



Orientalism Now: Lebanese History, Identity and Alterity

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Against the backdrop of turbulent change in contemporary Middle East societies, it is apt to reconsider Edward Said's conceptualization of Eastern other. Within the theoretical parameters of Orientalism and the more fluid borders of postmodernism our present concern is with the formation of history and culture in Lebanon. Bearing in mind the inherent differences between Lebanese Christians, Muslims and Jews, we contend that Said's notion of the other can explain only in part what is a far more complex religious encounter. Such a nuanced argument locates alterity in various frameworks of cultural correlation, appropriation and displacement. Our *modus operandi* is to adopt the epistemology of otherness in a comparative and comprehensive analysis of identity. We consider, in particular, how the Lebanese Maronites, a Christian sect, have employed history to assert ethnic difference and antecedence in terms of religion, language and territory. Furthermore, what we find in the discourse of contemporary Muslim leaders and academics – specifically Sunni, Shiite and Druze – are increasing questions concerning the meaning of Arab identity, common heritage and Islamic nationhood.

The central premise of Said's *Orientalism* is the belief that in the nineteenth century imperialism facilitated a growing interest among European academics in ethnography and taxonomy. The *Oriens*, the Orient, became *alter* by virtue of its Islamic identity, and a "pseudo-incarnation" by virtue of the fact that it came after Christianity (Said 1978: 62). This unrepresentative, flawed and tendentious classification of the Orient by a Western "corporate institution" predisposed to reinterpret historical data *ad infinitum*, was essentially racist as it "accumulated experiences, territories, peoples, histories; it studied them, classified them, verified them; but above all, it subordinated them to the culture and indeed the very idea of white Christian Europe" (Said 1990: 72). Moreover, the recursive formation of knowledge pertaining to the East was dependent upon a discriminatory language to



perpetuate its “consensus”, to accumulate its ideology, to investigate and regulate its subjects (Said 1978: 202–203). Here, invariably, the question of historiography arises, the extent to which contemporary Western historians of the East perpetuate certain views of Arabs in their discourse. In recent years, however, Said has been criticised for his selective and idiomatic reading of history, which misleadingly conflated “academic and artistic production”, in order to delineate differences between Islamic East and Christian West (see, for example, Irwin 2006: 3–4, 8). In fact, it has been pointed out, with regard to the enduringly controversial subject of crusading – the most emblematic of Christian-Muslim conflict in all its forms over the centuries – that post-11 September, 2001, there has been a tendency among Arab Nationalists and radical Islamists to express an “historical vision”, which paints a picture of Westerners as modern-day “crusaders” (Riley-Smith 2003: 151–167). Crusading apologists assert that such belief has no traditional consensus among Arabs, but is rather, in the twenty first century, an ideological construction *ex nihilo*; it has materialized as an objective reality only of late and become widespread in the form of anti-Western propaganda chiefly among extreme Muslim groups.

What is striking, therefore, is the subject of historical continuity, which is a central thread of *Orientalism*. The present essay builds upon the premise, as Said argues, that history has a “privileged role”, and that an understanding of its production and dissemination leads us to question the “complex problem of knowledge and power”. Said endorsed “contemporary alternatives to Western Orientalism”, a “libertarian” study of culture from a “nonrepressive perspective” (Said 1978: 24). He was partly inspired by this need to expose the biased methods of analysis employed by historians who deliberately, or subconsciously, misled their audiences. He recognised, nevertheless, the difficulty of this undertaking, bearing in mind that his own views were determined to a great extent by his position as a Christian Palestinian in exile, a Western educated literary critic, an American academic. He was labelled by his detractors as a “high modernist aesthete” unfamiliar with the historical realities of East-West relations (Mitchell 2000: 133) and, by orthodox Muslim scholars, as a secular humanist, who was a product of the same culture he purported to denounce. The point of emphasising the subjective role of the author is to highlight the difficulties faced when attempting to present a balanced study of Lebanese culture. However, we have taken care with our methods of analysis, selecting to examine a wide range of historical materials that are closely related to the various Christian and Muslim sects, in order to reveal the dynamics of knowledge and power. The relationship between other and self, furthermore, provides a theoretical framework within which to explore the multiple centres of culture and ideology.

The crisis of identity has been the source of much discord in Lebanon since the Middle Ages, resulting in bouts of interreligious conflict in the nineteenth century and, most recently, civil war (1975–1990). It is acknowledged that in Lebanon, “in the



modern imperial experience" (Said 1993: 3), the process of constructing and projecting other is played out in multiple and overlapping contexts. If identity of the Lebanese under Ottoman or French rule was based upon first-hand knowledge of a particular world order, which reaffirmed their position at the periphery of empire, following independence in 1943, a modern form of imperial experience continued to impose upon them both commercial and cultural hegemony. Where, therefore, are the centres of influence within these culture-historical structures of identity to be located? And do the Lebanese internalise and value their colonial heritage? (Bammate 1982: 29–30; Parekh 1997: 175) For instance, the relationship between Lebanese Christians, especially Maronites, and France is often cited as an example of mimesis, of postcolonial alignment; native ideas or beliefs are compared with or measured against Westernised ideals. But arguably this kind of relationship creates a dependence that undermines a racially bounded and endogamous entity. To those who reject colonial heritage, the irrational search for identity beyond national borders results in cultural counterfeit, mere copy, so to speak, of the original values, which postcolonial societies aspire to imitate. Perhaps Said was alluding to this desire for a European pedigree when he criticised Maronites – who are the largest and, politically, the most prominent of the Lebanese Christian denominations – for their unwillingness to embrace their Arab identity. Commenting upon the Orientalist H.A.R. Gibb's "sympathetic" but "monolithic" view of Islam, the latter's "prophetic" approximation of the deep-seated prejudices of Maronites to Zionist ideology finds agreement with Said, who remarks that this minority Christian sect is "alone amongst ethnic communities in the Islamic world, for their inability to accept coexistence" (Said 1978: 278). In *Orientalism*, Western historians' misunderstanding of Muslim Arabs is contrasted with their generally favourable treatment of the Maronites. Said's severe criticism of their fervent nationalism extends to accusation that their ideas of nationhood were part inspired by European fascism (ibid.: 303). That may be the case, and the suggestion of racial exclusivity is explicitly made, but of course the Maronites have not always relied on European hegemony. Bearing in mind their diminished position in a Muslim majority country, they have had to maintain their traditions, ideas and beliefs through close social integration and a profound interest in their own history.¹

The mnemonic devices chosen by Maronites in an attempt to recall and revitalise the past – Western historical sources and Church archives, *inter alia* – engender distrust among Lebanese Muslims critical of Christians with a vested interest in a separatist historical vision. Whether this is accurately demonstrative of the exclusionist tendencies of the Maronites is a moot point, but at any rate, their *modus vivendi*, it is believed by some Sunni, Shiite and Druze historians, serves simply to define further

¹ For a discussion of the cultural processes of ethnic identity, see S. Jones, 1997, *The Archaeology of Ethnicity: Constructing Identities in the Past and the Present*, Routledge, London, p. 24.



their ethnic difference through existential methods which contest any claim to Lebanese culture-historical homogeneity (Baihum 1969; Kawtharānī 1977; Shalaq 1978). In the following section, we explore how Maronites have sought to document and transmit history from one generation to the next, in order to establish ethnicity and antecedence – a Christian civilisation that predates Islam. Within this context, heritage may be defined as the transference of cultural beliefs and practices across “temporal boundaries” (Jones 1997: 40) – Roman, Arab, crusader, Ottoman, French – which signified occupation by “brother” or “enemy” (Hourani 1946: 14). Thus, bearing in mind the methods adopted by the Maronites to assert their identity, it is necessary to determine whether they have been receptive or antagonistic towards Arab acculturation. The dynamics of both manifest and latent forms of alterity dating back to the Middle Ages, may be traced beyond the modern colonial framework of Said’s *Orientalism* to reveal evidence of religious correlation and appropriation. This will help explain contemporaneous relations between Lebanese Christians and Muslims.

CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM ENCOUNTERS AND THE INFLUENCE OF THE MARONITE COMMUNITY

The legacy of the Middle Ages is of vital importance precisely because it represented a point of encounter between Muslims and European Latin Christians, described in Arab sources as *al-franj* (Franks) or *al-salibyūn* (cross-bearers or crusaders).² The *Corpus Christianum* was also *alter* on account of medieval Arab demarcations based on Hanafi (Sunni) concepts of *Dār al-Islām* – entity incorporating all Muslims and non-Muslims who lived under Muslim rule – and *Dār al-Harb* – Christians who were outside these ideological boundaries (Hillenbrand 1999: 99, 346; Petruccioli 1990: 40). In Said’s work, Christian Europe and the Muslim East vacillate between points of correlation – the “Islamic lands” are “uneasily” close to Christianity; Islam “borrowed” from Christianity – and appropriation – “the Islamic lands sit adjacent to and even *on top* of the Biblical lands” (Said 1978: 74). Said further observed: “Arabic and Hebrew are Semitic languages, and together they dispose and redispense of material that is urgently important to Christianity” (ibid.: 128). In Lebanon, such tropes of contiguity and appropriation are manifest in peculiarly hybrid forms that retain elements of two or more cultures, whether, for example, the medieval Christian practice of overwriting pagan texts or the conversion of places of worship. This palimpsest suggests, in both literal and metaphorical senses, the overlaying or imprint of one tradition over another. What may be described as multiple historical imbrications are evident throughout the central parts of Beirut. Indeed, religious

² Jonathan Riley-Smith has examined the modern connotations of the word “crusader” in “Islam and the Crusades in History and Imagination, 8 November 1898 – 11 September 2001”, *Crusades*, 2, pp. 151–167.



places of worship in the city are revealing of how, at various points in history, pagan *spolia* have been recycled or symbolically retained by Christians and Muslims as signs of religious superiority.

In the process of Christian and Muslim encounters, alterity oscillates between correlation and displacement. Such cross-cultural dynamic is apparent, for instance, in the work of the fifteenth-century Arab historian Sālih b. Yahyā, whose *Tārīkh Bayrūt* ("History of Beirut") allows us to consider the essential features of medieval syncretism and the indeterminacy of the Lebanese entity (*kyān*³). Yahyā describes how at the "festival of the river" Christians and Muslims worshiped together St George (*al-khadī*), who it was claimed had slain a dragon and saved the daughter of a local Christian leader (1969: 9).⁴ In Yahyā's historical account the emblematising of Christian identity, and the dramatizing and mythologizing of events surrounding a religious figure revitalise monotheistic beliefs. We may also recognise how ritual functions as a point of commemoration and social contact, which makes possible the transmission of certain traditions. This results in a hybrid, a peculiar form of heterogeneity retained in the belief systems of two religions.⁵ Nevertheless, though St George was an embodiment of the ideological fight against ancient pagan practices for Christians and Muslims alike, his emblematic status developed over time multivocal signification, what in anthropological terms may be described as a "wide fan of connotations" (Turner 1967: 88) based, in part, upon Christian perception, real or imagined, of the Muslim other as a threat. During the thirteenth century the crusaders built a church in honour of St George, and further popularized this Oriental equestrian saint as a heraldic patron and protector against Islam (Gerstel 2001: 65). However, in an example of Muslim re-appropriation, the church of St George was converted into the mosque of al-Khidr in the seventeenth century (1661) (Pringle 1998: 116).⁶

³ The term is often used by Arab historians to suggest how as a result of sectarian conflict, Lebanon fails to be a nation state in the fullest sense of the word. Shalaq, for example, alludes to a Maronite *kyān*, which predates the Lebanese *kyān*; al-Tā'īfah wa-al-ḥarb al-ahlīyah fi Lubnān, p. 69. Interestingly, when also applied in the Arab media to describe the state of Israel – which Lebanon officially does not recognise – entity has equally negative connotations.

⁴ For evidence of medieval iconic representations of St George saving a princess from a dragon, see M. Immerzel, 2009, *Identity Puzzles: Medieval Christian Art in Syria and Lebanon*, Peeters, Leuven, p. 151. Intriguingly, Yahyā further alludes to Jewish iconoclasts in Beirut, and an icon that miraculously shed tears of blood (*Tārīkh Bayrūt*, p. 9).

⁵ There is twelfth-century evidence of Sūfīs visiting Christian hermits and leaving *ex voto* Arabic inscriptions; Youhana Sader, 1997, *Painted Churches and Rock-cut Chapels of Lebanon*, Dar Sader, Beirut, p. 45.

⁶ In a further example of appropriation, after the defeat of *al-franj*, the crusader Latin Cathedral of St John was converted into a mosque, the present-day al-'Umari Mosque, and its wall paintings plastered over by the Muslims (Yahyā 1969: 34–35). Yahyā also recounted how places of Christian worship in Beirut were converted into Muslim *madrassa* (pp. 106–107). Similarly, the re-conquest of Palestine by Saladin in 1187 was followed by the conversion of several churches into mosques including



In the Middle Ages Oriental Christian identity was closely linked to mythology, heraldic imagery and social and religious interaction primarily in an urban context. In the overall objective of this essay, it is noteworthy to emphasise the element of crusader ideology – as embodied in the military figure of St George – and patronage, which raises questions regarding Western influence on native Christians. In the case of Maronites, in the medieval period, they enjoyed some privileges under their Latin Christian overlords; they were free to ply their trade and worship according to their own religious customs. As Uniate Catholics, the Maronites formally accepted the authority of the Roman Church in around 1180, and their identity became more distinct in the eyes of European Latins.⁷ The fact that they were of non-European origin was of no relevance because in the kingdom of Jerusalem – to which Lebanon then belonged – race was never used to define status. In the twelfth century Maronites were scattered throughout the Levant (Abulafia 1986; Pavoni 1982; Salibi 199: 148), and their contact and integration with Frankish (European) culture was evident in Beirut (Clermont-Ganneau 1905: 4, 9–11). They were enterprising and successful and lived alongside Franks and Italians among others; they were described as *fideles* – loyal to their patrons (Cessi 1950: III, 40; Jacoby 1977: 246–7).

Over the centuries, the Maronites continued to align themselves to the Holy See, and by declaring their obedience “to the law of Rome”, their territory could be considered subject to papal authority. Indeed, the history of Lebanon has been written from this peculiarly Christian perspective; *Tārikh Suriya* (1893), for instance, a voluminous study of Greater Syria by Yūsuf ad-Dibs, archbishop of Beirut (d. 1907), which retraces Maronite history from the period of the crusades to the Ottoman Empire, asserts the orthodoxy of Eastern Christians in the eyes of the papacy. As has been rightly noted, Maronite historiography originated as “an expression of national pride” (Salibi 1991: 15). Indeed, the history of the Maronites is revealing of cultural ties with European countries, France in particular. The interference of colonial Powers, argued Said, was especially evident in the second half of the nineteenth century, during periods of intense clashes between Maronites and Druze, whose respective interests France and England claimed to protect (Said 1978: 191). Nevertheless, there is reason to believe that for the Christians, at least, this external support was very inconsistent.

St Anne in Jerusalem, which became a Shafiite madrasah; his inscription is preserved in the tympanum of this building.

⁷ The communion of the Maronite Church with the Roman Catholic Church is examined by K.S. Salibi, 1958, “The Maronite Church in the Middle Ages and its Union with Rome”, *Oriens Christianus*, 42: 94. For a general history of Christian minorities in the Middle Ages, see J. Prawer, “Social Classes in the Crusader States: The Minorities”, in N.P. Zacour (ed.), *A History of the Crusades: The Impact of the Crusades on the Near East*, University of Wisconsin Press, Wisconsin, vol. V., pp. 59–115.



Confirmation that they had to contend with Western indifference can be found in a highly symbolic journey undertaken by Kaiser Wilhelm II in 1898 to lay a wreath at the tomb of Saladin, following a personal invitation from the Ottoman Sultan Abd-ul-Hamid II. This journey was itself indicative of relations between East and West, Muslims and Christians, at a time when the Ottoman Empire was seeking a German alliance. Crusade historians have not failed to recognise the symbolic import of this journey, which seems to undermine suggestion that a Western anti-Islamic culture dates back to the nineteenth century (Riley-Smith 2001: 151–52). However, when observed from another angle, the meeting between the Kaiser and the Sultan is of further significance for Lebanese Christians. On the journey from Beirut to Damascus, the Kaiser stopped at the village of Hamdoun, where he was welcomed by Maronite leaders, who appealed for support on behalf of their community. Their petition was met with ridicule; the Kaiser's suggestion that they lived in a predominantly Muslim region and if they were not happy with their lot they should convert to Islam was crassly dismissive (Salibi 2002: 44). Judging from this reaction, certainly in the late nineteenth century, the views of Lebanese Christians held little or no sway among European policy-makers.

MARONITE CHRISTIANS, HISTORY AND LANGUAGE

At this juncture we turn to our principal aim, which is to analyse the role of history in contemporary Lebanon. The past may be described as a knowledge fund from which subsequent generations inherit or select their materials; their motivations and biases are historically conditioned. For the increasingly marginalized Christians the past becomes the material of ethnographic enquiry. Maronites declare their racial origin and magnify past achievements in order to create points of cultural reference, by which they reconfirm their present identity. Indeed, the proclivity to categorize and organise, to create a hierarchy of values which privileges one's own higher religious symbols,⁸ is an inherently human concern (Levi-Strauss 1966: 13). This existential method (*manh*) classifies other groups as socially contiguous but, at the same time, culturally distinct. However, in contemporary Lebanon, owing to the confessional system of government – the allocation of political power to representatives of the major religious sects⁹ – disagreement arises over whether multicultural particularism upholds the right to practice freely certain traditions or constitutes an expression of religious conviction and, therefore, irreconcilable differences. Even a brief survey of Lebanese historians, both Christian and Muslim, dealing with the causes of civil war

⁸ Illustrative of this tendency is, for example, Dau's *History of the Maronites*; Tārikh al-Mawārina al-Dinī wal-Siyāsī wal-Hādārī (5 vols, 1970–1980).

⁹ By custom, the president must be a Maronite, the prime minister a Sunni and the speaker of parliament a Shiite.



and intercommunal strife, reveals a keen interest in ethnography and unbalanced power relations, polycentrism – distinct cultural wholes – and normative concepts of modernity or modernities (Corm 1988; Ghurayyib 2000; Khalaf 2006; Shalaq 1978). Lebanon is at the intersection of these social and political theories and in that sense it is characterised by what may be termed as a postmodern condition. The factors of history and ethnicity have always been salient within the spheres of national and foreign politics.

Any discussion on the history of Lebanese Christian identity must engage with the subjects of antecedence, modes of acquiring knowledge and topography. The Maronite community is *sui generis*, and its identity contingent upon certain methods of self-preservation. In this regard, the hierarchical Maronite Church, which extends directly to the Holy See, plays a significant role within the community in terms of its rituals and traditions. Under the leadership of its patriarch, the Church provides a guiding principle that instructs its followers on how to observe and reflect upon the differences of others. One may add that the Church pays particular attention to the methods of enquiry into location and origin, how people connect to their immediate surroundings and develop a sense of belonging. The sea and the mountains, for example, come to symbolise the spirit of Maronite adventure and enterprise (Dau 1970: 389, 394). However, though this kind of narrative is culturally enriching, it can also be detrimental even destructive bearing in mind the realities of religious tensions; the landscape encompasses within its physical features certain Christian values that denote both division and inaccessibility. Traditionally, geographical determinism characterises Shiites and the Druze as mountainous people, and Sunni and Orthodox Christians as city-dwellers.

There is a historically-conditioned need among the Maronites, centred upon religious practices, to establish precedence. However, though the preoccupation with the past privileges “who came first”, paradoxically, the precise origin of the Church remains uncertain. This suggests, therefore, that the concrete and conclusive proof of provenance is of secondary importance, as long as the methods of retrospection meet the “intellectual requirements” for an enduring sense of order and stability. For Christians, such a regulated existence contributes to the “maintenance of order in the universe” (Levi-Strauss 1966: 9–10), and if we briefly recall the mythical events surrounding the life of St George, as described in Yahyā’s *Tārīkh Bayrūt*, it becomes apparent why the worship of this religious figure is regarded by the fifteenth-century Muslim historian as a quintessential Christian attribute. Arguably, myth, which operates as a framing device of historical narrative, is easily incorporated within Church doctrine because it suggests a vital link between the ineffable and the actual; it denotes not a rejection of reality, but a principal means of preserving the past in the ever present (ibid.: 16).



This past, it is important to stress, is recovered through pictorial tradition – the icons and wall paintings which in contemporary Christian society remain symbols par excellence of cultural heritage – and language, to whose function Maronite historians have been especially alert. We previously mentioned how Said regarded history as the glue which holds together the ideas, or rather the illusions of the East, and language as embodying and delivering that truth (Said 1978: 203). However, though Said had in mind English and French as the epistemological tools of Western academics, who possessed knowledge to shape perceptions of a weaker and undeveloped East, it is equally the case that in contemporary multicultural Eastern societies, the dominant position of Arabic, the sacred language of Muslims, has captured the attention of linguists. The point to emphasise is that linguistic theories have made Arabic the focus of history, race and identity. For instance, it has been claimed that morphological interests among Lebanese Christian thinkers in the first part of the twentieth century stemmed from negative associations of Arabic with an exclusively Islamic past. Such views partly contributed to the rhetoric of certain Christian middle class elite, who motivated by the desire to promote their own “vision” of a future Lebanese state, designated Arabic as the “language of occupiers” and asserted their ideological differences from “nomadic” Muslims (Kawtharānī 1977: 77). More precisely, it was theorised, Arabic must have been appropriated by Muslim invaders because its Semitic origin predated their religion. Of course, as we surely must add, belief in Arabic as the sacred language of Islam amounts in itself to claim of antecedence and ownership; *Allāh* is generally understood as the God invoked by Muslims. Perhaps, therefore, morphology reflects a general human desire to reclaim the signification of words, to relate or reattach symbols to earlier meanings that reaffirm a person’s history and identity. For example, the *shahāda* (“there is no god but *Allāh*”), as pointed out by one Maronite historian, was inscribed above the doors of Christian houses in fifth-century northern Syria (Dau 1970: 409). Indeed, in claiming antecedence Arabic itself may be negated and Syriac, the liturgical language of the Maronites, becomes the *fons et origo* of identity (ibid.: 389).

CHRISTIAN AND ISLAMIC ENTITIES

Any histories that exclude or advance a certain point of view, relegate or interpret another will naturally arouse suspicion.¹⁰

¹⁰ For an analysis of Lebanese history from a specifically Shiite perspective, see Ḥasan Khalīl Ghurayyib, 2000, *Naḥwa tārikh fikrī-siyāsī li-shī‘at Lubnān: awḍā‘ wa-ittijāhāt*, Dār al-Kunūz al-Adabiyah, Beirut.



Faced by the closed off traditions of the Maronite community, Muslims increasingly questioned their own identity and the role of Islam in their daily lives. Certain issues became a preoccupation. For instance, does it mean that a person who adopts Western ideas naturally turns his or her back on Muslim heritage?¹¹ During the civil war both Sunni and Shiite *ulema*, the Lebanese Muslim leaders, pronounced that a past closely identified with Islam, which incorporates within its social and religious fabric both Christians and Jews, classified in the Quran as the *Ahl al-kitāb*, the “Protected Peoples”, could serve as a religious model of harmonious existence (Grafton 2003: 136–48). The glories of the past, therefore – medieval Islamic jurisdiction and incorporation and protection of non-Muslim groups – should serve as an example to contemporary society. For one Sunni commentator, the “triumphs” of the seventh century when the Holy land was conquered represented the apotheosis of Islamic rule because the new religion was able to incorporate minorities. At that time indigenous Christians and Jews fought in Arab armies against Byzantine forces (Bosworth 1979: 17). This idealism, he asserts, was not based on an “ideology of the self”, but rather on a more tolerant attitude towards other religions (Shalaq 1978: 8–9). The view is advanced that the Lebanese can pursue collectively a viable Arab state, which renounces any form of religious hegemony and foreign interference. Indeed, it is suggested that there are no ethno-cultural differences; in fact, Christians and Muslims are a homogeneous Arab entity, held together by some intrinsic or primordial nature, a supraordinate essence. This unaccountable quality transcends the “givens of birth – ‘blood’, language, religion, territory” (Jones 1997: 65). Perhaps, such a notion of the ineffable is not so farfetched in the context of religious syncretism, a Christian-Muslim belief in the miraculous that, according to one author, overcomes doctrinal differences and generates a “supra-religious regional affinity” (Immerzel 2009: 178). The belief in an Arab consciousness constituted of a shared language and common values (Kawtharānī 1976: 7) rejects a strongly exclusivist and self-conscious Christian identity. Those who endorse this harmonious existence speak of *jaw*, a peculiar “ambience” of time and place, an indeterminate force that relates to proximity, and the rhythm of life of Eastern societies (Depaule 1999: 222). In this respect, the Arab entity, which is anterior to cultural pluralism, unifies *Al-watan al-‘Arabi* (“Arab nation”) or *jism al-umma* (“body of the Arab nation”). A recurring theme of Lebanese historians is that historically this Arabophone entity was ruptured by European and Ottoman colonialism, not least the influence of the French mandate of the 1920s, which opposed unity and encouraged Christians to reject a common heritage.

¹¹ This question is explored in M. Dāhr, W. Kawtharānī et al., 1977, *Lubnān : al-ḥadārah al-wāḥidah*, al-Nādī al-Thaqāfi al-‘Arabi, Beirut.



Theories over a common Arab heritage focus on methods of co-existence based upon an understanding of religious differences (Dāhr, Kawtharānī et al.: 77; Kawtharānī 1976: 11), although the debate over Arabism as a basis upon which to construct a collective identity becomes especially heightened during particularly volatile events, most notably the loss of Jerusalem in 1967 (Baihum 1969: 72). During such periods of uncertainty Arab opinion mutates into notions of Islam as a boundless force unifying all Muslims. One finds echoes of this sentiment among Druze, who idealise Arabic-Islamic heritage (*ʿurūbah*) of sixteenth-century Syria (Junblāt 1977: 21–22; Schenk 2001: 334), or the Sunni theorists who advocate a universal Islam that transcends nationhood (Shalaq 1993: 122–123). However, such an ideology is often politically conceived and whether there exists an “Islamic milieu” remains open to debate (Petruccioli 1990: 10). Apart from the distinctive call to prayer and the arresting position of the mosque at the heart of each Muslim community, an “Islamic aura” fails to have culture-historical resonance in terms of, for example, a common architecture or uniquely urban habitat (Bouhdiba 1982: 12; Wirth 1982: 198). Said viewed Islam as “not a natural fact but a composite structure created to a certain extent *by Muslims and the West*” (Said 1997: 144). In other words, this negative Islamic construct was formed in response to anti-Western propaganda aimed at unifying the Arab cause in their struggle against a common enemy. From this perspective, the *Umma al-arabiya* was transformed into the *Umma mudāfiha*, a defensive but increasingly militant mindset that helped to define the negative Western image of Islam. Therefore, by definition, Islamic militancy projects the idea of a grassroots movement in defence of a common heritage, a “collective resistance against crusaders” (al-Sulh 1973: 20–21, 32). Nevertheless, Islam is not a natural fact, and current movements calling for political change expose the deep fault lines of ideology. Above all, there is disagreement over the degree of compatibility of traditional religious practices and modernisation. The dilemma centres upon two divergent views: Muslim societies should promote their own culture based on the established ideas and traditions of their religion, but risk the onset of sclerosis, or remain open to Western culture, an influence that has proven to be somewhat divisive.

It is revealing of Said’s state of mind that though he was such an ardent critic of the negative Arab caricature in the Western media, he was no less disturbed by Muslim “tribalism”, “minor ethnic or group particularity”, which was so harmful to Middle East societies (Said 1993: 21). In Lebanon, as elsewhere, the fragmented Islamic entity has resulted in the polarisation of ideologies and the fears of *fitna* or divisions among the major Muslim sects. However, accusations are commonly levelled at foreign countries for exploiting internal differences and the international media is denounced especially for its racially motivated stereotypes that degrade the Lebanese as somehow “genetically flawed” or predisposed to settle differences through acts of violence (Corm 1988: 263, 272). Be that as it may, the distrust even enmity among the various



Muslim and Christian denominations continues to arouse suspicions of each other's intentions for the future of the Lebanese state. Incontestably, sectarianism still characterises various political, social and cultural aspects of life in Lebanon and any suggestion otherwise is disingenuous. As the Lebanese sociologist Samir Khalaf has argued: "confessional identity has become the most viable medium for asserting presence and securing vital needs and benefits. Without it groups are literally rootless, nameless, and voiceless" (Khalaf 1998: 150). The most powerful concepts of the Shiites – martyrdom, struggle, desire for increased political representation and eschatological beliefs – are underpinned by strong conviction among the largest of all Lebanese sects that they have lacked meaningful political representation. The desire to redress this imbalance has seen significant changes in recent years, but if influence is sought through greater political engagement, the identity of the Shiites remains inflicted by a kind of schizophrenia, a state of existence characterised by a contradictory tendency to homogeneity and to Iranian loyalties (see, for example, Ghurayyib 2000: 170–71). This split personality is strongly ideological, torn between the secular laws of a pluralist society, and the powerful forces of divine revelation, the belief that Islam, qua religion, embodies absolute truth and the guiding principles of all humanity. Similar ontological concerns inform the views of contemporary Sunni thinkers. One common perception is that the Muslim body, the *Umma*, has been gravely affected by the trauma of Western influence, although it is God's will and must be accepted (Shalqa 1978: 8–38).

Beirut remains divided along sectarian lines and each of its constituent parts is distinguished from the whole in terms of its allegiances, which take visible form in religious edifices, giant portraits of community leaders and political banners. However, in Beirut, the "worship", or privileging, of monuments above the rational and ethical forms of humanism has been a theme of Arabic literature from the early twentieth century (Rihani 1923: 57–66). The recently built al-Amin Mosque represents a religious and cultural point of convergence to which Sunnis naturally gravitate, while the adjacent Maronite Cathedral of St George is of equal significance for the Christian community. The close proximity of the buildings arouses religious rivalries between the different groups of people. However, in any discussion of alterity there is a need, finally, to acknowledge the invisible other, and in Lebanon this is the absent Jew. Incontrovertibly, external affairs have impacted the Lebanese Jewish community, and the degree of anti-Semitism increased following the Palestinians' loss of Jerusalem. Muslim and Christian Arabism found expression in their mutual denunciation of an Israeli state; Jewish occupation of the Holy City could be perceived as "contaminating" and idolatrous (Baihum 1969: 61). It is necessary to emphasise, nevertheless, that before the civil war Jews, Muslims and Christians coexisted in Lebanon (Schulze 2009).



Today, the visible presence of the Jewish community has been almost completely eliminated, although their identity remains evident in the electoral registers, and emblematised in the empty places of worship, most notably the Maghen Abraham synagogue, which was recently renovated in central Beirut. The synagogue is the only prominent building remaining in Wadi abu Jemil, the Jewish quarter destroyed in the 1970s. The negation of the Jewish community has become powerfully symbolic and poignant. The Jew is the enigmatic other, both present and absent, historically connected and yet denied a Lebanese heritage, a native in exile and a “foreigner” invariably associated with the violence of displacement in a neighbouring country. Lebanese Jewishness is an uneasy and contradictory identity.

PARADIGMS OF OTHERNESS

We have sought to demonstrate how the concept of alterity is shaped by factors of history and ideology. Said’s *Orientalism* has been invaluable in focusing our attention on the encounter between Christians and Muslims over the centuries. In an attempt to free the study of Lebanese culture from this greater narrative, and to present a nuanced argument, we have assumed the libertarian role, while, at the same time, acknowledging the difficulty of presenting a completely objective point of view. What Said identified as a “complex problem of knowledge and power” repeats itself on various levels of religio-cultural interactions. In terms of the fragile co-existence between Lebanese Christians and Muslims, history or lineage has proved to be a vital tool for accumulating and organising knowledge, for the purpose of asserting an absolute and inalienable self. Such sectarian rivalries may be discerned in a multiplicity of culture-historical paradigms that are visible and invisible, concrete and symbolic. In Lebanon the formation of identity and the recognition of other can be located along the *limen* or threshold. This is the so-called Green Line or no-man’s land that existed between Christian East and Muslim West Beirut during the civil war. To an extent, similar demarcations still separate sectarian communities today. Significantly, the *limen* can further denote the psychological, the indeterminate or inscrutable state of mind that, for example, draws upon some ineffable notion of Arab heritage or Islamic entity to confirm and validate its existence. Equally, it is liminality which demarcates the mythical and mysterious history of the Maronites. Arguably, this indeterminacy engenders distrust between the different denominations, which makes it difficult to speak of the ideological bearings of nationalism. This lack of nationhood (*wātan*) means that geographical demarcations recognised by international laws do not necessarily coincide with imagined borders.



We may speak more accurately of Lebanon as “transcultural”, rather than a nation state (Schumann 2008: 240). That said, Lebanese Christians and Muslims belong to a common Semitic past and share several customs and traditions, which promote compromise and tolerance. Nevertheless, this relationship is continuously undermined and recast as a result of both internal and external tensions. Here, we are reminded of the earlier statement regarding society’s postmodern ailment, the debate over where the centres of hegemony and homogeneity lie. According to the French philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre, “The very idea of centrality [in Mediterranean countries] is refused because each group, each entity, each religion and each culture considers itself a centre” (Lefebvre 1996: 239). The self locates its centre and recognises the other in order to establish its endogamous nature. The “rhythms” (as Lefebvre described them) that emanate from these centres are the social and cultural forces of interaction between self and other. Alternatively, the reverberations are external, originating from postcolonial powers, dominant cultures or ideologies.

Unfortunately, inter-confessional rivalries and denominational allegiances remain divisive and deeply rooted in the histories of the various communities. The Lebanese entity lacks cohesion and cultural unity; differences are ideologically determined and seemingly irreconcilable. Christians continue to have strong political and cultural ties with Western countries, while Muslims, in response to Westernisation, have sought to privilege their own beliefs and traditions. Perhaps, it is worth finally considering whether the Lebanese are prepared to put aside their differences for the common good by renouncing certain strongly held views (Khalaf: 2006: 25). Advocates of a liberal solution based upon compromise, envisage, for example, the abolition of the Lebanese confessional system of government. However, this secular approach would not be acceptable if it were to result in the disintegration of native communities; similar legislative attempts to remove cultural differences in plural societies have been met with strong resistance (Kymlicka 135–156). To end on a more positive note, a cohesive Lebanese entity based upon compromise might allow for the appointment of a national figure able to speak on behalf of all people, and to articulate and unify the “experiences”, “aspirations” and “vision” of his or her nation (Said, 1990: 70).

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