrimage centers apprehended as "empty vessels" that visitors fill with meaning and expectations of their choice (Eade and Sallnow 1991). Here, borders (pilgrims / tourists and Christians / Muslims) are porous and it is not forbidden to temporarily transgress them. This is even tolerated, which is confirmed by the Capuchins position. Their role consists above all of providing a spiritual presence, absolutely avoiding proselytism, as required by Turkish law.

The heterogeneity of the House of Mary has grown. Paolo, an Italian Capuchin friar, explains that pilgrims are both Catholic and Orthodox, but that there are also Protestants or Muslims. Expectations are of any kind (healing, protection, success, marriage, etc.), but the friar notes that the most common expectation among Muslim women is to become mother: *“Mary is a woman. The main feature of women, in every aspect, is to welcome and motherhood. She is here as a mother and as a woman who welcomes her Christian and Muslim children. People come here to pray this figure so discrete and so gentle, so welcoming, so motherly, but also serene and silent. It is a very concrete invitation, to live what we believe in. People come here to pray, so that Allah gives them children. Once grace is received and they have had children, they come back here to thank Mary.”* The universality of Mary -as a mother- is highlighted to justify the non-Christian attendances. For this young priest, devotion of Muslims is quite normal and integrated in daily life. He has frequent exchanges with those who want to know more about the sanctuary and their religious life. In 2010 he hosted a group of Sufis from Iran and says: "It was wonderful to share the space of prayer with them”.

Some Sufis consider for example that Saint Francis of Assisi was a Sufi or a brother. As a result, many of them are neither afraid nor worried to cross the religious boundary, but without changing their faith. As a matter of fact it is inappropriate to consider these phenomena as syncretic: there is no creation of a third entity from two streams (Bowman 2012a). At most, there is an interreligious, individual and momentary “bricolage”. For example, Ayşe is a Sufi Turkish follower of Jalal ad-Din Rumi (Mevlana) and comes every year to the House of Mary for Christmas. After chanting the Quran in the chapel with her coreligionists -without being in any way prevented by the priests- she prays facing Mecca in the room considered Mary's bedroom. Then on the esplanade, she offers cakes to friars and nuns who know her and thank her for this act of commensality. This is very suggesting to underline the key idea of “Interreligious Hospitality”. In fact, this offering of food is a ritual of hospitality of the “religious Other”. Ayşe thanks the Catholics for their hospitality and vice versa when the Christmas Mass is performed in Turkish in order to interest the Turks (Midnight Mass is attended by two thirds of Muslims). This is not proselytism but an initiative of “inculturation”, a Christian postcolonial theological concept consisting not to convert –especially in the Muslim world- but to provide a spiritual presence in the continuity of the Second Vatican Council. At Meryem Ana Evi, friars and nuns experience the interreligious hospitality, being both “host and hosted” by the majority Muslim population. The etymology of “hospitality” comes from the Latin word *hospes*: “the one that receives the other” (Benveniste 1973; Pitt-Rivers 1977; Pitt-Rivers 2016). This word concerns -at least in French and Italian- the one who received (the host) and the one who is received (the guest). In that perspective, Catholic Friars are hosted in a Muslim society and they host Muslims in the sanctuary that they administer, giving an effect of “mise en abyme” according to the expression by the French author Andre Gide.



Two Muslim women praying in the House of Mary © Manoël Pénicaud

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As a conclusion, the House of Mary has become an international pilgrimage center. It attracted hundred of thousands of visitors because of the “power” of Mary, but also for its cultural heritage dimension. All of this reinforces the heterogeneity of this open and inclusive space. In the 21th century, we definitely have to consider that the phenomenon of shared sacred sites includes the touristic dimension and also that the distinction between pilgrims and tourists is quite obsolete and not heuristic (Badone and Roseman 2004). The House of Mary is an open holy place dynamized and crossed by a plurality of tangled meanings materialized in the wishing wall. Most all the visitors knot their desires and wishes on it, sometimes writing to Mary or to God, what is interesting because God should already know everything (Fliche 2014). Anyway this wall is a very concrete metaphor of the heterogeneity of attendance and expectations. As says the Capuchin friar, Paolo says: *“When I got here first, I used to talk about the wall down there as a touristic attraction. Then I started to read some papers, and when the sanctuary was closed I would go down to look at this wall and touch it. I would feel it with my hands. You see this wall covered with papers, and you do not realize that there is so much suffering, so many tragedies, deaths, diseases, desires, needs and so many grieving people... It is incredible! And then, sometimes, reading the papers, you understand that this wall is*

*the concretion of the prayers of thousands of people. This wall is their visible concretion. This wall is the World!”*



Wishing Wall, House of Mary © Manoël Pénicaud

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<sup>1</sup> Clemens *Brentano* visited Anna Katharina Emmerick for five years and wrote her visions. The book *The Life of the Holy Virgin* was posthumously published in Munich in 1852.

<sup>2</sup> Since the Middle Ages, Muslims have been piously visiting the church of the Tomb of Mary at the foot of the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem. This subterranean church is composed of altars of several Christian denominations, together with a *mihrab* indicating the Mecca direction that Muslims should face while praying. This site is the main location of the Dormition (Assumption) of Mary for Christians Orthodox.

<sup>3</sup> Letter from Mgr Descuffi to Louis Massignon, 10th of October 1951.

<sup>4</sup> Letter from Louis Massignon to Mgr Plumey, bishop of Garoua, Cameroun, 1st of September 1962.