Arab Baptist Theological Seminary
كليّة اللاهوت المعمدانية العربية

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MRel in MENA Studies Fieldwork: Walking Among the People

Have you travelled through the narrow streets of Nabaa lying in the outskirts of Beirut? Have you walked amid the serenity and splendor of the "holy valley", Qadisha? Have you spent a few days of Ramadan with an Imam of a Mosque and his family or stayed with a Druze family in their village? Or have you spent time with an Ethiopian over a pot of hot, spicy *injara* with bread that looks like pancakes but isn't quite so?

Thirteen students are currently pursuing research in fulfillment of the final requirements of the MENA Cultures Module of the Master of Religion in Middle Eastern and North African Studies (MRel). Administered primarily online with two-week residencies twice per year in Lebanon, this accredited postgraduate degree focuses on providing a strong theoretical understanding of the region and the issues that it faces, combined with an emphasis on developing applied skills needed to work in the region and among MENA communities worldwide. The MRel is ABTS's only English language degree program.

Students are now back home for their post-residency component of the module, which follows the on-campus residency from June 27 to July 8, 2016. During the residency, MRel students gathered from all over the world at the ABTS campus in Lebanon, attended classes and pursued fieldwork. Ashley al-Saliby, from the United States and living in Lebanon, shared, "one component of our two-week residency was that we were divided into teams and sent out to various locations around Lebanon. We were trained in some cultural anthropology techniques that we were required to use during our visits, and then had to submit a report on what we observed after returning. This small fieldwork experience gave us a chance to practice some of the tools we'll be expected to use for the much larger post-residency ethnographic study."

MRel students observing evidence of the various cultures represented at the ruins of Ba'albek, a World Heritage Site

Discovering Nabaa

A group of MRel students was assigned to spend the weekend in Nabaa, a poor, densely populated area in the outskirts of Beirut. They witnessed the cultural diversity of the area both on the religious and ethnic scale. There, you would meet the Lebanese, the Armenian, the Iraqi, the Syrian, the African and other nationalities. People of different faiths live together in harmony. They live together in the busy Nabaa compounds, where you can't tell where a building starts and where it ends.

The team went on interviewing random people about, "What makes you live together as a diverse community?" A unanimous answer was that there were inter-communal problems in the past, but then they realized that poverty was a common problem to all. So poverty knit them together. According to Rabih Hasbany, a Lebanese MRel student, who was on this team, "I was surprised that such a poor area is next to me.

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Residential, Arab theology students at ABTS use *Moodle* as the standard on-campus Learning Management System. All coursework, assignments, and electronic communication are exchanged over the Internet through *Moodle*.

In addition to your regular support to ABTS, please consider giving towards 15 laptops with software for first year students to use during their studies and in their ministries upon graduation. The total project cost is US $10,000. Contact Partnerships Manager Wissam al-Saliby today to know how you can contribute.

I used to hear a lot of people talking about Nabaa, that it's dirty and full of trouble. My visit changed my perception of that area. It's changed my outlook on things as we often complain about our circumstances. There was a woman there who works at a furn (a bakery); she said she refuses to leave Nabaa, the place where she grew up, despite her difficult circumstances. Sometimes we complain about our circumstances when they are much better than those of many."

Nabaa rooftops, photo by MRel student Rabih Hasbany

Serenity and Splendor of Qadisha

Qadisha Valley is a gorge in North Lebanon. On the Northeast side of Qadisha valley lies the Qannubin monastery, which is the oldest of the Maronite monasteries. Another group of MRel students stayed at the timeworn, secluded monastery of Qannubin with two nuns who have found their sanctuary away from the clamor of the world, so that maybe in the silence, they might hear the voice of God.

Audrey Gibson from the UK and a member of this team expressed her admiration of this place saying, "It was a very, very special place. And it's wonderful that they open their monastery to anyone. Anyone and everyone can go, whatever their faith or creed is. It was only a small monastery, but it had its own unique atmosphere."

The students' research question was about why people were visiting. Another member of the team, Anita Delhaas from Holland also said, "It was a privilege to join the everyday monastic life and participate in the activities of the nuns. Through semi-structured interviews and observation, I learned a lot about why people visit and stay in monasteries, how they take time to worship God and quiet their busy lives. Overall, it was a very valuable and refreshing experience. It gave me a good introduction to research and a renewed appreciation for the centuries' old tradition of the Maronites in Lebanon."

In a Druze Village

A team of three MRel students went to Ras El Matn in the Lebanese mountains to find out more about the Druze in that area. The Druze faith is one of the major religious groups in the Levant and are mainly found in Syria, Lebanon and Israel. The general idea of the research was to practice some social science ethnographic techniques. An ABTS theology student arranged for them to stay at her parents-in-law, who have a spare apartment in their big house. She took them around the village, and they met people whom they asked questions about the Druze. *Continues on p3.*

Are you considering a Master's degree to help you become more effective for God's Kingdom in the MENA region? *The deadline for application for the next MRel module, MENA Islam, is September 16. The module starts on October 10. Contact us for more information.*

They quickly realized that the place of birth really matters to this religious group. The team tried to work out whether it was because of their faith or it was more connected to the land itself. Donnie from the US shared, "We learned more about the Druze culture, especially about their strong ties to the land. Family and societal bonds were being strengthened and tested by land scarcity."

In Qannubin monastery, photo by MRel student Samah

Ramadan Nights… and Days!

Two female MRel students from the US, living in Lebanon, went to Saida and stayed overnight at a Sunni Sheikh's house, who also happens to be the judge of Saida and the Imam of a Mosque. His house is right across from his mosque. They ended up visiting it three times. They also broke the fast with his wife's family, for it was Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic calendar; it is a month when Muslims fast to commemorate the first revelation of the Quran to Muhammad according to Islamic belief.

The two students got the chance to speak to the women in the mosque and hear about what is significant to them during Ramadan. There was the language issue, but they overcame it creatively. Some thought Ramadan was the time of centering your souls; others thought it was a chance to spend good times with family. On Sunday, they also went to the old souk where the sheikh had grown up. They saw his old house, and the mosque where he and his forefathers had been imams. Everywhere the sheikh went, people greeted him, because he is held with high respect.

The Life of Migrant Domestic Workers

Louise Brown from the UK had the chance to stay overnight with eleven Ethiopian ladies. More than two hundred thousand migrant domestic workers work in Lebanese households. These are mostly women from the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Ethiopia.

"I spent the day going to their Bible study, participating in their service, eating with them and visiting sick members of the community," Louise said. She added, "I then spent the night with them. They made me feel very welcome amongst them. They gave me so much. The depth of their love for God and each other was humbling. I made them laugh as I tried to make their stew and pancakes into a Lebanese style sandwich."

MRel students' visit to the *Art Residence Aley*, an incubator for young Syrian artists' projects

The MENA Cultures Module of the MRel seeks to develop an understanding of and appreciation for the important elements and diversity of MENA cultures, the ability to draw critically upon the literature and practices of the social sciences and theology in thinking about culture and religion, (including trends analysis, cultural hermeneutics, and anthropological research and reporting), as well as to reflect critically upon the cultural implications of Christian ministry and work within the MENA context. The faculty of the MENA Cultures module are Richard McCallum, Lead Faculty, Kathryn Kraft, Support Faculty, and Robert Hamd, Holistic Formation Faculty.