

Who Defines Religion in the Colony?

Alexander Henley

On 1 September 1920, French General Henri Gouraud proclaimed the new state of Lebanon, or *Grand Liban*, from the steps of the colonial High Commission in Beirut. He did so as he took care to remind his audience, ‘In the presence of the Lebanese authorities, the sons of the most illustrious families, [and] the spiritual heads of all confessions and all rites’. Photographs of the event show Gouraud flanked by these ‘spiritual heads’, with places of honour given to the Maronite (Christian) patriarch on his right, and the Sunni (Muslim) mufti on his left. The Frenchman used this highly symbolic foundational moment to consecrate the notion of Lebanon as a consensus between its Christian and Muslim communities, represented by patriarch and mufti.

The extraordinary paradox here is that this confessional representation performed two apparently contradictory symbolic feats. It intentionally and overtly lent the authority of these two religious leaders to the legitimation of the state. Yet at the same time it subtly and perhaps unwittingly (re)created the religious leaderships that these two gentlemen were seen to embody, precisely by presuming them to hold the authority to represent ‘the Christians’ and ‘the Muslims’.

Ilyas Huwayyik, the man styled by the Maronite Church as Patriarch of Antioch and All the East, was addressed by General Gouraud as ‘the Grand Patriarch of Lebanon’. Notwithstanding the dozen or more non-Maronite Churches that now found themselves within Lebanon’s borders, many of which had protested the new state, Huwayyik and his

successors ever since have been treated in state protocol and public discourse as spiritual head of all Lebanon's Christians. On Gouraud's other side was Mustafa Naja, the Mufti of Beirut, a judicial functionary appointed by the Ottoman Sultan to produce fatwas, written legal opinions. The son of a Beiruti perfume-seller, Naja's daily routine involved issuing fatwas to the public from a market-stall near the central mosque; holding a regular study circle in the mosque and participating in Sufi gatherings; championing an Islamic educational charity; and helping at his father's stall in the souq.

Naja resisted General Gouraud's designs on him. Proudly loyal to Arab nationalism, the mufti had initially refused to attend the celebration of a Lebanese state. The general is said to have threatened him with deportation. On the steps of the French High Commission, the reluctant Naja was symbolically cast as the Patriarch of Lebanon's opposite number, implicitly now the Mufti of Lebanon, religious leader of the country's Muslims. The French offered Naja the official title of 'Mufti of the State of Greater Lebanon', but he rejected it right up to his death in 1932. Nevertheless, he had been set on the national stage and a continued public role came to be expected of him not only by the colonial authorities but also by Lebanese Muslims seeking representation. Gouraud had orchestrated an iconic image of a national Grand Muftiship, and in the decades after 1920 that image would become an institutional reality. Naja's successor, Muhammad Tawfiq Khalid, took the title 'Mufti of the Lebanese Republic' and built up a national religious administration with an impressive Beirut headquarters that became the hub of a newly self-identifying confessional community.

This story seems in many ways a striking example of the transformative power of the colonial language of religion. John Zavos has shown representation as the means by which

religion or religions were objectified in India, with the colonisers' creation of new public spaces as a key part of that process.

In Lebanon, as in India, 'representation translated into power through the articulation of firm, clearly recognizable communities'.^[155] A French colonial official's selection of Mufti Naja to represent one of Lebanon's religions, as equal and equivalent to the representatives of other religions, empowered the mufti and articulated a new Muslim identity as a religious community. The mufti would not previously have been called a 'religious leader'. Indeed his office would not have been described as 'religious' in the modern sense: his role was judicial, salaried from a public budget and serving society at large. Similarly, Sunni Muslims in Ottoman society were simply ordinary citizens; they did not organise or conceive of themselves as a community in contradistinction to others.

The translation of the modern Western concepts of religion and religious into the Arabic words *dīn* and *dīnī* was accompanied by an exponential increase in their use, and an even more marked rise of the plural *adyān*. Only in the modern era was Middle Eastern society said to comprise a number of *adyān*; ministries were dedicated to 'religious affairs' (*al-shu'ūn al-dīnīyya*), staffed by professional 'men of religion' (*rijāl al-dīn*). In Lebanon the Mufti of Beirut was gradually elevated to leader of this religious corps (*ra'īs al-silk al-dīnī*), and finally to religious leader of the community (*ra'īs al-tā'ifa al-dīnī*). But just because change happened during this period, should we assume it was all driven by colonialism? The usage of *dīn* has no doubt changed, but were there not similar concepts in pre-modern Islamic societies? 'You have your *dīn* and I have my *dīn*', says the Qur'an. Classical

thought opposes dīn and dunyā, the material world. The Ottoman notion of milla recognised the rights of non-Muslim communities. And the role of muftis – while judicial – was not merely legal in the modern sense: it was to define the proper practice of Islam.

The critical religion school has taught us to see the colonial invention of world religions and their relegation to a private sphere demarcated by modern states. But an emphasis on the bulldozing force of colonial power may obscure the resilience of local histories.

Mufti Naja may have been an unwilling participant in the colonial enterprise, but the rise of state muftis across the Middle East suggests that he was somehow an obvious, not an arbitrary, choice for the new role of religious leadership. Whoever defined religion in the new Lebanon, its result was not simply marginalisation from a secular public sphere but by contrast the empowerment of new religious institutions and a lasting ambiguity over the nature, boundaries and even the possibility of ‘secular’ politics.

Works Cited

Zavos, John. “Representing religion in colonial India.” In *Rethinking Religion in India: The colonial construction of Hinduism*. Edited by Esther Bloch, Marianne Keppens, and Rajaram Hegde, 56-68. London: Routledge, 2010.