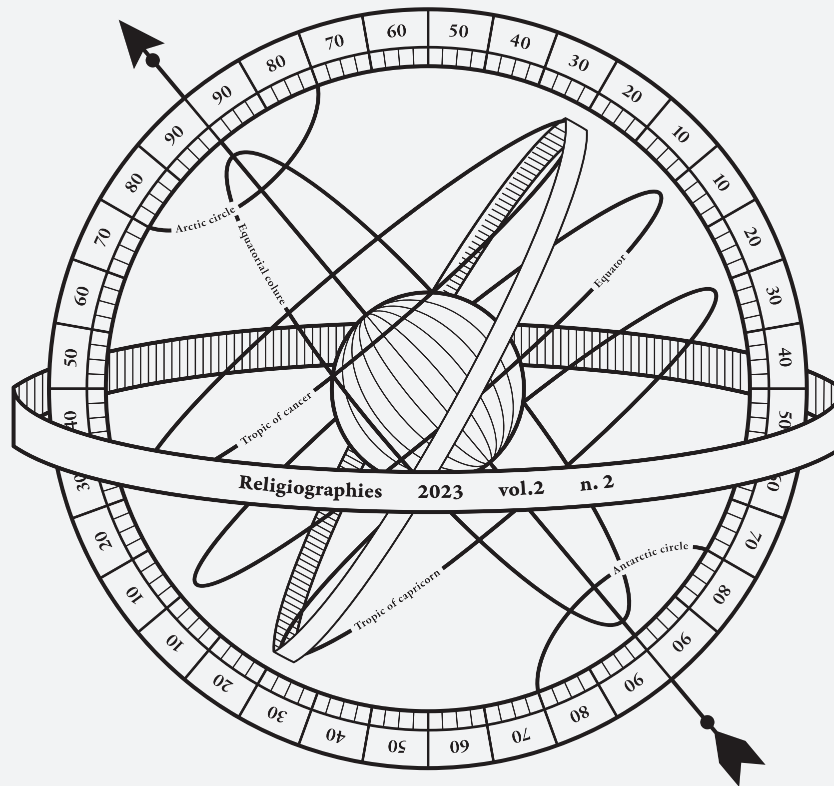
Religiographies



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The Imagery of Christian Nationalism in Lebanon

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Abstract
Lebanese Christian nationalism encompasses a wide spectrum of political discourses and practices that aim at preserving the national identity and the territorial integrity of Lebanon as a quintessentially Christian sovereign country. This essay examines the production and dissemination of images, visual representations, and aesthetic practices that have promoted a Christian nationalist discourse in Lebanon from the early 1970s to the present. Religiously infused images and symbols, taken from Christian textual sources, liturgical and devotional practices, and iconography are powerfully used in narratives that convey the image of Lebanon as part of a Christian faithscape and depict a brave history of resistance. Religious themes and images are also used to legitimize political leaders through the language of sainthood, prophecy, and salvation, in order to create a sense of affective proximity and emotional community between the leaders and their followers. The contrast between disenchantment and moral rebirth, doom and salvation highlights the religious dimensions of politics and the nexus between communal identity, sectarian affiliation, and political mobilization in modern Lebanon.

Introduction

The notion of "Christian nationalism" was proposed by Felsch in an edited volume on the political turmoil that engulfed Lebanon in the wake of the Arab uprisings and the Syrian civil war. He defines Christian nationalism as an ideological layer, more or less overtly expressed, that reformulates the ideas of exceptionalism and isolationism as they were variously articulated in the Lebanese Christian political arena during the twentieth century.[1]

At the core of this discourse, according to Felsch, is an idea of Lebanon as quintessentially a Christian nation. According to this vision, which emerged before the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war (1975–1990), Christians should enjoy a status of political preeminence because of their supposed historical role, even in a country that currently has a Muslim majority. Therefore, Lebanese Christian nationalism seeks to preserve a strong presence of Christians in government and policy-making agencies, a significant degree of self-government for Christian religious institutions, and even a clear territorial demarcation of Christian-majority areas within the country.

In many ways, this discourse is a metamorphosis of the *discours libaniste* that Sassine analyzed in his research.[2] This Lebanese national narrative was conceived mainly in Christian (and more specifically Maronite) milieus, for the sake of Christian political and economic interests and agendas, and was articulated through tropes and themes that were mostly based on Maronite tradition and Biblical references.[3]

Bawardi shows in his work how the "Lebanist" nationalist discourse, then seen through the prism of the supposed continuity between modern Lebanon and its ancient Phoenician past,[4] was developed under the French Mandate (1920–1943) and after the independence as a cultural project

1 Maximilian Felsch, "The Rise of Christian Nationalism in Lebanon," in *Lebanon and the Arab Uprisings: In the Eye of the Hurricane*, ed. Maximilian Felsch and Martin Wählisch (New York: Routledge, 2016), 70–86.

2 Fares Sassine, "Le libanisme maronite. Contributions à l'étude d'un discours politique" (PhD diss., Université de Paris Sorbonne, 1979).

3 Carol Hakim, *The Origins of the Lebanese National Idea: 1840–1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

4 Francesco Mazzucotelli, "On the Shores of Phoenicia: Phoenicianism, Political Maronitism, and Christian Nationalism in Lebanon," in *Histories of Nationalism beyond Europe: Myths, Elitism and Transnational Connections*, ed. Jan Záhořík and Antonio M. Morone (Cham, CH: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 53–71.

that used multiple tools, including history textbooks, archaeological sites and museums, poetry and literature, art festivals, music, and movies.[5] This production amounted to an attempt at constructing cultural hegemony within the Lebanese context. The project was manifestly political in content and vocation because it wanted to consolidate the Lebanese nation-state and its identity, constructed around its imagined Phoenician and Christian roots.

In this essay, I am concerned with the production and dissemination of images, iconography, aesthetic practices, and visual representations that have promoted a Christian nationalist discourse in Lebanon from the early 1970s to the present. From a methodological and theoretical point of view, I refer to the considerations advanced by Maasri about the intersection between visuality, art, design, and politics in the specific historical and political context of Lebanon before and after the civil war (1975–1990).[6] Posters, leaflets, flyers, photographs, statues, and later on images in jpeg and gif format contain symbolic codes and cultural meanings, incite reactions, command power, and call on onlookers to act as political subjects.

Political images are part of the process of propaganda, which is meant to manufacture consent, shape perceptions and behaviors, and instigate change in the target audience, but they also are symbolic sites of struggle. In the everyday dimension of contentious politics, politically committed art played and continues to play a powerful role as a vector of meanings. Yet, the aesthetic vocabulary and the practices of political images in Lebanon do not constitute a unified typology. This means that the analysis of signs, texts, visual effects, and aesthetic materializations cannot be disentangled from the political discourse and the historical context in which each image was produced.

The production of political images in Lebanon has been stimulated by the intense artistic and literary production, intellectual fervor, and radical political activism that have flourished in Beirut since the 1960s, drawing inspiration from graphic design, transnational modernism, Socialist realism, and traditional religious iconography. Even if the bulk of this production was located in the Palestinian and leftist milieus of West Beirut, a considerable spillover was also seen in the Christian-majority areas.[7]

The ephemeral nature of posters, leaflets, banners and, later on, blogs and websites, poses a significant problem, as does the massive destruction brought by conflicts and the deliberate destruction of artifacts that were deemed excessively sensitive or not worthy of preservation. Maasri explains how she managed to collect some five hundred posters from the civil war period and turn them into a digital database, with the intention to make it accessible through customized searches to "provide insightful research material for other interested scholars and students."[8]

From this perspective, I treat the posters and images that were digitalized, uploaded, and made available on the *Signs of Conflict* website as primary sources, and look through these primary sources at the production of meanings, and at how they are performed in public spaces.

I first provide a historical and theoretical introduction to the concept of Christian nationalism in Lebanon and its correlation with sectarianism as both an institutionalized political system and a political culture.

I then intend to show how the use of religious images and vocabulary establishes a nexus between territory and history that is invoked to perorate Lebanese independence and its mission as the fortress of Christianity in the Holy Land of the divine revelation, where Jesus Christ lived

5 Basilius Bawardi, *The Lebanese–Phoenician Nationalist Movement: Literature, Language and Identity* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2016).

6 Zeina Maasri, *Cosmopolitan Radicalism: The Visual Politics of Beirut's Global Sixties* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

7 Zeina Maasri, *Off the Wall: Political Posters of the Lebanese Civil War* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009), 46–52.

8 Maasri, *Off the Wall*, xxiv. Maasri, *Cosmopolitan Radicalism*, 23.

and preached. In this way, the land of Lebanon is conceptualized as part of a faithscape and a sacred geography, and its turbulent past is reinvented as a brave history of religious resistance. I intend to point out how this teleological interpretation of history is invoked to reinforce the continuity between past and present, and the connection to the land.

I then proceed to show how religious themes are invoked to legitimize political leaders, providing them with an aura of devotion, mysticism, and even prophetic qualities that reinforce the affective proximity and the emotional closeness between the leader and his followers. In the Lebanese Christian context considered in this essay, this connection between leaders and followers is often predicated on a strong anti-elitist discourse, and aims at consolidating the perception of an emotional community.

I also intend to explain how images, words, and references taken from the local religious traditions, even in their more vernacular forms, prompt a strong sense of victimhood and martyrdom, with repercussions on the cycles of selective memory, amnesia, violence, and repression that have been examined in the Lebanese post-conflict context after the end of the civil war (1975–1990).[9] In this framework, I show how the contrast between disenchantment and moral rebirth, as well as doom and salvation, highlights the religious dimensions of politics and the nexus between communal identity, sectarian affiliation, and political mobilization in modern Lebanon.[10]

9 Saree Makdisi, "Beirut, a City without History?", in *Memory and Violence in the Middle East and North Africa*, ed. Ussama Makdisi and Paul Silverstein (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 201–14.

10 In this article, I use the most common simplified transliteration for names of individuals and places, and a scientific transliteration based on DIN 31635 for political terms and concepts.

Christian Nationalism and Sectarianism in Lebanon

Lebanon's current political system is based on the 1926 Constitution and the 1943 National Pact, the latter a trans-sectarian gentlemen's agreement that promoted the interests of a rapidly developing financial and commercial bourgeoisie, mostly based in the capital city, Beirut.[11] This pact balanced the need for a political compromise among the country's bourgeois and land-owning elites with the need to preserve Lebanon's nature vis-à-vis the Arab world and its anti-colonial experience.[12]

On the one hand, the pact created a consociational and clientelist system based on a power-sharing formula that fed reciprocal vetoes and ultimately resulted in fragile state institutions. On the other hand, the pact did not reduce the aspirations of pan-Arab nationalists towards a rapprochement between Lebanon and the other member countries of the Arab League, nor did it ease the anxiety of many Christians (in particular Maronites) who were scared by the prospect of an assimilation into an Arab-Islamic environment. Some of them clung to the claim that Lebanon was the "national homeland of the Christians in the Middle East."[13]

This idea expanded the thesis, initially endorsed by Henri Lammens, known as *asile du Liban*, which saw the country as the mountain refuge of persecuted religious minorities through the centuries. Such a theory provided a teleological interpretation of history and a perspective of manifest destiny that was claimed by the advocates of Lebanese peculiarity versus the rest of the Middle East.[14]

The 1960s saw the rise of a new radical Left, characterized by the intersection of Marxism, Maoism, Third-Worldism, and militant support for Palestinian national rights. This triggered a radicalization of the Lebanese Christian political field, at first with the formation of the coalition of right-wing parties known as the "Tripartite Alliance" in 1968, and later with the call for a partition or a division of the country along sectarian

11 Fawwaz Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon* (London: Pluto Press, 2012), 93–95.

12 Marie-Christine Aulas, "The Socio-Ideological Development of the Maronite Community: The Emergence of the Phalanges and the Lebanese Forces," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 7, no. 4 (1985): 1–27.

13 Elaine Hagopian, "Maronite Hegemony to Maronite Militancy: The Creation and Disintegration of Lebanon," *Third World Quarterly* 11, no. 4 (1989): 101–17.

14 Kamal Salibi, *A House of Many Mansions: The History of Lebanon Reconsidered* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 134–35.

lines, aimed at a homogeneous Christian territorial polity, either in the form of an autonomous canton or as a wholly independent state.[15]

The Université Saint-Esprit de Kaslik, founded in 1938 by the monastic Lebanese Maronite Order, was the beacon of a militant current of thought that blended and expanded many pre-existing themes of Christian isolationism and steered them in a strongly sectarian direction, emphasizing the (alleged) Marxist and Islamic threat.[16] This milieu provided intellectual legitimization to the Christian (Maronite in particular) supremacist political groups that eventually morphed into the right-wing Lebanese Front at the onset of the Lebanese civil war.[17]

The discourse of Maronite leader Bashir al-Jumayyil was predicated on the idea of a Christian identity threatened by Arab nationalism, militant Islamism, and Marxism (or a combination of the three). This idea was coupled with slogans and catchphrases about resilience and perseverance against perceived threats of submission and erasure. According to Thuselt,[18] this discourse marked the transition of a vast sector of the Maronite constituency from a self-perception as the vanguard of modernity, and the elite of the Lebanese nation-state, towards a self-perception as an ethnic minority under constant threat of annihilation.[19] In this context, according to Felsch, Lebanese nationalism became synonymous with the protection of Lebanon's Christians against Arab nationalism, Islam disguised as Arabism, and Third-Worldism.[20]

As Haddad argued, it is difficult to disentangle nationalist from sectarianist discourses in the modern Middle East.[21] On the one hand, sectarian discourses need to be understood in the frame of the nation-state paradigm and the imagination of volatile national identities. On the other hand, the problematization of the relationship between sectarian identities and nationalism questions the notion of the artificiality of the nation-state in the Middle East and the conceptualization of nationalism as a wholly imported political theory.

The nature of sectarianism is among the most discussed topics in Lebanese politics and contemporary history. At its most elementary level, sectarianism in Lebanon can be defined as a system of power-sharing along confessional lines, predicated on formal and informal arrangements. This includes, but is not limited to, the allocation of parliamentary seats, the formation of cabinets, and the appointments in the higher ranks of the public administration according to predetermined quotas set for each of the eighteen officially recognized religious groups.

In fact, recent academic debates on sectarianism have problematized the concept and highlighted how this emotionally charged term, often used in petty polemics, needs to be carefully contextualized in time and space.[22] Since the groundbreaking work of Makdisi, who theorized the notion of the "modernity of sectarianism" and explained the politicization of sectarian identities as both a reaction and an alternative to the late Ottoman modernization attempts,[23] a significant part of the existing literature appears to be positioned on a continuum, with primordialist and instrumentalist understandings at either end.[24]

Lebanese Marxist scholars such as Mas'ud Dahir and Fawwaz Traboulsi have argued that sectarian identities and praxis cannot be disconnected from the dimension of social class and class conflict. Sectarianism is best understood, in their perspective, not as a form of false consciousness, but rather as a historically determined mode of Lebanon's incorporation (and that of the Middle East at large) in the capitalist world-system.[25]

15 Hagopian, "Maronite Hegemony to Maronite Militancy."

16 Alexander Henley, "Politics of a Church at War: Maronite Catholicism in the Lebanese Civil War," *Mediterranean Politics* 13, no. 3 (2008): 353–69.

17 Lewis Snider, "The Lebanese Forces: Their Origins and Role in Lebanon's Politics," *Middle East Journal* 38, no. 1 (1984): 1–33. Ghassan Hage, "Religious Fundamentalism as a Political Strategy: The Evolution of the Lebanese Forces' Religious Discourse During the Lebanese Civil War," *Critique of Anthropology* 12, no. 1 (1992): 27–45.

18 Christian Thuselt, " 'Dream of a Republic': Lebanese Political Parties as 'Real Parties' " (PhD diss., Roskilde University, 2018).

19 It should be noted here that an offspring of this milieu is Walid Phares, a former ideologue of the Lebanese Forces who authored a book called *Lebanese Christian Nationalism: The Rise and Fall of an Ethnic Resistance* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1995), and later became a controversial foreign policy advisor on the Middle East to US presidential candidates Mitt Romney and Donald Trump. See in Ishaan Tharoor, "The dark, controversial past of Trump's counterterrorism adviser," *The Washington Post*, March 22, 2016.

20 Felsch, "The Rise of Christian Nationalism."

21 Fanar Haddad, "Sectarian Identity and National Identity in the Middle East," *Nations and Nationalism* 26, no. 1 (2020): 123–37.

22 May Darwich, Tamirace Fakhoury, "Casting the Other as an Existential Threat: The Securitisation of Sectarianism in the International Relations of the Syria Crisis," *Global Discourse* 6, no. 4 (2016): 712–32.

23 Ussama Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism. Community, History, and Violence in Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Lebanon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

24 Whereas the first approach reads religious allegiance as the source of collective identities and political mobilization, the latter understands sectarianism as a discourse of legitimization that revolves around the distribution of resources and services. Gause argues that sectarianism should be understood not as the product of unchangeable identities, but rather as an effect of the failure of the state-building process in the Middle East. See in F. Gregory III Gause, "Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War," *Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper* 11 (2014).

25 This perspective was further developed by Hasan Hamdan, better known under his *nom de plume* Mahdi

Important recent contributions have interwoven sectarianism with neopatrimonialism, clientelism, and the fragility of the rentier model,[26] or have analyzed its political economy through the prism of its systems of alternative welfare,[27] or its spatialized dimension through the provision of services in exchange for political support in urban neighborhoods.[28]

The ongoing debate on the nature of sectarianism has fostered a vigorous and stimulating scholarly discussion that continues to shed light on Lebanon's political history. Here, however, I suggest that significant insight can also be acquired through studying the intersection between nationalism and religious identities, relying on the theoretical frameworks and case studies related to the late Ottoman and post-Ottoman period in different areas of the former Ottoman Empire. Based on the existing literature on nationalism studies, nationalist historiographies, and modernizing geographies in the post-Ottoman space, I intend to shed light on the attempt at fostering homogenizing and exclusive identities that are constructed as the foundation of mass political mobilization, through the morphing of fluid Ottoman *millet* identities into new national allegiances.[29] In particular, this process takes place through the sectarianization of space, sometimes turning it into faithspaces, and through the consolidation of an emotional community around a charismatic leader.

Images of the Homeland: Geography and Identity

In 1919, Charles Corm rallied a group of ardent Francophile businessmen and intellectuals around the project of a literary journal called *La Revue Phénicienne* that supported the idea of an independent Lebanon under French tutelage within its supposedly natural borders. The journal postulated that modern Lebanon was the continuation of the ancient Phoenician civilization, and framed the latter in a trans-Mediterranean geography and a European civilization context through the mythological connections between Agenor, the Phoenician king of Tyre, and his son Cadmus, founder and first king of Thebes. This "resurrection" of Phoenicia, as Salibi put it,[30] was largely in line with other nationalist movements in the Middle East, which sought to ground national identities and political legitimacy in their ancient, glorious past. Archaeological digs, origin mythologies, and foundational epics all conveyed a sense of national pride and a fed a narrative of anticolonial redemption through the recovery of past grandeur and political independence.[31]

Corm and his acolytes were influenced by the political thought of the French nationalist Right, which had found its way into the Christian intellectual circles of Beirut and Mount Lebanon through the Jesuit-run Université Saint-Joseph, founded in 1875. In the highly volatile context of Mount Lebanon under Ottoman rule in the nineteenth century, schools and colleges run by the Jesuits had sought to counter the expansion of Protestant, pro-British educational institutions, and to promote a Catholic education that was French in language, culture, curriculum, and political orientation.[32] On the one hand, Jesuit-run facilities became the incubator of a new Christian political and intellectual elite that was overwhelmingly Catholic by religion and Francophile by culture.[33] On the other hand, the same schools acted as a conveyor belt for the clericalist conservative thought of the French Right as it was developed during the years of the Third Republic.[34]

Among the authors that most influenced Corm and the *La Revue*

'Amil, who radically challenged the essentialization of sectarian identities, and convincingly conceptualized sectarianism as a political discourse and practice that is constructed in connection with the spread of capitalism, colonialism, and the quest for the control of the postcolonial state. See in Kais Firro, *Inventing Lebanon: Nationalism and the State under the Mandate* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2003), 56–67.

26
Hannes Baumann, "The Causes, Nature, and Effects of the Current Crisis of Lebanese Capitalism," *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 1 (2019): 61–77.

27
Melani Cammett, *Compassionate Communalism: Welfare and Sectarianism in Lebanon* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014).

28
Joanne Randa Nucho, *Everyday Sectarianism in Urban Lebanon: Infrastructures, Public Services, and Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

29
Paraskevas Konortas, "Nationalisms vs Millets: Building Collective Identities in Ottoman Thrace," in *Spatial Conceptions of the Nation: Modernizing Geographies in Greece and Turkey*, ed. P. Nikiforos Diamandouros, Thalia Dragonas and Çağlar Keyder (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010), 161–80.

30
Salibi, *A House of Many Mansions*, 172.

31
Asher Kaufman, "Phoenicianism: The Formation of an Identity in Lebanon in 1920," *Middle Eastern Studies* 37, no. 1 (2001): 173–94.

32
Kais Firro, "Lebanese Nationalism versus Arabism: From Bulus Nujaym to Michel Chiha," *Middle Eastern Studies* 40, no. 5 (2004): 1–27.

33
Rafaël Herzstein, "Les pères jésuites et les Maronites du Mont-Liban: l'Université Saint-Joseph de Beyrouth," *Histoire et missions chrétiennes* 9, no. 1 (2009): 149–75.

34
Dennis Patrick Walker, "Clericist Catholic Authors and the Crystallization of Historical Memory of World War I in Lebanonist–Particularist Discourse, 1918–1922," *Islamic Studies* 48, no. 2 (2009): 219–60.

Phénicienne circle, Maurice Barrès played a special role. Barrès was a French writer and politician who was a close associate of Gabriele D'Annunzio and Charles Maurras, the founder of the monarchist Action Française. From his relationship with Maurras and Paul Déroulède, Barrès developed the notion of *nationalisme intégral* and praised a holistic view of a human community finally purged of its allogenous elements and brought back to its supposed authenticity.[35] In his view, the nation would form a spiritual and organic totality, revitalized and unified through its common origin once all the elements outside the national consensus (by which he implied social conflicts and religious minorities) were eventually removed.[36] The value Barrès accorded to the relationship between *la terre et les morts* ("the land and the dead") led him to confer outstanding significance to some specific places that he considered as infused with the memory of collective sacrifice or with an aura of supernatural energy. There he felt the beating pulse of the nation, as he did at the hill of Sion-Vaudémont, which he celebrated in his 1913 poem, *La Colline inspirée*.[37]

After a trip to the Levant in 1914, Barrès wrote *Une enquête aux pays du Levant*, where he exalted the supernatural force exuding from some place connected to Phoenician and Greek mythology. The nascent Lebanese nationalist discourse enthusiastically embraced this celebration, and embraced in an almost cult-like manner the veneration of Lebanon's *paysage* (landscape) as the receptacle of the nation's essence and character.[38] Barrès expressed theories that were useful to refute the pan-Arab thesis, which postulated a common pan-Arab national identity based on the use of Classical Arabic as a literary language and the use of various vernacular forms of Arabic as the main language of everyday interaction. In fact, writers and intellectuals during and after World War I argued for a distinct Lebanese (or alternatively Syrian) national identity based on territory (in a strongly deterministic sense) and historical memory rather than language.[39]

Corm expanded these themes in a 1934 poem titled *La Montagne inspirée*, in a clear reference to the work by Barrès. The core of the poem is a tribute to Lebanon's civilizational mission through the ages and its extraneity relative to its Arab-Islamic surroundings. Corm used references to the Crusades to celebrate the relations between Maronite and Frankish rulers (and, by extension, between Lebanon and France) and to consolidate the historical essence of Lebanon as a quintessentially Christian area, part of the sacred geography of the Bible and the history of Christianity.[40] Corm shared with Barrès the idea that some places were endowed with a special role in the history and the identity of the nation, and believed in the persistence of a *genius loci* that shaped the particular character of Lebanon, or its *Volksgeist*.[41]

The combination of an idea of the land as foundational for national identity, with an idea of the land as a mountain refuge for oppressed religious minorities, nourished a narrative that praised the exceptional features of Lebanon and its difference from the rest of the Middle East. In this narrative, the mountain region known in modern times as Mount Lebanon (*Ǧabal Lubnān* in Arabic) was at once the main demographic cluster of the Christian population, the historical precursor of an independent Lebanon,[42] and, metaphorically speaking, the embodiment of the identity and values of the nation.

In a wartime poster of the Lebanese Forces, a Christian right-wing militia (today a political party), a snowy and apparently barren mountain landscape features a vertical jet that looks like a stylized human figure

35
Thuselt, "Dream of a Republic," 87–88.

36
Asher Kaufman, "From 'La Colline inspirée' to 'La Montagne inspirée': Maurice Barrès and Lebanese Nationalism," in *France and the Middle East: Past, Present, and Future*, ed. Michel Abitbol (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2004), 225–46.

37
Bernard Heyberger, "Saint Charbel Makhlouf, ou la consécration de l'identité maronite," in *Saints et héros du Moyen-Orient contemporain*, ed. Catherine Mayeur-Jouen (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 2003), 139–59.

Asher Kaufman, " 'Tell Us Our History': Charles Corm, Mount Lebanon and Lebanese Nationalism," *Middle Eastern Studies* 40, no. 3 (2004): 1–28.

38
Raja Choueiri, *Les sites paysagers de la mémoire du Liban* (Baabda: Felix Béryte, 2012), 228.

39
Kaufman, "From 'La Colline inspirée' to 'La Montagne inspirée.' "

40
Charles Corm, *La Montagne inspirée. Chansons de geste* (Beyrouth: Éditions de la Revue Phénicienne, 1934), 52–56, 91.

41
Choueiri, *Les sites paysagers*, 221.

42
The region of Mount Lebanon was indirectly ruled by the Ottoman Empire through a quasi-feudal system of landowning families and received an autonomous status with wide prerogatives of self-government through the *Règlement Organique* of 1861 and 1864.

Fig. 1. Through the highness of the mountain, the resurrection of Lebanon. Collection Wassim Jabre.

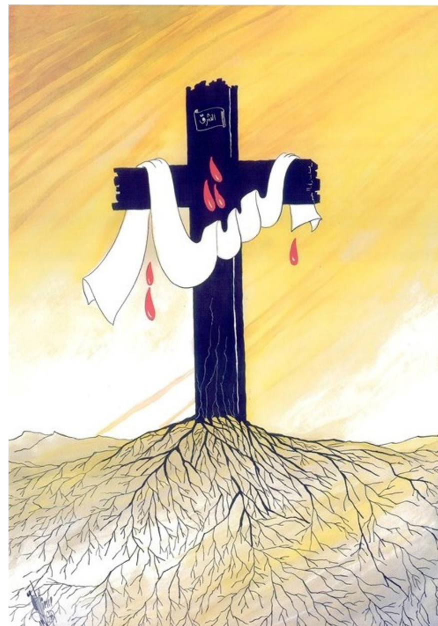

Fig. 2. Lebanon. Photograph © Pierre Sadek. Collection Wassim Jabre.

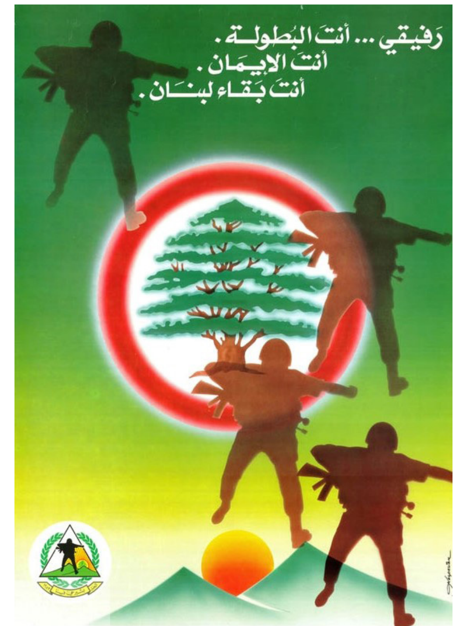

Fig. 3. My comrade, you are heroism, you are faith, you are the persistance of Lebanon. Photograph © Kasparian. Collection Wassim Jabre.

holding a party logo. A smaller caption in the margin below locates this poster in the region of Kisrawan-Ftouh, the major stronghold of Lebanese Forces during most of the war period. The main caption reads, "Through the highness of the mountain, the resurrection of Lebanon." (Fig. 1) Here the word *šumūḫ* (which can be translated as glory, honor, or pride, and therefore is meant to suggest moral as well as orographic elevation) is associated with the word *qiyāmah*, which means resurrection in the afterlife, and is usually associated with doomsday and, in an Arabic-speaking Christian context, the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The parallelism between the passion and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the tribulations of Lebanon during the war is a frequent trope. It clearly appears in a poster designed in 1982 by Pierre Sadek, a prominent political cartoonist and fervent supporter of Lebanese nationalism,[43] in the aftermath of the assassination of President Bashir al-Jumayyil, the former military commander and charismatic leader of the Christian right-wing Lebanese Front. Here, the cross of Christ is planted in the land of Lebanon, and is actually a tree that is rooted in the mountainous landscape. The white cloth on the cross is dripping blood, and is positioned in a way that could also loosely resemble the word *Lubnān* (Lebanon) in Arabic script. (Fig. 2)

A greenish mountain landscape with a rising sun forms the backdrop for yet another poster with a repeated image of a fighter in full combat gear and a giant logo of the Lebanese Forces. The caption reads, "My comrade . . . You are heroism, you are faith, you are the persistence of Lebanon." (Fig. 3) As Maasri notes,[44] this poster offers an abridged version of another, text-laden one that praises the virtues of the prototypical Christian fighter. Addressed to an ideal "resisting comrade" who is fighting in the mountains, the manifesto states that "through your faith, you fought for the sake of the most precious, holiest, and deepest of the causes," which is the protection of "our free, dignified Christian existence in this environment." The militia fighter is defined as "the shield of our Christian people, the defensive wall of its freedom, and the guarantee for its

43 Maasri, *Off the Wall*, 46.

44 Maasri, *Off the Wall*, 112.

Fig. 4. My resisting comrade . . . Bashir lives in us so that our Lebanon remains alive. Collection Hoover Institution Archives.

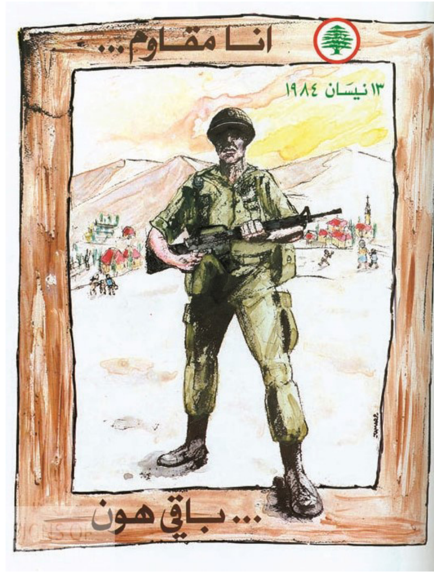

Fig. 5. I am a resistant . . . I remain here. Photograph © Tamari.

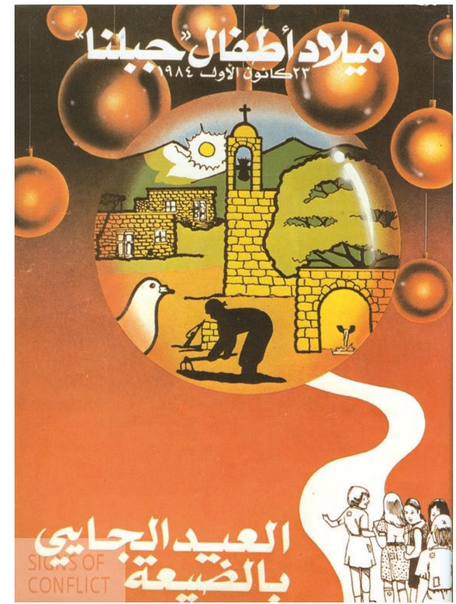

Fig. 6. The Christmas of the children of our mountain, 22 December 1984 . . . The coming holiday in the village.

survival." (Fig. 4) A visual rendition of all these concepts appeared in 1984 in the issue 29 of *al-Masīrah*, the journal of the Lebanese Forces, on the occasion of the ninth anniversary of the civil war's outbreak. Here an armed soldier stands solidly in the foreground, in an assertive posture, guarding an idyllic mountain village in the background, replete with red-tiled houses, orchards, and children walking towards a church with its steeple. (Fig. 5) On December 22, 1984, the same journal published a poster titled *Milād aṭfāl ğabalnā* ("Christmas of the children of our mountain," with emphasis on the adjective "our"). Here the composition brims with nostalgia: the scenery is lush and sunny, and a farmer is tilling the land in an archetypal mountain village with stone houses, a well, a fountain, and a church at its very heart. The scene takes the form of a Christmas ornament, as if it were a Christmas wish, with children in black and white in the foreground, starting along the path that might bring them back to the colors of the village. (Fig. 6)

The historical context of the last image is the "War of the Mountain," fought in the Chouf region and central Lebanon between September 1983 and February 1984. The Lebanese National Resistance Front (Druze and Communist militias) utterly defeated the Lebanese Forces, and Christian civilians were expulsed from the region. The caption of the 1984 poster reads, "Next Christmas in the village," alluding to the prospect of a swift return, whereas the process in fact took decades, and was certainly not achieved through military means.[45]

On the one hand, the trope of the village as a place of belonging and a *lieu de mémoire* is a mainstay in Lebanese nationalist discourse that predates the civil war and is still powerful today. The rural idyll of the mountain village remains strongly evocative of a largely fictionalized traditional lifestyle, far from the hustle and bustle of Beirut, the big city, where identity, family ties, and values are supposedly diluted.

The 1967 musical film *Safar Barlik*, written by the Rahbani brothers and starring Lebanese diva Fairouz, is a romanticized story of love and resistance against the Ottoman general mobilization and a call to arms in World War I. The events are set in an imaginary (and mostly unlikely) village that apparently has no overt confessional affiliation, but that can

45 Ruth Michaelson, "Chouf's war-displaced Christian Lebanese to return to their homes," *RFI*, April 21, 2015.

be assumed as mostly Christian because of its location in the highlands.[46] The script still clings to the patriotic narrative of a shared national entente among Christians and Muslims against Ottoman rule, depicted as despotic, ridiculous, and corrupt at the same time.

This narrative was celebrated in *Les pleureuses* ("The weeping women"), a sculpture created by Yusuf Hoyek in 1930 for a major square in the center of Beirut and dedicated to a group of "martyrs," or leading nationalist figures who had been sentenced to death by the Ottoman military governor Cemal Paşa in the spring of 1915.[47] At that time, and even more so in the following decades, the rhetoric of national unity uneasily tried to hide the reality of a very heated debate on the definition of Lebanon's national identity and the forever unresolved tension between Lebaneseness and Arabness.[48] In *Where Do We Go Now?*, a 2011 film directed by Nadine Labaki, a remote mountain village appears as an idealized microcosm, marked by both friendship and tensions between Christians and Muslims, which seemingly encapsulates all the characteristics of Lebanon, taking the metaphor of the nation as a village and the village as the mirror of the nation to the most conspicuous level.[49]

On the other hand, however, Christian nationalist representations of the mountain village include an additional layer. The village does not merely appear as "Lebanese" or "traditional,"[50] whatever the two terms might mean: it is explicitly Christian. The religious dimension of this imagery conveys a sense of belonging and a community-based perception of the *entre-soi* that reflects the deeply spatialized nature of Lebanese sectarianism in its everyday materiality. In post-conflict Lebanon, urban, peri-urban, and rural spaces are contested and refashioned along confessional lines, through the reproduction of physical and symbolical borders and boundaries: oversized churches, huge crosses on higher grounds, roadside shrines, and statues of saints are built and maintained to reinforce the Christian character of villages and landscapes, acting in every way as land markers and bordering devices.[51]

The signification of space through religious symbols is a central component in the construction of sectarian narratives that portray locals in opposition to a stereotyped (albeit historically changeable) Other. The latter is invariably seen as savage, cruel, and as a threat to the ontological security of the community, in a reductionist and often obsessive understanding of history. The territorial limits of the village (or an urban neighborhood that sometimes reproduces village relationships and mentalities) are therefore seen as the front line in defending the group's identity and its self-perception.[52] As a play on words and religious stereotypes, the enemy is described as *al-qātil* ("the murderer"), while the devout Christian soldier (*al-muqātil*, or "the combatant") is photographed in a moment of prayer. (Fig. 7) In order to keep Lebanon on the world's map, (Fig. 8) the external other (such as the Ottoman rulers, the Syrian army, or the Palestinian militants) must be defeated in the same way as the internal other (such as leftists and non-conformist Christians). (Fig. 9)

Among the prominent features in the aesthetics of Lebanese nationalism, the cedar tree also has a central place. It figures on the national flag, institutional logos, commercial brands, and party symbols. According to Sassine, a careful scrutiny of right-wing publications, including the journal *Lebnaan* between 1975 and 1979, shows how the cedar tree was described as a national motif that dated back to the Phoenician era, when it was used in shipyards as a prestige commodity.[53] In this way, the cedar

46 The movie can be watched here: accessed December 18, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R1e5UZ1Ly60.

47 Lucia Volk, *Memorials and Martyrs in Modern Lebanon* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 59.

48 Samir Kassir, *Beirut* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 284, 331–33.

49 The idea of the village as a laid-back place, where traditions, cultural heritage (*turāt*), and a leisurely pace of life are preserved is not a prerogative of Lebanese Christians. In fact, the dichotomy between urban and rural makes little sense in a country where village insularity is reduced by geographical proximity and elaborate patterns of resettlement from the countryside to the city. Idyllic villages in pristine settings, completely detached from the trappings of modernity and mass politics, are therefore more of a narrative device than the reality on the ground. See in Augustus Richard Norton, *Amal and the Shiʿa: Struggle for the Soul of Lebanon* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987), 31.

50 The trope of the mountain village complements the depiction of the Mediterranean Sea in Lebanese nationalist narratives. In the 1950s and 1960s, Lebanon's maritime dimension was profoundly saturated with ideas of leisure and fashionability that reinforced the allure of Beirut as the "Paris of the East." See in Kassir, *Beirut*, 304–9, 365–66, and 385–408. Images of beach clubs with young women in bikinis, seaside restaurants, yachts, and night clubs were, however, not only part of a general trend of promoting tourism across the Mediterranean; most importantly, they embedded Lebanon in a clear Mediterranean geography and history that looked westwards and emphasized the connections with Europe. See in Zeina Maasri, "Troubled Geography: Imagining Lebanon in 1960s Tourist Promotion," in *National Design Histories in an Age of Globalization*, ed. Kjetil Fallan and Grace Lees–Maffei (New York: Berghahn Books, 2016), 125–40.

51 See for example in Emma Aubin-Boltanski, "Miracles and Apparitions of the Virgin Mary in Lebanon: the Proof is in the Eyes of the Other," *Religiographies* 1, no. 1 (2022): 82–95.

52 Chantal Mazaeff, "L'action des Forces Libanaises à Aïn al-Remmané : un intense travail de réhabilitation et de socialisation politique," in *Leaders et partisans au Liban*, ed. Franck Mermier and Sabrina Mervin (Paris: Karthala, 2012), 263–83. Tsolin Nalbantian, "Lebanese Power Struggles and Fashioning 'Armenian' Space, 1957–1958," *Review of Middle East Studies* 47, no. 2 (2013): 218–27.

53 Sassine, "Le libanisme maronite," 362–63.

Fig.7. The murderer . . . The combatant. Collection Hoover Institution Archives.

Fig. 8. Collection Wassim Jabre.

Fig. 9. Your schemes are uncovered and justice will triumph.

tree reinforced the connection between territory and heritage, geography and history. More important, however, was the religious interpretation of the cedar tree, which was described in these publications as the biggest and most beautiful plant, created by God as a testimony to the special, benevolent attention he reserved for the land of Lebanon as part of the sacred geography of the Holy Land. The cedar tree features in the Song of Songs (5:15), where it is said about one of the two lovers that "his countenance is as Lebanon, excellent as the cedars," while the bride is defined as "a fountain of gardens, a well of living waters, and streams from Lebanon" (4:15), but also like "the lily among thorns" (2:2). Maronite tradition reads the song as an allegory of the relationship between Christ and the Maronite Church, besieged by heretics and infidels,[54] whereas Christian nationalist discourses by the end of the 1970s read the song in terms of the relationship between God and Lebanon.

A few decades earlier, Charles Corm waxed lyrical about the mystical halo of the cedar tree, which he saw as suggesting nobility, majesty, and sturdy perseverance in the face of marauding armies and invading empires which invariably crumbled at its feet. In *La Montagne inspirée*, cedars incarnate the power of resilience based on Christian values and the merits of a rural, modest life (in opposition to the decadence and miscegenation of city life). The cedar is both the image and the metaphor of Wadi Qadisha, the heartland of the Maronites and the holy valley of the monks who fled their lands of origin and retreated to the furthest mountains to preserve their faith and identity.[55]

All these religious images and symbols reinforce the connection with the land and the political claims attached to it, leaving a distinctly Christian stamp on the Christian Lebanese nationalist discourse about the landscape.

54 Salibi, *A House of Many Mansions*, 72.

55 Sassine, "Le libanisme maronite," 142–43.

Images of the Leader: Charisma and Sainthood

In this section, I would like to show how religious images are equally powerful in the construction and legitimization of charismatic leaders.

Throughout the twentieth century, the political arena in present-day

Fig. 10. 44 years at the service of Lebanon. Photograph © Pierre Sadek. Collection Karl Bassil.

Lebanon has been defined by client politics around urban and rural notables, who usually drew (and continue to draw) their power and legitimacy from inheritance, familial relationships, personal patrimony, and a strong bond with their territory of origin.[56]

In the Christian context, notables, or *zuʿamāʾ* as they are called in local parlance, often encountered stiff opposition from the Maronite Church, whose lower clergy and monastic orders had sympathized with peasant uprisings since the nineteenth century,[57] and from mass-based parties as a result of urbanization in the twentieth century.[58] Since the 1930s, mass parties, mostly supported by students, lower-middle class employees, and professionals, and recently urbanized manual laborers, presented themselves as the champions of the common folk and the only alternative to the notables.[59]

The Christian nationalist parties presented themselves as the heralds of modernity and, at the same time, the gatekeepers of tradition. On the one hand, they exhibited the features of a modern nationalist mass-based party, in contrast to the quasi-feudal landlords and their clientele; on the other hand, they staunchly referred to the values and doctrine of the Maronite Church, of which they aspired to become the temporal representatives.[60]

In the case of Pierre al-Jumayyil, the founder of the Lebanese Phalanges Party, and his son Bashir, arguably the most iconic representative of Christian nationalism in Lebanon, the political ideology was centered along two main axes: on the one hand, an idea of the nation as a community of will, with its specific "mission" or "cause" (*qaḍiyyah*) inferred by a teleological interpretation of history; on the other hand, a positioning that is defined as "popular" (*šaʿabī*), but that could more properly be labeled as populist or *völkisch*, standing in contrast with the perceived elitism of traditional politics and calling for the establishment of a strong (*qāwī*) state.[61]

Both Pierre and Bashir al-Jumayyil combined populism with a cult of youthfulness, virility, and physical vigor, which mirrored the spiritual vigor of a rejuvenated Christian community, eventually woke, united, and brimming with awareness (*waʿī*).[62] Ostentations of *machismo* and military hierarchy coexisted with the cult of the leader, especially when it helped to mobilize disenfranchised youth in urban peripheries.[63]

The charismatic legitimization of the leader in the Lebanese Christian arena has been understood as a relationship between leader and followers based on the defense of the national cause and the desire to build an affective community. In a poster created by Pierre Sadek for the Lebanese Phalanges Party, Pierre al-Jumayyil is portrayed as a stylized profile against a darker background. His body is crossed by two flags: one is the national flag of Lebanon; the other bears the logo of the party, but the red stripes of the national flag morph into streams and drops of blood, suggesting a notion of self-sacrifice at the expense of one own's life that is reinforced by the caption, proudly celebrating "forty-four years at the service of Lebanon." (Fig. 10)

The leader needn't be a winner all the time. His defeats and troubles mirror the nation's predicament and can be framed through registers and images that evoke the Passion and Resurrection of Christ. In a 1983 poster, the portrait of Pierre al-Jumayyil is superimposed over a botched image of the statue of *Yasūʿ al-malik* (Christ the King), which hovers above the bay of Jounieh, the Christian stronghold to which many Christians fled from Beirut during the civil war.[64] The caption in Arabic

56
This dimension of Lebanese politics has been studied across different geographies and sectarian affiliations. See in Michael Johnson, *Class and Client in Beirut: the Sunni Muslim Community and the Lebanese State 1840–1985* (London: Ithaca Press, 1986); Michael Gilsenan, *Lords of the Lebanese Marches: Violence and Narrative in an Arab Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); and Tamara Chalabi, *The Shi'is of Jabal 'Amil and the New Lebanon: Community and Nation-State, 1918–1943* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006).

57
Arturo Marzano, *Terra laica. La religione e i conflitti in Medio Oriente* (Roma: Viella, 2022), 102–15.

58
Melhem Chaoul, "Zahlé : de la *za'âma* nationale à la *za'âma* dépendante," in *Leaders et partisans au Liban*, ed. Franck Mermier and Sabrina Mervin (Paris: Karthala, 2012), 435–59. For a thorough analysis of notable-based politics in the city of Zahlah, see also Arnold Hottinger, "Zu'amā' and Parties in the Lebanese Crisis of 1958," *Middle East Journal* 15, no. 2 (1961): 127–40; Peter Gubser, "The *Zu'amā'* of Zaḥlah: The Current Situation in a Lebanese Town," *Middle East Journal* 27, no. 2 (1973): 173–89.

59
Dylan Baun, *Winning Lebanon: Youth Politics, Populism, and the Production of Sectarian Violence, 1920–1958* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 22–70.

60
Emma Aubin-Boltanski, "Samir Geagea : le guerrier, le martyr et le *za'îm*," in *Leaders et partisans au Liban*, ed. Franck Mermier and Sabrina Mervin (Paris: Karthala, 2012), 57–80.

61
Christian Thuselt, "Milizen als Surrogat eines dysfunktionales Staates: Das Beispiel der 'Lebanese

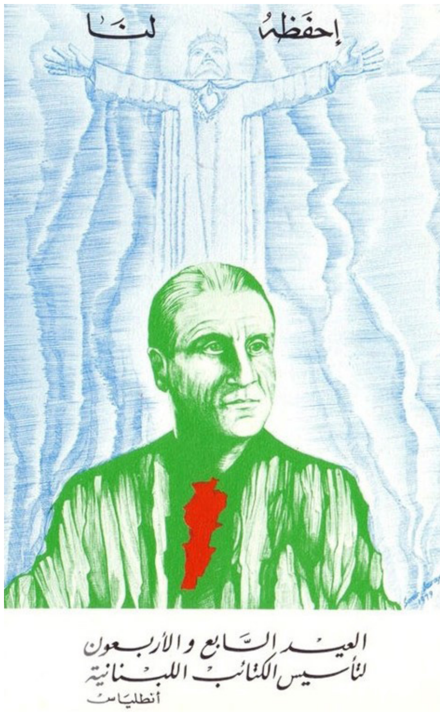

Fig. 11. Preserve it for us . . . The forty-seventh anniversary of the foundation of the Lebanese Phalanges. Collection Wassim Jabre.

Fig. 12. 14 September. Photograph © Raidy. Collection Zeina Maasri.

can be translated in multiple ways. It might be interpreted as "Protect him for our sake," where the faithful ask Jesus to protect Pierre al-Jumayyil. However, it could also be interpreted as "Protect it for our sake," meaning Lebanon. In this case, the addressee might be Jesus or Pierre al-Jumayyil himself. Whereas the statue of Jesus displays what in Catholic iconography is referred to as the Sacred Heart, the leader is shown as literally having the entirety of Lebanon in lieu of his heart. (Fig. 11)

The relevance of religious symbolism, in particular in the Maronite tradition, in the process of iconizing the leader can be fully appreciated in the case of the late President Bashir al-Jumayyil. According to Haugbølle, the particularity of the constructed image of Bashir al-Jumayyil lies in the ubiquity of references to the cedar (in the sense explained earlier) and the cross of Christ, which allows Christian right-wing propaganda to depict him as the sacrificial lamb.[65] There is a plethora of audiovisual sources, whose modes of fruition are important in Haugbølle's analysis as much as their content. Such sources feed into a veneration of the leader that is full of explicit references and implicit subtexts of a religious nature: the death of Bashir al-Jumayyil echoes the Passion of Christ, and revivifying his political message means the rebirth of the Christian Lebanese identity. Bashir al-Jumayyil was assassinated on September 14, 1982. A poster produced for the anniversary of his death shows the leader's face inside a cone of light that is projected from heaven onto the land of Lebanon against a very dark and slightly menacing background. Even if there are no explicit references to God, the composition of the scene is reminiscent of Catholic (and Orthodox) images of the Baptism and the Transfiguration of Jesus. (Fig. 12)

The parallelism of Jesus and Bashir al-Jumayyil is taken to the extreme in a poster drawn by political cartoonist Pierre Sadek in 1982, where the assassinated leader is shown wearing a crown of thorns, just like Jesus along the Way of the Cross. The thorns are in fact a form of stylized lettering of the word *Lubnān* ("Lebanon"), with the dots of the Arabic letters

Forces,' " *Sicherheit und Frieden (S+F) / Security and Peace* 53, no. 4 (2015): 193–99.

62
Aulas, "The Socio-Ideological Development of the Maronite Community."

63
Frank Stoakes, "The Supervigilantes: The Lebanese Kataeb Party as a Builder, Surrogate and Defender of the State," *Middle Eastern Studies* 11, no. 3 (1975): 215–36.

64
Patrick E. Tyler, "Pressures Threaten Christian Lebanon's Calm," *The Washington Post*, March 5, 1987, accessed March 21, 2023, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1987/03/05/pressures-threaten-christian-lebanons-calm/9d5b16f7-bce1-4873-be88-463e1fe55968/.

65
Sune Haugbølle, "The Secular Saint. Iconography and Ideology in the Cult of Bashir Jumayil," in *Politics of Worship in the Contemporary Middle East: Sainthood in Fragile States*, ed. Andreas Bandak and Mikkel Bille (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 191–212.

bā' and *nūn* rendered as drops of blood. (Fig. 13)

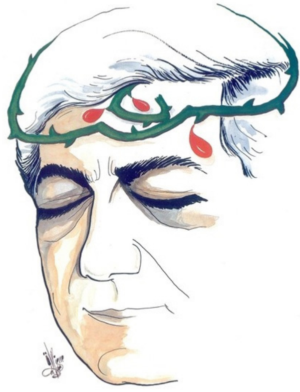

Fig. 13. Lebanon. Photograph © Pierre Sadek. Collection Wassim Jabre.

The (male) leader can be an exceptional individual who is praised for his qualities, virtues, and achievements, but most importantly he is seen as the person who embodies the aspirations and feelings of his entire constituency. It is for this reason that hagiographies of leaders are often composed through the register of continuing "the dream" (*ḥulm*), meaning the more idealistic political aspirations of the Christian constituency, in contrast with an economic and political reality that seems either depressing or dysfunctional.[66] It is therefore not surprising that many posters celebrate or call for the continuation of the *masīrah*, which can be literally translated as "procession," but in political contexts is more often associated with the political path of the party, especially when it is involved in highly contentious and conflictual politics. In a poster commissioned by the Lebanese Forces in April 1983, the assassinated leader appears to be participating in a sort of relay race, passing a weapon as if it were a baton to a nondescript fighter who can nevertheless be identified as a member of the Lebanese Forces because of the delta sign on his equipment. (Fig. 14)

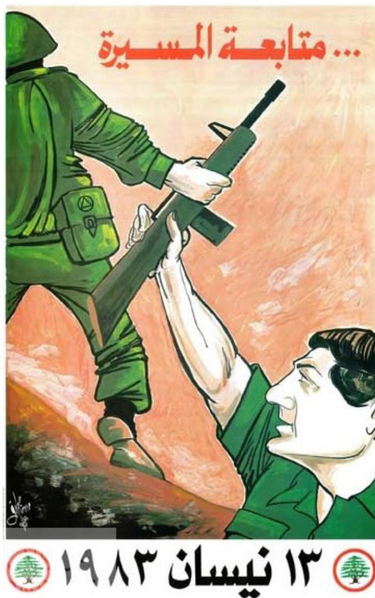

Fig. 14. The procession goes on . . . 13 April 1983. Photograph © Pierre Sadek. Collection Wassim Jabre.

The images of wartime posters are largely consistent with considerations raised in later case studies of political anthropology in the Lebanese Christian context. This area of research shows how the practices of commemoration of Lebanese Christian leaders still draw on the symbolic repertoire of Christianity in Lebanon, with a particular emphasis on the images of the two fighting saints, George and Elias, who stand out as nationalist symbols against foreign enemies and invaders.

The image of Samir Ja'ja', for example, combines elements of deep mysticism, messianic anxieties, and a rhetoric based on notions of mission and martyrdom.[67] At once a hardened warlord and a devout Christian, Ja'ja' seemingly projects an image of sainthood that, in line with the traditions and perceptions of Eastern Christianity, can alternate military assertiveness with monachal ascesis.[68] Ja'ja', who often boasted about his humble social and geographical origins to differentiate himself from the elites, is often compared to the "resistants" of the nineteenth century, like the monk Ephrem;[69] the mystic peasant Taniyus Shahin, who led the anti-feudal peasant uprising in 1858; and the "saint of the mountain," Charbel Makhlouf, who has been venerated since the 1950s as a Christian and national icon who embodies the essence of Maronitism.

According to Heyberger, the relatively recent construction of the cult of Charbel Makhlouf is extremely important in what he calls the consecration of Maronite identity. The veneration of this saint appears largely influenced by the counter-revolutionary religiosity of rural France at the end of the nineteenth century, and is largely sustained by the nationalist and spiritualist thought of Maurice Barrès. Notions of ascesis, suffering, and martyrdom are compared with, and connected to the history of the Christians of Lebanon, and in particular of the Maronites, who are imagined as being a mountain fortress always at risk of subjugation and assimilation. The rhetoric of the land and its roots strengthens the idea of Lebanon as a bulwark for Christians, who supposedly enjoy a privileged relationship with the land and therefore should have a superior political status. The cult of Saint Charbel, in Heyberger's analysis, stands at the crossroads between religion, territory, and identity, providing a sense of destiny for the country and its leading component.[70]

A fusion of charismatic, populist, and messianic tropes also comes through in the interviews conducted by Lefort[71] with a sample of militants

66
Thuselt, "Milizen als Surrogat eines dysfunktionales Staates."

67
Formerly a militia leader who rose through the ranks of the Lebanese Forces and became its leader in the middle of the 1980s, Samir Ja'ja' was jailed between 1994 and 2005 and, since then, has been the leader of the Lebanese Forces refashioned as a political party within the "14 March" coalition.

68
Aubin-Boltanski, "Samir Geagea : le guerrier, le martyr et le *za'īm*."

and supporters of Michel Aoun.[72] His followers often portray him as a man of providence, a popular leader who fights for reinstating a sovereign state as an alternative to armed militias and against the interference of foreign governments. The tragic events of the so-called (and ill-fated) "war of liberation" against the Lebanese Forces and the Syrian army between March 1989 and October 1990 are read in a frame of death and rebirth, where Aoun's lifetime events evoke the ancient Near Eastern and Greek myth of Tammuz/Adonis and the Passion of Christ. Many followers ascribe to their leader an almost prophetic ability to read the historical and political trends, and to anticipate the strategic choices that can inaugurate a better future for the Christians of Lebanon. The nature of "savior" (*muḫalliṣ*) that some followers ascribe to Aoun is connected with their hope for a renewed strength of Lebanon's Christians vis-à-vis the (real or perceived) threats represented by the final implantation of Palestinian and Syrian refugees, or the rise of Islamist militant groups. Despite its sovereignist and allegedly anti-sectarian agenda, the discourse among many of Aoun's followers is therefore replete with markedly sectarian perceptions and contents. At the same time, according to Abirached,[73] Aoun's political path shows how a charismatic relationship might play out in a different temporality than one based on electoral cycles and short-term notions of victory and defeat. From this perspective, charisma in politics seems to be grounded not in the actual achievements of the leaders or their individual qualities, but in their ability to activate or reactivate political boundaries that allow the members of the group to perceive themselves as parts of a full political subjectivity.

It has been argued that the construction of an imagined emotional proximity helps to reanimate the relationship between the masses and the leader, to project individual anxieties and expectations into a collective dimension, and to develop a poetics of hope that feeds the *emotionale Vergemeinschaftung* ("emotional community-building") that Weber sees as the core of charismatic authority.[74]

What is specific to the Lebanese Christian nationalist discourse is how these dimensions of leadership cult and this construction of the imagined community are solidly framed by religious images and concepts that can be powerfully evoked and mobilized. However, it would be misleading, in my opinion, to understand this process as an instance of permanence of primordial religious identities. As I showed earlier, the construction of nationalist doctrines in Lebanon is a modern phenomenon that is largely connected with the rise and development of nationalist ideas in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe. Religious and, in this specific case, Christian images and themes are used as a language that is deployed by nationalist politics in times of frenetic change and uncertainty.

In line with the conclusions proposed by Karaömerlioğlu in his analysis of the political thought of Nurettin Topçu and his doctrine of Anatolianism,[75] I argue that the particular connection of nationalist and religious tropes in the Christian Lebanese context is not merely an obsolete and primordial political narrative that is created by new rising elites, but rather a modern and seductive manifestation of powerful dynamics. This intersection of nationalist and religious tropes, as shown earlier through posters and other images, feeds off territoriality, defined as the defense of a land and the political use of geography, and belonging, through the use of selective memory and the creation of narrative arcs that involve a supposed golden era then decay, crisis, salvation, and rebirth.

69 Michel Yunus, "Qiṣṣah niḍāl rawwat arḍ al-arz" [The story of a fight for the land of the cedars], Lebanese-forces.com, July 20, 2021, accessed October 9, 2022, https://www.lebanese-forces.com/2021/07/20/christian-struggle-lebanon/.

70 Heyberger, "Saint Charbel Makhlouf, ou la consécration de l'identité maronite."

71 Bruno Lefort, "Répresentations du leadership et memoires vives chez les militants aounistes," in *Leaders et partisans au Liban*, ed. Franck Mermier and Sabrina Mervin (Paris: Karthala, 2012), 219–62.

72 Michel Aoun served as President of Lebanon between October 31, 2016, and October 30, 2022. He was previously the leader of the Free Patriotic Movement, a party affiliated with the "8 March" coalition.

73 Philippe Abirached, "Charisme, pouvoir et communauté politique : la figure de Michel Aoun," in *Leaders et partisans au Liban*, ed. Franck Mermier and Sabrina Mervin (Paris: Karthala, 2012), 33–55.

74 Hinnerk Bruhns, "Le charisme en politique : idée seduisante ou concept pertinent ?", *Cahiers du Centre de recherches historiques* 24 (2000).

75 M. Asım Karaömerlioğlu, "The Role of Religion and Geography in Turkish Nationalism: The Case of Nurettin Topçu," in *Spatial Conceptions of the Nation: Modernizing Geographies in Greece and Turkey*, ed. P. Nikiforos Diamandouros, Thalia Dragonas and Çağlar Keyder (London: I. B: Tauris, 2010), 93–109.

Conclusion

In Lebanon, within the current sectarian political system and social paradigm, Christian nationalism appears as a wide spectrum of discourses and practices that ostensibly aim at defending the national identity and the political integrity of Lebanon. These discourses and practices thereby continue to define the sense of belonging to the nation and its history along sectarian lines (in this case, being Christian).

Religiously infused images and symbols play a central role in the fruition and circulation of all these Christian nationalist discourses. Themes taken from the Ancient Testament, the Gospels, or the cult of saints in local traditions and devotional practices are powerfully deployed in three main domains: the celebration of local geography (space), the celebration of local history (time), and the celebration of the connection between the group and its leader (emotional community-building).

One of the limits of much of the existing literature on sectarianism and sectarianization in Lebanon is, in my opinion, its more or less conscious appeal to Lebanese exceptionalism, as if the political developments in the country were something unique and bizarre. Even when the theoretical premises are different, this assumption of Lebanese exceptionalism ends up reinforcing primordialist understandings of the country's history, identities, and identity politics.[76]

When we look at Lebanon's sectarian politics not as an exceptional local phenomenon predicated on primordial identities and topographies, but rather as an assemblage of different political doctrines, as well as an entanglement between religious identities, nationalism, capitalist modernization, class conflict, and formation of new elites, we have the opportunity to develop a more nuanced analysis of Lebanese history, with the chance to stimulate an enriching conversation with the histories of nationalisms and identity-building processes in post-Ottoman territories such as Turkey, Greece, and Cyprus.

I think, among many other examples, at the category of Muslim nationalism provided by Zürcher in his analysis of the political vocabulary of Turkey's early republican leadership, whose definition of nationhood was still defined and gatekept along religious lines in the early 1920s;[77] or at the nexus between religion and nationalism in the *Türk-İslam sentezi* doctrine of the late 1970s in Turkey's right-wing milieus;[78] or at the combination of Zionist nationalism and Orthodox Judaism in the *Tziyonut datit* (Religious Zionism) and the *dati leumi* ("religious national") political camp in Israel.[79]

The power of the intersection of religious imagery and nationalism, as this article aimed to show, and the heuristic relevance of its study lies in the fact that it helps to explain the inconsistencies of nationalist and sectarian discourses.[80]

The map of the imagined community and its political structure can change over time, and its leaders can change tactics and alliances. What ultimately matters is the utopian and redemptive character of the nationalist project, its sacralization of land, and the tension between doom and rebirth that founds the mobilizational dimension of politics.

Whether through the ubiquitous reference to the Cross, the Passion of Christ, or other established Christian iconography, the religious images in the Lebanese Christian nationalist discourse reinforce a utopian dimension and establish a parallelism between the Christian constituency and its leaders, on the one hand, and Jesus Christ, on the other. The images

76 Rosita Di Peri, Francesco Mazzucotelli, *Guida alla politica mediorientale* (Milano: Mondadori Università, 2021), 49–56.

77 Erik-Jan Zürcher, "The Vocabulary of Muslim Nationalism," *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 137 (1999), 81–92.

78 Banu Eligür, *The Mobilization of Political Islam in Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 93–134.

79 Ezra Kopelowitz, "Religious Politics and Israel's Ethnic Democracy," *Israel Studies* 6, no. 3 (2001): 166–90.

80 Anastasia Stouraiti, Alexander Kazamias, "The Imaginary Topographies of the *Megali Idea*: National Territory as Utopia," in *Spatial Conceptions of the Nation: Modernizing Geographies in Greece and Turkey*, ed. P. Nikiforos Diamandouros, Thalia Dragonas and Çağlar Keyder (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010), 161–80.

that were discussed in this article do not merely have an aesthetic value; they produce meanings, and are meant to reinforce the connection with the land, as well as the legitimacy of the leader, portrayed as the savior, founder, and binder of the community. Religious images provide a powerful device of legitimization and mobilization, even when they can be manipulative and used instrumentally for narrow political purposes that might very well be at odds with the actual content of the messages and core beliefs of the corresponding religion.