

Articulating Difference

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Understanding Sectarianism

The civil war in Lebanon is over. Sectarianism is not. This simple observation should make all scholars who analyse sectarianism (or communalism) pause and reflect on the nature of the problem that they are so often called upon to explain. In Lebanon and elsewhere – in India, Indonesia, the Philippines, and the Balkans – religious violence and sectarian political discourse have not diminished in the modern world, and in fact, in many instances have been exacerbated in it.

The dominant paradigm to explain sectarianism has long insisted that modernity is one thing – invariably defined as secular and Western – and sectarianism another. This secularist paradigm insists that religious feelings, beliefs, culture, and passions are insidiously persistent and immutable. Sectarianism, therefore, is almost always identified as a problem affecting less developed countries, or those peripheral regions of Europe such as the Balkans or Northern Ireland. The destruction by Hindus of a mosque in the late 20th-century India is often comprehended in light of a long history of antagonism between Hindus and Muslims in South Asia. The Maronite conflict with Druzes in Lebanon is similarly understood against the backdrop of an age-old clash of civilizations in the eastern Mediterranean. The power of such a paradigm is rooted in a simple observation: that the discourse accompanying and justifying sectarian violence is itself expressed in a language that leaves little room for historical nuance. More often than not, this language evokes a *longue durée* of antagonisms that mark Muslims, Hindus, Jews, or Christians as irreconcilably different, as inherently violent, and as incorrigibly hostile to a particular group's collective identity. Moreover, such a reassuringly simple paradigm of age-old hostility is constantly reinforced by every act of violence that occurs between religious communities in the modern world, regardless of the specific historical context.

► **Reconstructing downtown Beirut.**

Historians' constructions of sectarianism

For many observers, the case of Lebanon has bolstered the notion that sectarianism is an age-old problem. Because the recent civil war (which ostensibly ended in 1990) mimicked many of the aspects of an earlier 19th-century conflict between Druzes and Maronites that devastated the region in 1860, Lebanon has been written about as if its religious antagonisms stemmed from ancient grievances that would forever rob it of an opportunity to 'become' modern. Book after book, speech after speech, and article after article have repeated this so often that few bother to look to closely into the origins of sectarianism in Lebanon. Most Lebanese themselves are convinced that sectarianism is endemic in Lebanese history. Prominent Western historians have claimed that sectarianism represents a Muslim reaction, indeed a rage, against the modernization policies advanced by the Ottoman reform movement which declared the equality of Muslim and non-Muslim and which began a wholesale administrative, cultural and military transformation of the Ottoman Empire. The polemical implication of this argument assumes that the Muslim majority could not be really modern – that is to say, Muslims could never accept Jews or Christians as equals, but had to be cajoled into a Western and presumably alien modernity by authoritarian regimes. Invariably the only evidence presented to support this interpretation is the testimony of contemporary European sources or the fact of the violence itself as if the outbreak of religious hostilities in 1860 in and of itself was sufficient to prove a the-



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sis of age-old sectarianism. Other historians have stressed social and economic pressures and dislocations caused by the impact of European industrialization on, and the consequent decline of, the Syrian textile industry. And still other historians have claimed that European rivalries played a decisive role in fomenting sectarian divisions. Historians, in short, have sought to explain the secular context of sectarianism; few have ever seriously grappled with sectarianism itself except to treat it as an easily grasped phenomenon, a cultural essence, a tribal will, a primordial religiosity that is antithetical to a liberal, egalitarian and secular modernity.

Interpretation of Ottoman reform

To the extent that sectarianism in modern Lebanon is religious in articulation it is indeed antithetical to a Western-style secularism which ostensibly separates religion from politics. But to the extent that sectarianism emerged out of a 19th-century intersection of Ottoman reformation and Western intervention, it should not be classified as antithetical to modernity. Before the 1860 massacres, social status, not religious affiliation, defined politics in Mount Lebanon. While in the Ottoman Empire as a whole, and in urban areas in particular, Muslims enjoyed political and cultural primacy over non-Muslims, the operative social and political distinction in rural Mount Lebanon was between knowledgeable elites and ignorant commoners regardless of religious affiliation. Both Christian and Druze religious authorities legitimized the traditional secular political and social order. It was the Europeans, who insisted on saving the 'subjugated' Christians of the Orient, that singled out religion in Mount Lebanon as the basis for, and sign of, modern reform. In the mid-19th century, European powers intervened in the region on an explicitly sectarian basis. The French championed the Maronites and the British protected the Druzes. In an effort to resist European encroachment and to construct a notion of a secularized Ottoman subject-citizen, the Ottomans in Mount Lebanon guaranteed Muslim (and Druze) and non-Muslim (Maronite) communities equal political representation and taxation. At one level, the problem facing European powers, Ottoman authorities, and local elites was how to transform religious

communities into political communities, while also preserving a hierarchical social order. On another level, communal politics inadvertently democratized politics as non-elites forced themselves to the forefront of sectarian mobilizations which, in turn, often violated traditional hierarchies. For example, Maronite commoners interpreted Ottoman reform to mean social as well as religious equality, whereas the Maronite church interpreted Ottoman reform to mean a 'restoration' of an imagined Maronite Christian emirate in Mount Lebanon (which had never existed as such). Both interpretations of reform constituted visions of liberation. Both either entirely excluded or subordinated the Druze inhabitants of Mount Lebanon. The religiously mixed nature of the region and the growing intervention of European powers who insisted on partitioning Mount Lebanon into pure Christian and Druze districts only exacerbated communal tensions.

Ultimately, it was conflicting interpretations over the meaning of Ottoman reform – not age-old religious antagonisms – that led directly to the sectarian violence in Mount Lebanon in the 1840s and culminated in the massacres of 1860. And it was an attempted solution to this 'age-old' problem that led Ottomans and Europeans to construct a system of local administration and politics explicitly defined on a narrow communal basis. Indeed the emergence of an explicitly sectarian political practice in Mount Lebanon can be dated precisely to the early 1840s. It was reinforced after 1860 when the Ottoman government created the religiously balanced Administrative Council to aid the non-native Christian Ottoman governor appointed by the Sublime Porte in consultation with the European powers. And it reached its most complex and theoretically sophisticated form in the modern Lebanese state which divides power on a supposedly proportional (hence theoretically equitable) basis exclusively amongst the major religious communities of Lebanon.

To be clear, this is not to say that sectarianism is 'good' because it is 'modern'. It is not being suggested that sectarianism is the only kind of modernity, as sectarian ideologues would have it. Nor is it suggested that sectarianism is an ideal system. Clearly it is not: it is chronically unstable because constant struggles between and within religious communities to define political con-

trol of, and the limits to, these communities consistently overwhelm every attempt to build a national platform. The articulation of a broad, national, and secular Lebanese citizenship will always be sacrificed on the altar of narrower communal interests because it was upon these communal interests that the state was founded and it is these interests that continue to dominate the state. Rather, while it is important to reject sectarian history, which can interpret the past only in light of supposedly unchanging Muslim, Christian or Jewish communal identities, it is also important to realize that the simplistic equation of sectarianism with atavism indicates the poverty of secularist imagination. It is also not adequate to understand sectarianism simply as a colonial construction. In the case of Mount Lebanon, sectarianism represented the transition from a pre-colonial and pre-reform Ottoman history to a post-reform history dominated by the West.

In the final analysis, what makes sectarianism so tenacious in Lebanon today is that it is a profoundly problematic component of the modern nation: it represents conflicting interpretations of a discourse of equality which, because of a 19th-century history that brought together European 'humanitarian' intervention, Ottoman reform and local aspirations, made the religious synonymous with the communal, and the communal parallel to the individual. In the social context of Mount Lebanon, sectarianism allowed non-elites to involve themselves in politics to an unprecedented degree precisely because politics was defined along communal rather than exclusively elite lines. In the context of the Ottoman Empire as a whole, and against the backdrop of several hundred years of Muslim rule over Christian minorities, sectarianism represented no less a profound change: the state no longer had a majority and several minorities defined in exclusionary religious terms, but a series of interdependent religious communities whose members were granted equal social and political status before the law. That this sectarian revolution was radically distorted by French colonialism during the post-Ottoman era to favour the Maronites (which ultimately led to two civil wars to redress this imbalance) should not obscure its crucial break with an Ottoman history that privileged Muslim over non-Muslim and elite over commoner. Without recognizing the historical, social and political complexity of sectarianism, the secular criticism of it will continue to be little more than indignant sound and fury – as impotent as it is misdirected. It will continue to miss the point, the intensity and the persistence of sectarian allegiances and antipathies. Sectarianism is not a disease but a modern reality that must be understood before it can be dismantled.

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