

**The Pervasiveness of the “Sacred” in Beirut’s Public Spaces.**

**“A Preliminary Geographical Analysis”**

**Christiane SFEIR**

**Professor, Lebanese University, and research units,**

**CERDA Lebanese University**

**Abstract**

This paper aims to very briefly analyse, through geographer’s eyes, the various religious and secular actors’ strategies in their process of production of sacred spaces in Beirut, Lebanon. The eighteen Lebanese religious communities present in the country each mark Beirut’s urban landscape with religious symbols and signs that are also very often politically charged.

Our assumption is that “sacred” space cannot be limited just to religious buildings; in Beirut, it is expressed by taking over public spaces, transforming easily accessible secular loci into areas that impose rules and specific codes of behaviour.

In the city, religious events are expressed through spiritual, cultural, social and architectural venues. Beirut is marked by symbols merging politics and religion, with a regular use of religion by the media working for political parties; thus, each quarter of the city is marked by a particular political ideology that reflects the religious identity of its inhabitants through specific codes and signs.

These vary according to their geographical position and time frames. The religious affiliations of the majority of the inhabitants of a particular region impose codes that mark particular public spaces. This geography is rendered even more complex by the specific religious calendars observed by each religion: spatial “sacredness” thus begins and ends on clear-cut dates for each religion, producing specific spaces created, recognized and used differently by the various segments of the city’s population.

**Keywords:** Religion, Geography, Beirut, Lebanon, “Sacred” spaces, Politics, Scales.

### **Introduction**

Lebanon is a country in which its 18 religious communities express their history, geographic position and population numbers as a means of participating in wider Middle-Eastern political, economic and religious stakes. Having weathered internal conflicts and external interventions, the country is currently engaged in a complex ideological debate involving each religious community’s claims to a share of political, cultural and geographic space<sup>1</sup>. Their agendas are put forward through visual markers in Beirut’s urban landscape, particularly through ideological symbols and icons and also by blurring the separation between the lay and the religious.

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1 Of the thirteen Christian communities, six are in communion with Rome; four communities are Muslim. The current population is 60% Muslim and 40% Christian; the Shiites represent around 30% of the country's total population, the Maronites 25 %, the Sunnis 23%, the Greek Orthodox and Greek Catholic Churches 13%, the Druze 7%, and the Armenian Churches 2%.

The "sacred" has become central to all the Lebanese religious communities; they all rely on ill-defined ideologies in their quest to be visible and to claim a parcel of political power. This mix is pervasive, with two intermeshed variables, religion and politics, laying the foundations of the construction of urban space.

For this short paper, we have adopted Eliade's very useful, albeit now dated definition: "a form of thought from which man builds his entire cosmology" (Eliade, M., 1957). It's a substance in itself without necessarily being attached to a particular religion. As for "Religion", it does not necessarily imply a belief in the monotheistic God, but refers to the experience of the sacred; it is connected to the sacred (Otto, R., 1995) through a system of ritual behaviors and beliefs that define religion and which underpins larger ontological questions.

In the particular case of Beirut, the "religious" marks on space, such as images or statues, are intimately connected to political ideologies; they are thus closer to a form of Geography of the Sacred than to familiar Geography of Religions. However, public expressions of both religion and the numerous expressions of the sacred imprint specific identities to particular spaces. The individual scale is very rich in data: daily life, the mentality of individuals of each and every community, and clothing also point to the use of religion as markers of identity.

Our research endeavoured to collect data, covering personal objects, buildings and icons related to religious expressions in public, semi-public and private spaces<sup>2</sup>. This approach follows the directions taken by Geography since the 1990s : the geographical study of religion has altered its course from the old spheres of interest in denominational studies related to religious demography, the landscape of cimiteries and pilgrimages, to new fields linked to the politics of the sacred, community identities, and body and gender. The question is now perceived from both a global or a local point of view, importance being given to politics, ethics and theory geography (Kong, L., 1990; Anttonen, V., 2005; Tweed, T. A., 2006; Ivakhiv, A., 2006; Moyser, G., 2003) .

The survey covered places of worship and prayer, schools, universities, archaeological sites, hospitals and cemeteries belonging to a particular religion or sect, as well as more detailed surveys on specific neighbourhoods populated by various faiths, and finally individuals. On the individual level, expressions of these markers vary from the ways of speaking, clothing, or jewels worn: medals and crucifixes (for Christians), a black cube, a verse of the Qur'an in the form of a pendant (for Sunnis), or a jewel in the form of two swords (for Shiites). A survey of the icons, portraits, posters and other objects was also undertaken in the city and its outskirts; all the information was geolocated for analysis through off-the-shelf Geographical Information Systems tools. Figure 1 illustrates the location of all the religious shrines in Beirut and its suburbs, while Figure 2 maps the theoretical homogeneous religious identity of spaces polarized by these shrines.

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<sup>2</sup> A definition of these spaces in the particular context of Arab, Middle-Eastern or Lebanese cities has been largeley debated by geographers elsewhere: Davie, M., (sous dir.) 2007.

Each part of the capital's space is marked by one or several ideologies that identify, in part or in whole, the religious denomination of its inhabitants; it is often publicly expressed through visual codes and signs. While a space's identity is of course not defined exclusively by its physical characteristics, the various actors in its society, who accept and remodel it over time, collectively build it. This constant redefinition of spatial identities can eventually lead to forms of discrimination, which in turn produce differences in the form of well-defined, though moving, spatially-defined units. As an example, the Southern suburbs (named *Dahieh* by the *Beirutis*) were progressively built by Shiites fleeing war-torn Southern Lebanon or the poverty-stricken Bekaa valley over the years since the 1970s. As their numbers increased, the *Dahieh* expanded towards the city, incorporating villages and other suburbs, which were not, till then, "Shiite". The *Dahieh* finally linked up with the city, which was also spatially expanding through its own internal demographics. In the process, the *Dahieh* is now perceived as being a "Shiite territory", while the other areas of the city are "Sunni" or "Christian" (Fawaz, M., 2007; Harb, M., 2007; Khuri, F. I., 1975; Pharès, J., 1977) .

The religious community structure is embedded in all social layers that define the Lebanese population, and to which all classes seem to be attached. Social groups defined from religious communities proclaim their community identity through different social practices that vary in scale: clothing, religious items worn, rituals practiced in public spaces during religious festivals, images and statues, and finally places of worship. Our assumption is that a religious space is not just limited to religious buildings; this type of space is often expressed by the appropriation of public spaces by the inhabitants themselves, transforming "secular" spaces, open to all and indifferent to a particular religious function, into "sacred" spaces that impose specific rules and codes of behaviour first and foremost to the area's inhabitants themselves.

This research also required sorting values out of emotions, beliefs and lifestyles. Recent developments in Geography have shown the importance of signs as a system of values, including their religious dimension in space (Davie, M. F., 1992; Davie, M., 1997; Claval, P., 1978; Claval, P., 2008; Corm, G., 2009; Courtas, R. & Isambert, F.-A., 1977; Di Méo, G., 2007; Hervieu-Léger, D., 2002; Guermond, Y., 2002). In France, this issue has received particular attention by Piveteau who stressed that the analysis of ideologies was necessary in spatial analysis (Piveteau, J.-L., 2002). Kim Knott explained how religion has its place in explaining space (Knott, K., 2010): religious persons are spatially distributed according to various factors such as mission and conversion, religious growth or decline, migration and population change, war and natural disasters. In an earlier work, the same author (Knott, K., 2005) proposed a specific spatial methodology for locating religion in secular spaces, things, communities and objects. However, the inclusion of religion in Geography leads to a complex relationship between the question of subjectivity and objectivity in the Social sciences: on one hand, the study of the impact of spirituality on how humans produce and organize space cannot be free of subjectivity, while the diversity of approaches and the interference of the observer's own value-systems also lead to subjectivity. The interpretation of signs and codes related to social rituals and traditions of each religious community all lead to the real, the imaginary and the symbolic dimensions proposed by the structuralist posture (Defoor, A., 1999).

While this may not be a major conceptual and methodological problem for post-modern Anglo-Saxon geographers, it explains the reluctance of many French geographers to explore this field.

The paucity of research on sacred or religious spaces in Lebanon, or the reluctance to investigate the subject derives from the fact that many geographers in this country graduated from French universities, in which the question of religion has been shunted aside because of the debate on *laïcité*. However, many non-geographers have worked on the anthropological and social aspects of religion, striving to understand the social effects on human behaviour when religion is linked to politics in Lebanon (Mervin, S., 2005; Sassoubre, C. B., 2008; Mermier, F., 2008, Mermier, F., 2009); Roula Talhouk's (Talhouq, R., 2011) and Robert Benedicty's works on rural sites (Benedicty, R., 1986, 2010) also examined the inter-religious relationships in respect to spatial variables. Elsewhere, a preliminary cartographic approach to the question of space and religion has been published (Homsy, G. &Gottwalles, 2008).

Our own approach is systemic, postulating that religion and politics in Beirut are linked through an abstract agreement, a negotiation, with each depending on the other according to particular social situations and stakes that produce concrete, identifiable, geographical spaces.

### **The pervasiveness of religious signs in Beirut**

Lebanon, and more particularly Beirut, has often been portrayed as a kind of symbolic scene of the confrontation of all the geopolitical conflicts of the Middle East, the playing-field for the internal and external political parties in their quest for power and influence. During each of the city's traumatic periods, its population adopted or reverted to religious values and symbols.

However, as every religious sect was represented by a political party, it showed off its identity through mundane symbols (a small clearly-identifiable jewel worn around the neck for example, a tattoo, a veil), or more impressive and ostentatious signs (the building of the city's largest mosque in the city's centre, or the tallest bell-tower) or through the beatification of Christian saints<sup>3</sup>. The spiritual, cultural, social and architectural dimensions were all used to forge and express a particular identity on a specific space, helped by all the various media available to both the Christian and Muslim religious authorities. Ideological symbols mixing politics and religion produce forms of "sacred" space and consolidate the expression of the religious identity of its inhabitants. These signs vary according to their position in the city or their calendar; they all lead, one way or another, to cleaved urban spaces.

Religious events produce an expression or a collective reaction that eventually takes on ritual significance. However, these expressions are intimately connected to places, which in turn are linked to their history; their urban landscape (Beirut's, in this case) become a product of the interaction between these two variables.

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<sup>3</sup> On 22<sup>nd</sup> June 2008, Downtown Beirut celebrated the beatification of a new saint, brother Jacques Haddad, the fourth saint added to the list of Lebanese blessed. Three saints have so far been canonized: St. Charbel Makhlouf, St Rafqa ar-Rayes and Saint Nimatullah Kassab Al-Hardini. Two years later, in June 2010, brother Stéphane Nehmeh was beatified. In less than a century, five saints from the Maronite community were recognized by Rome.



The religious affiliations of the inhabitants of a particular quarter can thus be clearly expressed in public spaces: shrines on pavements in Maronite areas, portraits of Shiite Ayatollahs in the *Dahieh*, or pictures of Sunni *ulemas* elsewhere. Koranic verses decorate doorways, and giant posters promote the veil and religious commitment in (Shiite) Ouzai, while in Achrafieh (the epitome of the city’s “Christian area”), pictures of the Virgin Mary and of Cardinals Sfeir or Raï are often displayed. Although these representations signify a specific religious identity, they are often associated with images of lay political leaders. Each of the city’s space is thus doubly identified by both its religion and political affiliations.

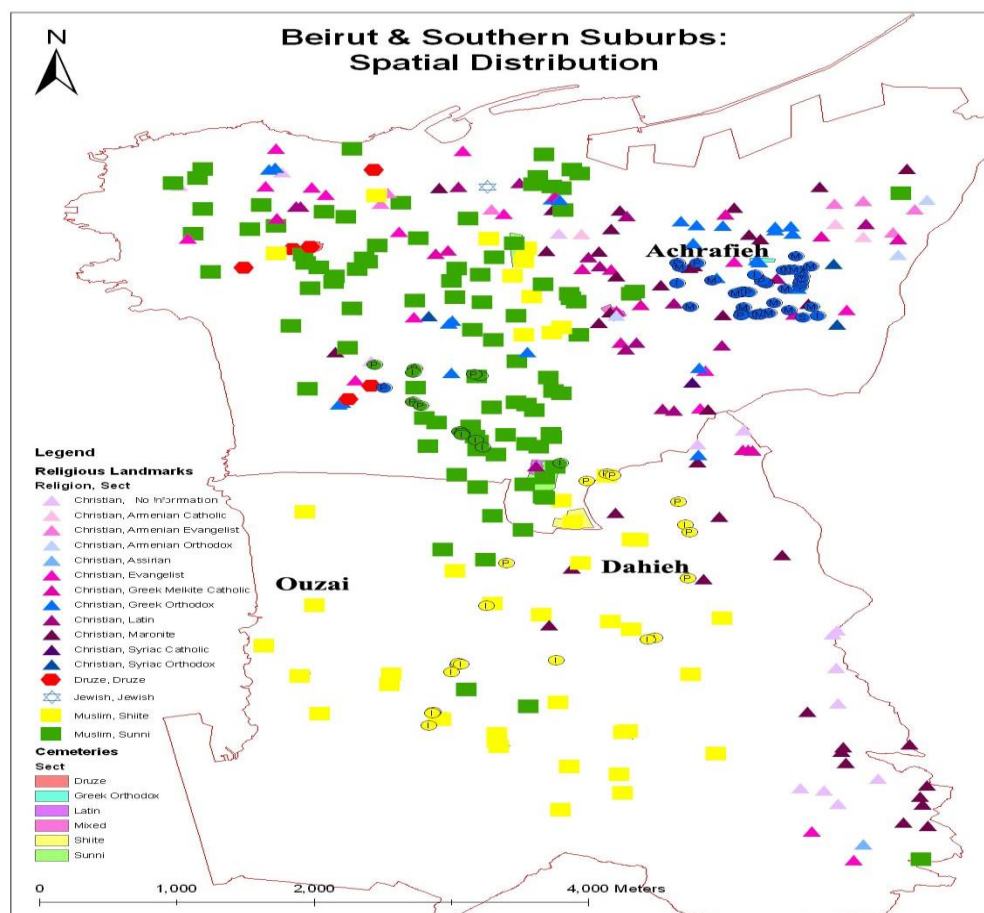


Figure 1: Spatial distribution of religious spaces in Beirut and its Southern Suburbs.

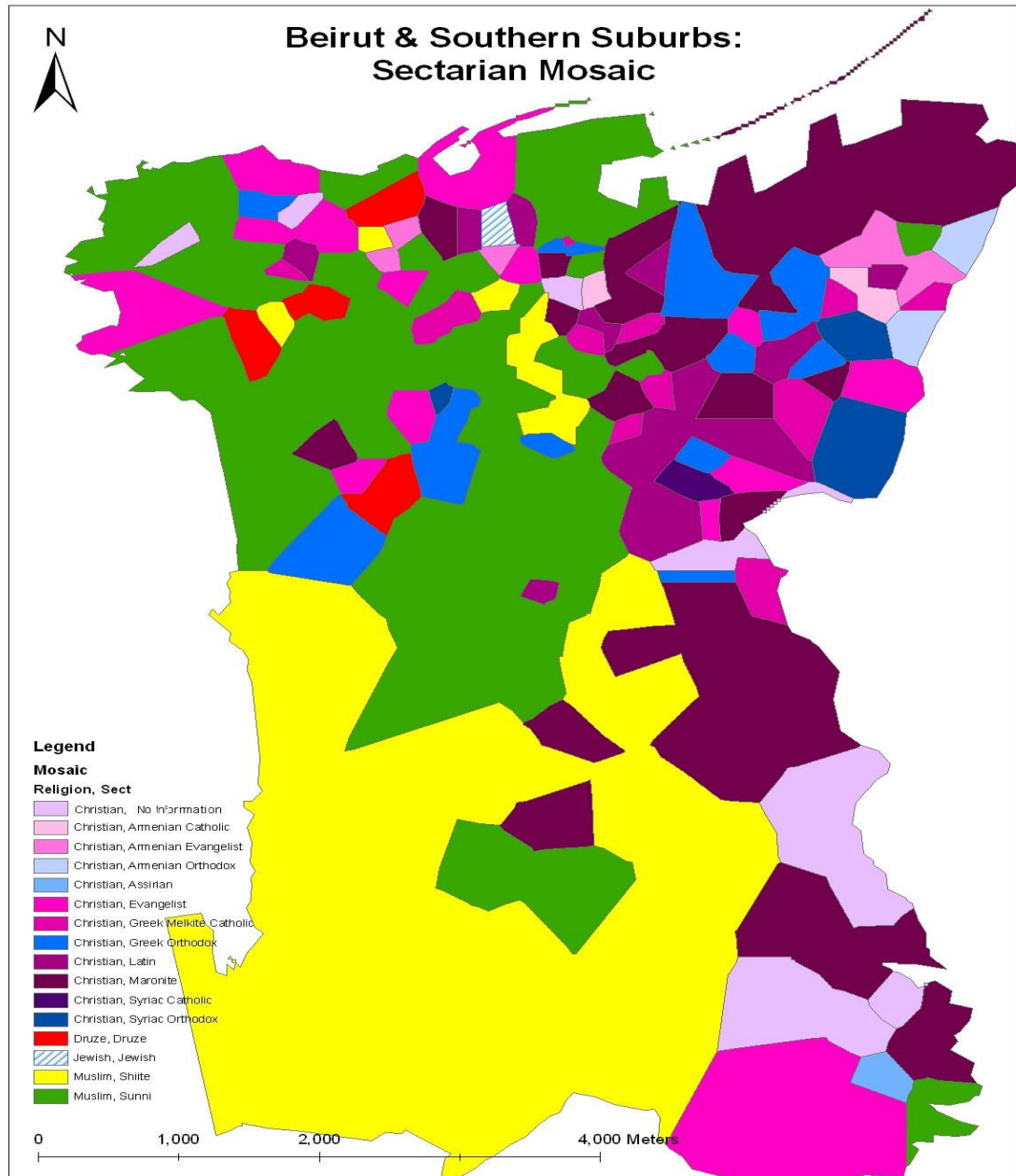


Figure 2: The theoretical spatial identity of spaces polarized by religious buildings in Beirut and its Southern Suburbs.

However, the spatially positioned information refers to a strict time frame for each religious group: there are periods of the year recognized as “sacred” by each community, with sacredness beginning and ending on specific dates for each religion or sect. They directly influence Beirut’s cityscape during the *Ashura* for the Shiites, Easter and Christmas for the Christians, *Ramadan* for the Sunnis, the *Adha* for all Muslims, including the Druze. For example, the *Ashura* begins on the first day of the *Hijra* calendar and lasts for ten days. For the Shiites, it’s a sacred and sad period of remembrance for the death of Hussein, killed by the Sunni self-proclaimed successors of the Prophet. However, that same day is a joyful celebration for the Sunnis who decorate public spaces and take their children to open-air fairs. These same places are then occupied ten days later by the mourning Shiites. One same space can thus express multilayered expressions of identities over time. Tensions are rare between the different sects vying for, or successively using, the same space, as long as the political expression of this religious identity is not overly stressed. (Figure 3)

This multitasking of the religious for other uses is not new, especially as visiting a particular sacred place is a regularly-repeated emotional experience. Thus, on each August 14th, or Assumption day, candles are lit on the corners of roofs, while a special dish (called “hrisseh”) is prepared, notably in some mountain villages. There is a clear blurring of roles, with the religious traditions contributing to social mixing and a temporary general appeasement of rivalries among the members of the same religion; it is also an occasion to mix with members of other religions or sects in a generally pacified atmosphere.

More recently, traditions have also been “invented” or “imagined” in the Andersonian sense, taking the excuse of a religious holiday to organize cultural activities in direct relation to the tourism and leisure industries: the Muslim open-air *iftars* and music kiosks were imported from Egypt less than twenty years ago but are now claimed as being “traditional”, just as wedding-chants and music have been introduced from the Gulf states. The Christmas tree and road-side chapels are stated as being “traditional” among the Christians of the Middle East, and brand-new pilgrimage circuits are stated as being “very old”. During these events, everyone is involved, from the believers to the atheists and the agnostics; however, politics are never really far away, and are regularly the object of debate<sup>4</sup>. Consequently, space, religion and politics are intermingled in contexts where their separation is not constitutionally spelled-out, such as Lebanon.

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<sup>4</sup> The question of the separation of the State and Religion is an ongoing debate in many Arab countries around the role of the Shari‘a, especially during the so-called “Arab Spring”.



Palm Sunday (Beirut city centre)



Ashura kiosk (Basta Tahta-Beirut)



A Christian *mazar* on the street (Achrafiyyé)



Ramadan decorations (Beirut city centre)

Fig. 3: Religious practices in public spaces in Beirut (Sfeir 2009).



### **Religious expressions at three different scales**

The preliminary results of the survey show that individuals use clothing accessories to express their religious affiliation: the Cross, the crescent, a miniature Koran, a rosary around the wrist or neck all signify an identity to those who take the time to observe and who are familiar with the code. This discrete personal identifier can be extended wider, with depictions of these objects painted on the rear windows of cars. The car itself can then be identified as “Muslim” or “Christian” when the painted rosary shows the name of the Prophet Muhammad in place of the Cross.

This religious marking of space extends to the use of pictures of saints, or verses from the Koran, framed and exhibited on the walls of houses or above the main door as a form of protection. These images also protect cars: the dashboards of taxis belonging to Christians are often covered with holy images, sometimes next to portraits of political leaders or photographs of film stars. Muslims drivers use miniature Korans or symbolic matches, very common in Islam; medals and crucifixes (among Christians), a black cube representing the Kaabah in Mecca, or a verse of the Koran (for the Muslims), or two swords (for the Shiites) are also very popular ways of identifying oneself. Multiple symbols (a cross, a medal dedicated to a particular saint, several koranic verses, a jewel against the “evil eye”) can also be worn together to express an investment in mystical powers that go beyond usual devotional practices: wearing these accessories is considered an increased guarantee for security and protection. (Figs. 4, 5, 6)



Figure 4: A Christian sign on a car.



Figure 5: A Muslim pendant with the word “Allah”.



Figure 6: A pendant with a Koranic verse.

A third case is a combination of political signs with religious symbols: photos of “martyrs” placed beside a statue of a saint in a chapel, or associated with Koranic verses. Even on a personal scale, a wearer can combine a jewel cross, for example, with a political party’s logo, or a gold Koranic verse with the silhouette of a political leader. As such, these religious markings are part of a “materialist tradition, free of theological interpretations, but deeply marked by religions of the Book [...] Until the 1960s, the description of customs, beliefs, myths and rituals was most often in the service of a functionalist explanation” (Augé, M. & Colleyn, J. P., 2004). These are not major issues of faith and belief, but social practices and codes. In the case of Beirut, these expressions are therefore either tools of social recognition, or the confirmation of forms of political power, inseparable from religious identities.

The *hierophanization* of space and the process by which place and space have become expressions of a different reality, (in this case “sacred”) have been extensively covered by various authors such as Mircea Éliade and Roger Caillois (Caillois, R., 1950; Eliade, M., 1949). Examples are numerous that illustrate the transformation of space into loci where transcendental revelations can be expressed. These are often expressed along symbolic fracture zones, lines of tension or points of friction. Shrines or *mazars* are typical examples: they are common among the Maronites and Shiites. For the latter, a small shrine is built to remember a martyr, or a person whose death has an important meaning. These shrines can be anywhere and their function is meant to encourage a willingness of redemption or sacrifice. They are built without any consideration for official urban planning, but are extremely significant for the community, and in time are incorporated in formal planning decisions. As such, they intimately contribute to the construction of a community’s territorialization (i.e. the symbolic appropriation of space) through the prism of religion.



Three registers have been identified: the territorial modalities of the communalization of religion, the geopolitics of the religious and the religious symbolizations of space (Hervieu-Léger, D., 2002). The first point is intimately linked to the legal and political contexts, which are put into place to integrate a society according to specific religious traditions; the second point relates to the distribution of power between religious groups in relation to religious, social, cultural and political issues associated with spatial stakes. The third point is related to the understanding of space as seen from a religious point of view, i.e. how space is planned and used for religious practices. Following Durkheim, religious place can create, enable and strengthen social ties, or question it: religious experience is a social question creating bonds for a *consensus*, as well as creating *discensus* (Durkheim, É., 1912).

Returning to the case of Beirut, in neighbourhoods inhabited by Maronites, *mazars* from rural areas have been imported into an urban context; their function is identical, remeniscing the war and the death of young martyrs. However, each population has marked its territory slightly differently, according to its origins: for example, particularities will differentiate the inhabitants from the Chouf, now settled in the Christian suburb of Ain el-Remmaneh from those from South Lebanon now settled in the *Dahieh*. In all cases, the shrines are both religious *and* political and are clearly intended to express this mix, but also they demarcate different territories. Elsewhere, an inconspicuous wire separates the prayer area from the surroundings, creating a sacred space for those who live nearby. As for the rest of the people the boundary has little importance and is nearly invisible. However, these spaces are “sacred” for those who stop and pray on the street<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> This is similar to the *eruv* Orthodox Jewish ritual space in Manhattan (Stump, R. W., 2008).

In both cases, space has been demarcated, separating what is “ours” from the rest of the city and its population. As such, the very definition of “public” and “sacred” requires further deconstruction.

A change of scale introduces the question of the use of public space for religious activities, such as prayers in the streets, official buildings, or classrooms belonging to the state’s educational system. In these cases, religion is often less a question of individual faith than an instrument used to attain a political goal. Clear methodological tools are however lacking to separate the two in complex geopolitical contexts such as the contemporary Middle East, and more specifically Lebanon. This country is a Republic with a Constitution inspired by Western secular democratic values. However, the Constitution and its interpretations or the various consensual agreements signed since the 1940s also introduce very clear religious distinctions between its citizens: only a Maronite can become the country’s president, while a Sunni can only become a Prime Minister, as examples. Roles and employment in the state and the Civil service are divided according to religion. While this is perhaps not a unique case, one of the consequences is that the country’s space and cityscapes, including official buildings and offices which are theoretically “public”, are regularly swamped by pictures of political figureheads, which very clearly highlight their religious identity. Maronite candidates, for example, have been associated with the Lebanese Forces’ logo, a stylized cross. The interchangeability of religion and politics is manifest here, just as a Muslim symbol can be clearly associated with a Sunni or a Shiite political candidate. Similarly, political leaders have been “protected” by saints, prophets, the Virgin Mary; military actions have been endowed with divine meanings (Hezbollah’s “Divine victory” against the Israeli invasion in 2006) and even whole cities or quarters have been associated with the Virgin Mary (Achrafiyeh during the Civil war, as an example).

## Conclusion

The whole gamut of scales is therefore visible when examining public spaces in Beirut and their relationship to the “sacred”. On one hand, in everyday contexts, the formal faith of individuals is visually, though often discretely, expressed. One does not ostentatiously exhibit one’s faith in Beirut, except in very particular situations or dates: Christians will make vows during May and wear particular clothing, imitating the Virgin Mary’s or a particular saint’s, while during Ramadan or Ashoura, Muslims will adopt a more religiously-correct type of clothing. Cars and buildings can be “marked” to express their owners’ religious affiliation, even though their residents’ may be different.

On the other hand, the issue is not about individual choices, which can visually mark the city’s urban public spaces, but the link between the political and the religious spheres, which then produce a far clearer visual impact. In this context, it is clearly the political dimension that manipulates the religious one, imposing clear meanings to both the local inhabitants and to the visitors. Election campaigns, military events, visits by foreign dignitaries, are all perfect occasions to show off this link (Talhouq, R., 2011). Thus, to attract potential electors, a political candidate will put forward his religious affiliation though the subtle graphic code of his posters; his or her speeches will invariably make short reference to the Scriptures or to the Koran; the candidate will necessarily visit the religious dignitaries before any major decision is taken. In the same vein, religious holidays such as Ramadan or Christmas, are occasions to mark the public space with clearly identifiable religious codes, transforming it into a political statement. These same religious holidays are manipulated by the political sphere to highlight political decisions, further blurring the difference between the two. The city’s urban landscape is the perfect expression of this pervasiveness, giving the impression that most of the city is “sacred” to each and every community.

This, in turn leads to the (false) impression that the city is a sum of closed, clearly-identified and religiously coherent spaces, separated one from another by hostile demarcation lines.

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