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Notes au bas des pages.


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THE DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF LEBANON AS AN ETHNIC AND NATIONAL SPACE.
CASE STUDY: PATRIARCH SFEIR’S SPEECH AT OXFORD

DR TALAL WEHBÉ
Associate Professor - USEK

On October 31, 2003, the Maronite Patriarch, Nasralla Sfeir, delivered a lecture at the University of Oxford in the UK. The topic is announced in the introduction as “the Maronite Church and its contribution to the Muslim-Christian coexistence in Lebanon”.

Considering the eminent position of the Patriarch, and the comprehensive and representational nature of the lecture, it is quite relevant for a discourse analyst who is studying nationalism to explore the Patriarch’s lecture in a case study, since a case study is “good for showing how something happens or works in a real life situation” (Kane & Bruno, p. 215). From a discourse analysis perspective, the study of texts is “part of social science” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 14), and the usage of discursive strategies is undoubtedly part of “real life”.

According to the literature on nationalism, the use of ethnic features to define nations’ identities is not at all an unfamiliar process. Since nations are not only

1. I thank Dr Rosie Ghannage for the fruitful discussions I had with her on the subject.
“constructed” materially, but symbolically as well, and this is commonly constructed through the use of ethnic features (Spencer & Wollman, 2005, p.10), the Patriarch’s lecture is a good example of symbolic construction of the Lebanese nation. The process of symbolic construction is necessarily selective. However, the selection developed in the Patriarch’s lecture is an open one: a shared national identity may be unfolded within the scope of the Patriarch’s discursive construction of Lebanon as an ethnic and national space.

According to Richard Handler, author of Nationalism and the Politics of Culture in Quebec, “a nation is bounded –that is precisely delimited- in space and time” (cited in Zuelow, 2002). The focus of this paper is the Patriarch’s discourse on the Lebanese space, a national space which cannot be defined without direct reference to its historical transformation through the present time and beyond.

It is noticeable in the Patriarch’s speech that before he starts talking about the Maronites in particular, he considers relevant to refer to two spatial units: “Antioch” and “Lebanon”. Sanctity is a common feature shared by both spaces. Antioch is described as “the Mother Church…” and Lebanon as “holy”. The spatial features and sacred dimension of the “Mother church” and Lebanon are mainly developed in the first two sections of the Patriarch’s lecture (see Appendix).¹

A content analysis of the first two sections, based on a coding (see the definition of “coding” in Burns, 2000, pp. 432-433) that contains two general classifying categories, spatial features and holiness, allows us to uncover the roots of a complex link established in Sfeir’s lecture between the Maronites and Lebanon, between an ethnic identity and a national one². I use what is commonly

1. The Patriarch’s lecture has 10 sections titled as follows: Anticoh, the Mother Church of the Levantine Christianity (I), Lebanon Holy Land (II), The Origins of Maronites (III), The Maroniates and the Arab Muslim Rulers (IV), During and After the Ottoman Rule (V), Role of the Maronite Church in Oriental Cultural Renaissance (VI), The Role of Maronites and Christians in Shaping Modern Lebanon (VII), Tragedies and Disasters of the Lebanese War on Both Christians and Muslims (VIII), The Taif Accord (IX), Looking to the Future (X).

2. The rest of the patriarch’s lecture explains the emergence of the Maronite Church in North Syria (Part III), its situation under the Arab Muslim Rulers, how its members interacted with and were affected by the Crusades (part IV) and the Ottoman empire (part V), and their role in ‘Oriental cultural Renaissance’ (part VI) and ‘in shaping modern Lebanon as a nation (part VII). The last three sections of the Patriarch’s lecture describe the Lebanese war that “broke
accepted in the literature on nationalism about the complex relation between ethnicities and nationalism to uncover how, from the Patriarch’s perspective, holiness is implicated in the discursive construction of Lebanon as an ethnic and national space.

ANTIOCH AND LEBANON

The Patriarch spells out spatial features that participate in defining a religious community, i.e. the Maronites; and establishes, in religious terms, the basic features of the identity of a contemporary spatial unit that has become a nation, i.e. Lebanon. This may be considered as a “natural” prelude to the perception of Modern Lebanon as a nation built mainly on the historical entanglement of spatial and religious components.

The Patriarch deems relevant to go back to 300 BC to start defining the Maronite Church. The elementary spatial unit involved in that definition is Antioch. It is distinguished by historical events that transform it into a significant spatial unit. It is also defined in the heading of the first part -textually, a prominent position- as the place of “the Mother Church of the Levantine Christianity”. In a less prominent position, Antioch is identified by geographical features: “... a city 12 miles from Mediterranean sea...”, and its political importance in the ancient world: “... built by Seleucus around 300 B.C... capital of Seleucid Kingdom... capital of Syria Prima” (par. I.1). The Patriarch’s perception of Antioch as a spatial support for the development of “the first Christian community” (par. I.2), “the capital of the church in the Orient” (par. I.3) and the “capital of the church in the Levant” (Ibid), leads to labeling it ‘the Mother of the Levantine Christianity’.

After setting up the greatness of Antioch in the political and religious history of the Levant, the Patriarch relates it to two other spatial units, Damascus and Lebanon. The connection between the three spaces is explicitly mentioned in the Patriarch’s lecture: “Antioch was also the seat of a patriarchate..., but since the beginning of the second millennium A.D. its Patriarch resides alternately in Damascus and Lebanon” (par. I.3).

We may say that in a sense, symbolically, the glory attributed in the lecture to Antioch is transferred, via the displacement of Antioch’s Patriarch, to Damascus and Lebanon. The aforementioned patriarchate establishes a prominent human link between Antioch, Damascus and Lebanon: the two latter

out in 1975” and the socio-economic destruction it caused (parts VIII and X) and the constitutional changes that ended the war (part IX).
spatial units become able to share between them Antioch’s glory, or at least the fruits of that glory.

It is, however, puzzling to a certain extent to see the Patriarch mentioning Damascus (a city) and Lebanon (a country), and not Damascus and the specific Lebanese cities or towns where Antioch’s Patriarch resides “since the beginning of the second millennium A.D.”. The practical reason might be that Antioch’s Patriarch did not always reside in the same Lebanese town or city. Therefore, one might say that symbolically the holiness of Antioch was spread over the whole Lebanese territory.

**THE SACRED FEATURE OF LEBANON’S IDENTITY**

Significantly, the second section of the speech is titled “Lebanon Holy Land”. Lebanon is presented as belonging to three different spatial units, the Arab World —“unique in the Arab World” (par. II.1), the Land of Phoenicia —“Lebanon is a part of the Land of Phoenicia” (par. II.2), and the Holy Land —“Lebanon is an integral part of the Holy Land” (par. II.6).

Two relatively long paragraphs (II.5, II.6) develop consecutively the early spread of Christianity in Lebanon—the Patriarch refers to the Christ’s visit to Tyre and cites a number of quotes from the Bible where Lebanon is mentioned, while the conquest of Lebanon by “the Egyptians, the Persians, the Greeks, the Romans, and then the Arabs, the Crusaders and the Turks” (par. II.3) is mentioned but left undeveloped.

Reference to Lebanon as a part of the Arab World is done in the context of explaining the natural ‘beauty and might’ (par. II.1) of the Lebanese land, while it is referred to Lebanon as a part of the Land of Phoenicia to credit it with the historic glory of Phoenician cities. Lebanon’s natural “beauty and might” and its Phoenician heritage are developed, consecutively, in the first two paragraphs of the second section —“Lebanon Holy Land”, which suggests that they are two main pillars of Lebanon as a nation.

In the fourth paragraph of the second section, Lebanon is presented as geographically “located between the sea and the desert”, and this location is integrated into a comparison where the aforementioned location is compared to “the Roman mythology god Janis with two faces”: the latter is, in literary terms, the vehicle, Lebanon the tenor, and ‘bringing together’ two different matters, ‘western and oriental civilizations’, the explored resemblance. In the same paragraph, ‘Beirut’ and three other smaller spatial units – markets, domes of churches and minarets of mosques, are mentioned to explain the resemblance; for the same purpose, generic reference is made to ‘European city’ and ‘Arab
city’. Holding together two different civilizations is another key feature of Lebanon’s identity.

However, considering that the title of the second section refers to Lebanon as a holy land, and the two longest paragraphs in the same section develop the perception of Lebanon as a holy land, one may say that holiness is, from the Patriarch’s perspective, the most prominent of four features of Lebanon as a nation. Three of them are primordial: being holy, being part of the Arab World and the Land of Phoenicia, and one is relatively recent: “bringing together” two civilizations. Lebanon as a nation inherits holiness from Lebanon as a land that witnessed the rise of Christianity. Holiness is the primordial feature of an ethnic identity promoted to the most prominent primordial feature of the Lebanese land and nation.

FROM ETHNIC TO NATIONAL IDENTITY: ‘THE COEXISTENCE OF CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS’

The Patriarch deems relevant to deal in a single topic, and text, with a Church —’the Maronite Church’, two communities defined by their faith —’Christians and Muslims’, a type of social relation between them —“coexistence”, and a country (par. VII.2). More abstractly, he refers to a religious organization and/or community, two coexistent ethnicities, and a space.

One may find in the following noun phrase, from the seventh paragraph of the third section of the speech, the main reason for linking these four elements together: ‘... the Maronite Syriac Antiochian Church which played a major and special role in shaping the identity of Modern Lebanon’. It is significant that this noun phrase has the noun ‘Church’ as head, while ‘Maronite’, ‘Syriac’, ‘Antiochian’ and the relative clause ‘which played a major and special role in shaping the identity of Modern Lebanon’ are all modifiers of ‘Church’. This latter is modified by a person’s name (Saint Maroun), a culture of origin (‘Syriac’), a space of origin (Antioch), and a reference to past events that “played a major and special role” in shaping the identity of a specific space: a country, a nation —I might say. The use of ‘modern’ in the quote is also significant: a church loaded with an ancient heritage has participated in shaping a modern nation, which implies a specific perception of the relation between the past, present, and future, a belief that continuity through time may be based on attributing a prominent role to religious factors. It also implies a specific relation between the formation of two ethnicities, Christians and Muslims, as a background for the formation of a nation, Lebanon. The symbolic construction of nations has to draw “on deep reservoirs of feeling, on a sense of identity that has a long history” (Spencer & Wollman, 2005, p.4). In modernist terms, a
nation is “a named human population sharing a historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members” (Smith, 2005, p. 24).

The Patriarch’s lecture suggests that the features of the Lebanese nation that originate in Christianity, or in the history of Christian and Maronite communities, are only partially defining Lebanon’s identity. Other defining features have their origin in the history of Muslims’ presence in Lebanon. One might say that the construction of “a shared history” for all the ethnic groups in Lebanon is an ongoing process (see the example of Mauritius Island in Eriksen, 2005, p. 145).

Beyond defining Lebanon in reference to the past and present times, in the last paragraph of his lecture the Patriarch proposes what we may call a *moral directive* for the survival of Lebanon as a nation. He says ‘In my view, the only choice left for the Lebanese People is to keep Lebanon as a country of freedom, coexistence and understanding, with the help of all friendly nations’.

To look at things from the Patriarch’s viewpoint, we may say that in a sense the connection between Lebanon’s primordial identity as a holy land and its present time is still missing or incomplete. The priority of holiness assigns the Maronite Church a prominent role in ‘shaping modern Lebanon’ and its culture, and will hopefully make a successful contribution in an expanded social implementation of Lebanon’s holiness, in shaping it for good as ‘a country of freedom, coexistence and understanding’ (par. X.2).

**CONCLUSION**

This paper focuses on the discursive construction, in the Maronite Patriarch’s lecture, of Lebanon as an ethnic space for the Maronite Church, and a national space for all Lebanese. The Patriarch refers to the Bible and the history of Christianity to characterize Lebanon as holy; the Maronite Church is also holy, and participates in making Lebanon Holy.

More abstractly, we may say that our human perception and representation of the spatial units called nations may be highly conditioned by, and interactive with, our perception and representation of our ethnic identity and the priorities we establish among the features of that identity. Giving priority to the religious features of our identity in defining the ethnic community we belong to is likely to result in prioritizing religious features, such as holiness, in defining the nation we belong to.
However, reference to Lebanon in the Patriarch’s lecture “as a country of freedom, coexistence and understanding” may be understood as a will to construct Lebanon, in the first place, as a civic nation—rather than an ethnic one, where ethnic features would be subordinated to “legal and political norms”, i.e. equality of citizens before the law and equality in political rights (Spencer & Wollman, 2005, p. 12).

APPENDIX

_The first two sections of the Maronite Patriarch, His Beatitude Mar Nasrallah Boutros Sfeir’s lecture (I added the paragraph numbers)_:

Mr. President, Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all, I would like to thank you for inviting me to this great cultural forum and this prestigious university, to talk about the Maronite Church and its contribution to the Muslim-Christian coexistence in Lebanon. I take this invitation as an honor for myself and for my Maronite people who emerged first in Lebanon, and have now spread all over the world. I would like to take the opportunity to send my greetings to them now and to the Lebanese who chose to live in this deep-rooted city, after some of them suffered from the war, which broke out on Lebanese territory seventeen years ago.

I. ANTIOCH, THE MOTHER CHURCH OF THE LEVANTINE CHRISTIANITY

1. Antioch is a city about 12 miles from the Mediterranean sea, located in the north of ancient Syria, now Antakya in the Southwest of modern Turkey. Antioch was built by Seleucus I Nicator around 300 B.C. and it was named after his father Antiochus. Antioch was the capital of Seleucid kingdom, then an imperial residence. It became the third most important city of the Roman Empire after Rome and Alexandria, and it established itself as the capital of Syria Prima.

2. The first Christian community started With Saint Paul who visited Antioch (Acts 13: 13-14), and it became his home base for missionary activities. Saint Luke records that some of the persecuted Christians moved from Jerusalem to Phoenicia, Syria and Antioch (Acts 11: 19-20). Antioch also enjoyed the visit of Saint Peter, who was afraid to be associated with the Gentiles of the city (Galatians 2: 11-13). Antioch established itself as a church, and it was there that the earliest followers of Jesus Christ were called “Christians” for the first time (Acts 11: 26). So Antioch was a very
important centre during the initial spreading of the Gospel, located as it was along the road from Jerusalem to Rome.

3. Antioch was the capital of the church in the Orient, but from around 415 A.D. it has become the capital of the church in the Levant, which includes, geographically, Syria Lebanon, and Iraq. Antioch was also the seat of a patriarchate, one the oldest patriarchates in the Christian world, but since the beginning of the second millennium A.D. its Patriarch resides alternately in Damascus and Lebanon. However, the Patriarchate of Antioch has suffered from many schisms, which have given birth to five different Oriental Churches: the Syrian Orthodox Church (non-Chalcedonian), the Greek Orthodox Church (Chalcedonian), the Maronite Church (Chalcedonian), and the Syrian Catholic Church (Chalcedonian).

II. LEBANON HOLY LAND

1. The word Lebanon means “the white mountain”. The snow which covers its highlands from December to May gives the country its natural whiteness, unique in the Arab world. As a result, very many rivers and springs flow, lending the Lebanese landscape its special greenness which changes in harmony with the four seasons of the year. Although the high mountains breathe out fresh cold air, the Mediterranean sea, stretched out along the Lebanese coast, softens the harshness of the mountain air to produce a warm and agreeable climate. Lebanon touches the peak of its beauty and might with its magnificent cedars which can reach a height of 30 m. They are found in various places in Lebanon, especially in the highest Lebanese mountain, the Cedars’ mountain (3100 m).

2. Lebanon is a part of the Land of Phoenicia, and it was renowned for some of its old cities such as Jbeil (Byblos), Saida (Sidon) and Sour (Tyre), which were seaports and used to enjoy some form of independence. Jbeil imprinted coins bearing its name, Sidon had its own Senate, and Tyre had its own school of stoic philosophy. One of Tyre’s natives was the famous legislator Ulpianus who held the post of Supreme Judge in Rome in the beginning of the third century AD. Jbeil was famous for being the birthplace of the Alphabet where it was first developed around 2200 BC. The word “Bible”, which means ‘book, derived originally from the word “Biblos”, and thus it shares with the Phoenician city, Byblos, the same Semitic origin.

3. We do not have enough time to elaborate about Lebanon throughout the ages, but we can take a brief glimpse at Lebanon after the coming of Christ. Lebanon has been successively conquered throughout the ages by the
Egyptians, the Persians, the Greeks, the Romans, and then by the Arabs, the Crusaders and the Turks up until modern times.

4. Geographically, Lebanon is located between the sea and the desert. This is why some people say that it is like the Roman mythology god Janus with two faces, bringing together both western and oriental civilizations. Visitors to the capital Beirut can still notice that some markets make them feel that are in a European city, whereas other markets show the ethos of an Arab city. One can hear the bells ringing, in the domes of churches and, at the same time, the voices of muezzins coming out from the minarets of mosques.

5. Lebanon came to know Christianity from the age of Our Lord Jesus Christ who came to South Lebanon, particularly to Tyre and Sidon. Tyre welcomed the Christ when he arrived as a healer, teacher and miracles’ maker. He witnessed the faith of the Canaanite woman who rejoiced at the healing of her daughter (Matthew 15:21-28 and Mark 7:24-30). Moreover, the book of the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 21:3-7) tells us that St. Paul has spent several days with the first Christian Community in Tyre during his last trip to Jerusalem. The status of Saida does not differ from that of Tyre, as St. Paul stopped over to visit his Christian friends (Acts 27:3). However, these small communities started to flourish and spread out only after the middle of the second century, from which Christianity was launched to other coastal Lebanese cities, particularly to Beirut, Jbeil, Batroun and Tripoli, Thus Christianity grew in Lebanon in spite of persecutions commited by the pagans against the Christians at the time. Hundreds of them were martyred, such as: Theodosia and Christina of Tyre, Zenobius of Sidon, Aphianus of Beirut, Aquilina of Jbeil and Barbara of Baalbeck.

6. We can only say here that Lebanon is an integral part of the Holy Land as Our Lord Jesus Christ announced good news to it, and consequently it was visited by the first apostles and disciples. It is known that Lebanon was mentioned around sixty times in the Holy Bible, particularly in Isaiah who says, “the glory of Lebanon will come to you, the pine, the fir-tree and cypress together, to adorn the place of my sanctuary; and I will glorify the place of my feet” (Isaiah 60:13). In the Song of Songs he says: “come with me from Lebanon, my bride, with me from Lebanon; look from the top of Amana, from the top of Senir and Hermon, from the Lions’ dens, from the mountains of the leopards” (Songs of Songs 4:8). Besides, it was mentioned many of times in the Old Testament being the symbol of beauty, greenery and landscape which flows out blessings upon human beings (2 Kings 14:9; Psalm 72:16; Song of Songs 4:11; Isaiah 40:16; Ezekiel 17:3; Habakkuk
2:17; Hosea 14:6). Lebanon is also characterized, in the Holy Bible, by its Cedars planted by God according to the Book of Psalm (Psalm 104:16), being the symbol of glory, power and greatness (Psalm 92:13; Isaiah 35:2; Ezekiel 31:3-9; Amos 2:9).

7. Let us move on now to the Maronite Syriac Antiochian Church which played a major and special role in shaping the identity of Modern Lebanon.

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