

‘Religion’ and the Study of ‘Religious Leadership’: Some Observations From Lebanon

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The distinctive thing about religious leadership is that it is religious. The clue is in the name. Nor do religious leaders themselves let us forget it, setting themselves apart from non-religious leaders and the general public by means of their outlandish dress, their publicly pious practices, their religious expressions and references, and even their personal grooming habits. The very obviousness of this religious nature leads to assumptions of a difference between religious and non-religious leaders that goes far deeper than appearances. In the case of Lebanon, where religious leaders of various Muslim and Christian stripes wield a great deal of power, such assumptions have become so essential to the expression of secular modernist ideals that I devoted my doctoral research to exploring them. Here I will outline a few of the misconceptions I have encountered, some or all of which may be familiar in other contexts.

Religious leadership is one of several categories of actor treated regularly in general works on politics in Lebanon. For example, a recent book by Rola el-Husseini includes this conventional section in a chapter on non-state elites more broadly: ‘Whereas state elites act directly within the political arena... these unelected elites’ influence the political arena from ‘the shadows’.^[37] ‘The Role of the Clergy in Politics’ begins by setting the scene:

The clergy has always had an impact on political life in Lebanon owing to the confessional nature of the country's political allegiances. Indeed, the concept of national citizenship has not taken hold in Lebanon in the same way that it has in Western nations. Loyalty to the family, the clan, and the religious community overrides other allegiances, leaving little room for national patriotism.^[38]

Here the category of religion – including religious actors ('the clergy') and 'religious community' – is taken to be self-explanatory, a natural and permanent feature of the social universe. Further, religious phenomena are contrasted with modern structures and concepts of nation, state and citizenship, as both their precursors and their presumed opponents.

Framing 'religious leadership' as a generic category within a religious-secular binary seems common sense, and prompts certain kinds of common sense questions: Why has the rise of secular political leadership in a modernising state like Lebanon not resulted in the decline of religious leadership, as the secularisation thesis would have us expect? Conversely, under what conditions do religious leaders become politicised? Attempts to answer such questions, well-intentioned as they may be, serve to obscure or mystify all sorts of power dynamics at work within and across the binary they take for granted.

Religion-and-Politics studies like these tend to obscure difference among 'religious leaders' (merging diverse histories and functions into 'The Role of the Clergy') as well as obscuring similarity between 'religious' and 'political' actors (both of which may be elected, depend on state recognition, and promote national patriotism – all

characteristics el-Husseini uses to distinguish ‘state elites’ from ‘non-state elites’ such as ‘the clergy’).

In the process, they tend to obscure historical change (flattening the divergent pasts and disguising the often-recent origins of ‘traditional clerics committed to a time-honored religious hierarchy’)^[39] as well as mystifying present motivations (which may be explained in terms of reified religious ‘tradition’ extracted from pre-modern history). Classifying actors as essentially either ‘religious’ or ‘political’ leads scholars to judge them according to imposed criteria of sincerity that mystify the actors’ own intentions and obscure the power of their own discursive framing: what does it really mean to say that a ‘religious leader’ may ‘become politicized’ whereas a ‘leader who is first and foremost a politician’ may ‘borrow the symbolism of religion’?^[40]

Several general theories have been proposed to answer questions about the ‘persistence’ of powerful religious leadership in countries like Lebanon. Fiona McCallum summarizes three common theories as follows.^[41] One view is that Oriental religions – both Islam and by extension Eastern branches of Christianity – are by nature more resistant to secularization than European Christianity. Another links the failure of secularisation to the weakness of the state: if people do not find security in the modern state, they look to their traditional leaders instead. A third refers to a religious resurgence that is part of a reaction against globalization. Sometimes one or other of these theories appears to fit a particular religious institution or community at a particular time, but they all fail to give the kind of generalizable explanation that they claim to provide. The problem is in the

way research projects are formulated around the category 'religion'.

In formulating my own comparative study of religious leaders in modern Lebanon, I was once warned that the task was not only inadvisable but likely impossible: each religious community is 'like a different country' and must be understood through its own history and religious tradition. Other well-meaning advisers suggested that to study religious leaders was in fact to study vestiges of a pre-modern past, not the 'modern politics' that are the stuff of Lebanon's present and future. The category of religion has in practice led researchers to focus on individual religious communities as independent spheres of action that can (and should) be understood separately from each other and from the modern context of the state – while concomitantly making assumptions about the universality of religious phenomena.

As well as using cases of religious leadership to draw generalised conclusions about religion, the tendency to circumscribe scholarship on each religion has also produced an alternative approach that uses the particularities of different religions or sects to explain the roles of their religious leaders.

[42] For example, Sunni Islam is said to be characterised by the overlap of religion and state, so the Lebanese Sunni Mufti, who is salaried from the state budget, is considered a relic of the privileged place of Sunnis in Islamic Empires. Lebanese Shi'ite leadership, by contrast, was only set up in the late 1960s by populist Imam Musa al-Sadr, and tends to be linked to a regional 'Shi'ite awakening' of a latent revolutionary tendency in Shi'ism. And Druze sheikhs have always had a central role, it is said, because of the insular, tribal character of Druze religion, which has clung to its traditions despite centuries of persecution. Such explanations often lead, in my

view, to an uncritical reproduction of clichés, which risks feeding prejudices.

These conventional narratives – whether of religious particularism or of religion in general – project essentialised images of religion(s) onto actual social formations, and in doing so obscure the modern historical context. So going back to the three examples above, they appear in a very different light when viewed in relation to one another and to the modern state. It was only in the 1930s and 40s that a Mufti was elevated above other clerics in response to the colonial state's demand for religious representatives, becoming a national figurehead for a newly defined Sunni community. The Shi'ite leadership may have been created later, but was designed to match the Sunni model at the height of its national prestige. Meanwhile the Druze community, like the Sunnis, adapted an existing Druze sheikhly title to generate their own equivalent of the Mufti that has gradually displaced competing modes of leadership.

Once viewed comparatively, it becomes clear that these various institutions have been shaped into their modern forms by the context of the Lebanese state and its new multi-confessional public sphere, in which 'religious leadership' has acquired the meaning we now take for granted.^[43] Yet explanations of their contemporary prominence continue to hinge on their supposed natural connection with 'primordial' allegiances among the population.

An essential distinction is conventionally drawn between the Lebanese communities' 'secular' and 'religious' spokesmen. Ironically, it has not been uncommon for commentators to judge the 'religious' leaders more representative than their 'secular' counterparts. A classic text of the 1960s popularised the idea that religious leaders

comprised a ‘shadow parliament’ able to express raw sectarian viewpoints that were excluded from Parliament by the moderating effect of the electoral process.^[44]

Confused perceptions of an organic connection between religious leadership and religious community result in these figures being linked to sectarianism as both a product and a cause. On one hand they are assumed to ‘resonate’ in some mystical way with their coreligionists;^[45] on the other, they are accused of retarding Lebanon’s development from sectarianism to nationalism through their undemocratic interference in politics.

My own study finds that the official ‘religious leaders’ of each sect are sustained above all by the state’s recognition and legislation of their roles. Indeed, taking a closer look at the way they actually use this public platform, we see a discourse heavily imbued with the ‘national patriotism’ el-Husseini despaired of, aimed not at inciting sectarian rivalry but responsible citizenship and submission to a strong central state.^[46]

One of the reasons their role is so misunderstood is that commentators dismiss what they have to say because it is delivered in ‘religious’ terms, couched in the preaching of moral values. Whether the clerics’ pacific ‘religious’ discourse is suspected of insincerity – public platitudes covering for private support of militancy – or considered naïvely well-intentioned, the assumption being made is that such discourse is ineffective, detached from real power politics. Once again the isolation of religion as a category obscures very real power dynamics, especially the negotiation of knowledge across the imaginary religious-secular divide. ‘Religious leaders’ are no less part of the contemporary systems of meaning that define

the salience of leadership, citizenship, and national belonging; their own roles are articulated in these terms, and like others they participate in the interpretation of the language that shapes the Lebanese public sphere.

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