Aspects of Christian-Muslim Relations in Contemporary Lebanon

by George J. Hajjar
Notre Dame University, Lebanon

The following lecture was given in Professor Jane Smith's "Essentials of Christian-Muslim Relations" class in the summer of 2002.

Good afternoon. As Dorothy said to the good witch in the Wizard of Oz, "There's no place like home." I am happy to be back here in Connecticut and at Hartford Seminary, before I return to Lebanon on a flight this evening.

I have visited Lebanon many times over the past six years, and spent a full year lecturing at a university in Lebanon in 1998-99. Although at that time I had completed half of the M.A. in Islamic Studies/Christian-Muslim Relations at Hartford Seminary, I wasn't sure what I might have to say to my colleagues in Lebanon, one of the world's birthplaces of Christian-Muslim relations, about interfaith study and dialogue. I assumed that since Christians and Muslims have been living together in Lebanon for centuries, they would be able to assist others in interfaith study and dialogue.

What I discovered, however, is that many Lebanese do not have a deeply informed understanding of each other's religion. This was a surprise to me. I also realized that many Lebanese communities could benefit from the knowledge of an outsider like myself with regard to Christian-Muslim relations. Many times, I would overhear the theological misconceptions that one religious community had about the other community and would carefully try to explain how I thought that the opinion they expressed was inaccurate. Sometimes, it was a lack of knowledge of the Qur'an or Bible or the traditions and history of the respective religious communities. Almost always, the Lebanese seemed intrigued and appreciated my having shared the information. Therefore, when I returned to the U.S. from 1999 to 2001, I pursued and completed the M.A. at Hartford Seminary. Many of you may experience this same phenomenon in your pastoral ministry and experience. You should remain confident that with your personal skills and these important degrees you are obtaining, you will be able to make a positive impact on people of various faiths whether you are an insider or outsider to that community.

I very much appreciate the opportunity to talk with you today about aspects of Christian-Muslim relations in Lebanon. In the heart of the Middle East, the birthplace of interaction between Christians and Muslims, it provides a wonderful case study. Unlike any other country in the world, and different from any other Middle Eastern country, Lebanon has had for centuries an almost even population distribution of Christians and Muslims.

Everyday Life in Lebanon from a Religious/Social Perspective (we removed word “like”)

Each morning, I wake up in a Lebanese neighborhood called “Jesus the King.” Less than 50 yards from my residence is the large Jesus the King church/monastery. The founder of this church is a now deceased monk of the order of St. Francis named Yaacoub Haddad Cappuchi. He is soon to be beatified by pope John Paul II. As I leave my Lebanon residence, I have to pass two Lebanese army check points. These checkpoints exist for the protection of the home and wife of a Lebanese Christian warlord who is presently incarcerated. As I pull up to the checkpoint, a young, strong looking soldier holding an automatic rifle briefly looks at me and inside my car and then states “Habib albi, Allah Ma-ak” or “Beloved of my heart, God be with you.” Can you imagine an American soldier allowing you through a checkpoint while saying “Beloved of my heart, God be with you?” The Lebanese soldier said this to me with the casualness that an American soldier would say, “Ok, you can go!” without knowing who I was and after seeing me only one or two times previously. So, we can see that within the first 3 or 4 minutes of my day I have already been immersed in a religious aura because of where I live and the Arabic language.

As I proceed just another 40 yards in my car down a mountain, I see the first of many roadside religious shrines. These shrines are glass and metal dollhouse like structures. Inside they are replete with icons of Lebanese saints such as Charbel and Rafqa as well as statues of Mary, Moses, Elijah, etc. These shrines also contain candles and rosaries and are sometimes left unlocked so that people can donate or even take money from them. I travel just 15 minutes in my car, adjacent to the Mediterranean, when I begin to see tall minarets besides mosques that display beautiful Arabic calligraphy. Depending on the time of day, one can hear the “muezzin” or a Muslim parishioner responsible for the call to prayer five times during the day. After about a half hour I start to ascend the Shouf
Mountains of Lebanon, where the view is one of the most beautiful in the world. High wooded mountains with deep valleys take your breath away and one can see sporadically placed houses on the mountains that leave you wondering how such houses were ever built there. As I approach the village of “Deir Qamar,” the 400 year old Christian “Monastery of the Moon,” where my university is located, I see traditional dressed Druze men with white turban-like hats, full or trimmed beads depending on their age, wearing dark shirts and dark baggy pants. During the day from time to time one can see both Christians and Muslims holding their “masbaha” or “subhr,” which is a set of 99 stringed stone beads (each bead representing a different reference name to God), known as “worry beads” or “prayer beads” in English.

At the end of the day, after I descend down the Shouf Mountains, I soon approach one of the busy Beirut highways. The weather is often hot, the highway crowded with cars and tightly packed large buildings on both sides. There are only tiny strips of grass in the middle of this madness of heat, traffic and pollution. However, about once each week I see some Muslims bowing in prayer on these strips of grass among all the congestion. Finally, as I re-approach my residence I sometimes see a fully bearded barefoot monk of the St. Francis order walking up or down the street. I pass the same army checkpoint I did in the early morning and another soldier replies to me “Allah ysallmak” (God will give you peace) or “Shariff” (it’s an honor). What all this demonstrates is that even routine life in Lebanon is enveloped with an atmosphere of religion. I remember on a few occasions I tried to actually count how many times I heard references to God in daily, routine conversation. One day I got to forty, another sixty. Some common references to God in ordinary Arabic conversation are: “Il Humm Dilla” (Praise be to God), “Allah Ma-ak” (God be with you), “Nushkur Allah” (We thank God), “Allah Ywaslak Be Salame” (God will help you arrive to your destination safely), “Ya Allah” (Oh God), “Mitle Ma Allah bireed” (As God wants), “Inshallah” (God willing), “Iza Allah Raad” (If God wants it to happen), etc.

Yet despite this constant reference to and awareness of God’s presence, the Lebanese people are also feeling a great strain. Lebanon’s economy is in shambles right now. Lebanon is a country smaller than our state of Connecticut. Less than ten years ago, Lebanon had a one billion dollar economic surplus. Today, it has a thirty billion dollar debt. In 1975, just before Lebanon’s most recent civil war, its currency, the lira, was strong. One American dollar equaled two to three Lebanese lira. Today, the dollar is equal to 1,500- Lebanese Lira. In 1975, the average Lebanese family earned about $1000 per month; now, 27 years later, that average is about $650 per month. Lebanon’s economic problems are having a very negative effect on the mood and emotional well-being of the people. I have noticed an increase in anxiety and depression among the people of Lebanon over the past few years. They have had a reputation of being hospitable, fun loving and easy going. However, a recent study conducted by the Institute for Development Research and Applied Care (IDRAC) suggests a much higher incidence of depression in Lebanon than in many other countries. One of the main factors is Lebanon’s economic crisis. This has had an effect, I am sure, on Christian-Muslim relations. It is difficult for people to move to a higher level of social thought and functioning when their most basic needs are at risk or not being met. I think that the severe state of Lebanon’s economy has lowered the interest of many Lebanese in vigorously pursuing a higher order of need, namely the brotherly relationships that should exist between fellow Lebanese of different faiths.

The causes of Lebanon’s economic woes are both internal and external. Briefly stated, the internal problems revolve around the overzealous reconstruction effort of war torn Lebanon, Lebanon’s inability to borrow money, corruption and the mismanagement of public funds. Externally, as a country depending on tourism, Lebanon has seriously suffered both from the Arab-Israeli conflict, and from the threat of U.S. economic should Lebanon not conform with American policy in the war on terrorism.

Also important in understanding Christian-Muslim relations in Lebanon is another aspect of life its contemporary life, namely, its educational system. Currently, I am a lecturer at a fairly new and growing Lebanese university, all four of my children have been attending elementary school in Lebanon for the past four years, and my wife has been working for a school development consultancy for the past three. The Lebanese educational system is strong and conducive to learning. In contrast to the U.S., Lebanese students learn three main languages beginning in what would be our kindergarten level. I have been pleased to see my children learn how to read, write, speak and comprehend Arabic, French and English beginning at such a very young age. The Lebanese educational system has been using the metric system for decades. While students in the U.S. begin to learn the metric system in middle or high school, Lebanese students begin in the first grade.

With all its advantages, however, the educational system in Lebanon has had major weaknesses. One of these weaknesses is that it has not led to societal integration. Nearly 70% of Lebanon’s schools are private, attended by those who can afford them, while the poor have had to cram into the fewer public schools. Additionally, Lebanese students can choose to attend different types of schools – French, American, British or Arabic. Thus, they have tended to form separate identities based on the type of school. Students can be heard saying “I’m French educated”
or “I’m English educated” and so on. Additionally, there has been little governmental monitoring of private schools, often resulting in students learning different information within very different curriculums. Students thus became segregated not only geographically but also educationally, often with little in common. Students would proclaim “I’m French educated” or “I’m English educated” which did not support a feeling of camaraderie among the young. The epitome of societal segregation of Lebanon, caused in part by its educational system, is evidenced by the fact that no nationally approved history textbook exists beyond the fourth grade level. Even the fourth grade text is said to cease reporting history in the year 1975, the start of the Lebanese civil and foreign war. Yes, Christians and Muslims of Lebanon have lived side-by-side for generations, but not really together. The Lebanese have been unable to agree upon an official, national history textbook. One community’s hero could also be recorded as another community’s nemesis or traitor. Reaching consensus is an onerous task. Lebanon has slowly been trying to address the issues under an agreement called the “Taif Agreement” of 1991. All of these factors have deeply affected relations among the main religious communities of Lebanon. Officially, there are eighteen different religious denominations in Lebanon. Of these, the six major or largest communities, three Christians and three Muslim, are as follows:

Maronite Christians

The largest Christian group are Maronites. They claim to be followers of a Christian hermit named Maroun who lived in northeast Syria in the late fourth or early fifth century. Later in the late seventh century, at the advent of Islam, a man named John Maron left Syria for Lebanon because of inter-Christian and pagan rivalries and oppression. It is important to emphasize that Maron and his followers did not leave Syria for Lebanon because of tension or persecution by the followers of the newly found faith of Islam, but because of Byzantine Christian and pagan oppression. Despite this, some Maronites of Lebanon will incorrectly state that their ancestors left Syria for Lebanon because they were dealt with badly by Muslims. During the Crusader invasions of 1095-1272, many Maronites, encouraged by their clerical leaders, sided with the Crusaders against the Muslim-Arab Empire. (Some Maronites, particularly those from the high central mountains of Lebanon, did fiercely oppose the Crusader invasion.) This pro-Crusader response was a crucial element both in Maronite/Lebanese history and in interfaith relations as it marked the beginning of an alliance with France and Europe and the Western orientation of the Maronites. After 1770, the Maronites formed the single largest community in Lebanon. The majority were peasants who would soon revolt against the Druze and Maronite feudal lords. By 1860, the Druze population of Lebanon, an offshoot faith of Shia Islam and once a majority population in Lebanon, engaged in a fierce and brutal battle with the Maronite community that resulted in thousands of deaths and the displacement of thousands of Maronites. In 1932, the Maronites, free from Ottoman Turk rule but under French mandate, still comprised the largest single community in Lebanon, according to the one and only official census taken in Lebanon to date. At that time, the Maronites were involved in Arab nationalism to various degrees and were also prominent in the revival of written Arabic. Thus, in 1943, as the majority population and active in Lebanon’s development, the Maronites were offered the presidency of Lebanon under an unwritten national pact. To this day, the office of the president of Lebanon is to be held by a Maronite. The Maronites requested the assistance of the Syrian government and army in 1975 to help quell Lebanon’s civil war. In 1982, they sided with the Israeli army in its invasion of Lebanon, to the great displeasure of the Syrian army, most of the Muslim community and some of the other Christian communities of Lebanon. The concern that the Maronites of Lebanon would again seek foreign intervention in order to overpower their fellow countrymen, as they did during the Crusades, still reverberates in Lebanon. Many Maronites struggle with their identity as Arabs and as Lebanese. Some believe that they are not ethnic Arabs at all, despite their early origins in Syria and before that the Arabian peninsula. The Maronite liturgy is said both in Arabic and Syriac, a dialect of ancient Aramaic and the spoken language of Jesus Christ. Traditional Maronite churches are devoid of statues, but employ icons that are sparsely displayed. Their church songs are beautiful in both sound and meaning and send chills up one’s spine, whether or not one comprehends the meaning.

The Greek Orthodox Christians

The Greek Orthodox Christians of Lebanon and the Middle East have also been called Byzantine rite Christians, Melkites and Arab Orthodox. The Greek Orthodox of Lebanon are mostly indigenous Arabs, called “Greek” because of the Greek origin of early colonizers of the Levant. They are the second largest religious group in Lebanon. Followers of Greek Orthodoxy trace their heritage to the earliest of Syriac origins. The Greek Orthodox community is made up of those early Christians of Syria (which included Lebanon) and Egypt who accepted the church’s “Council of Chalcedon” in 451. This council, the third of seven such councils, insisted on the premise that Jesus Christ had two natures: human and divine. The Maronites and the Copts of Egypt, despite their affirmation that they were not at odds with the Council’s resolutions, have been considered by the Greek Orthodox church to hold different views on the natures of Jesus Christ, views that are referred to as “wicked heresies.”
Lebanese Greek Orthodox Christians generally agree that they are of indigenous Arab origin, with some reservation and qualification depending on where in Lebanon they live and on the prevailing political sentiment of their region.

The Melkite Greek Catholics

Melkite Greek Catholics are also descendants of the main Greek Orthodox/Byzantine church with its early Syriac origin. The term “Melkite” is derived from an early Aramaic and Arabic term meaning “the royalists” or “the kings men.” This was a somewhat negative term given to the early Christians that followed the Emperor Constantine’s embrace of Christianity. Today’s Melkite Greek Catholic Christians finally split with the Greek Orthodox church in 1724 and came into communion with the Roman Catholic church. The Melkites are diffuse in Lebanon but have concentrations in the central and south parts of Lebanon. The Melkites are the third largest Christian community in Lebanon. In recent years, the Melkites, like the Maronites, have denied affiliation with Arab ethnicity, race and culture.

The Shi'ite Muslims

The term Shi'ite is derived from “Shi'a Ali” or “partisans of Ali.” The Shi'ites are now the largest single religious sect in Lebanon. They are a branch of the largest Muslim community in the world, the Sunni Muslims. Unlike the Sunnis, Shi'ites believe that the first leader after the death of the Prophet Muhammad should have been his first cousin ‘Ali, who was his son-in-law by his marriage to Mohammed’s daughter Fatima. One of Ali’s sons, Hussein, attempted to reconcile the order of descendants to that of his father ‘Ali. This involved a confrontation with another Muslim leader or “caliph” of the emerging Umayyad empire in 680 A.D. Hussein’s small army was attacked and he was killed by the opposing caliph’s men. For the emerging Shi'ite community, this was a major, sorrowful event that is lamented to this day as the time when they lost the sole righteous succession of the prophet Mohammed through the lineage of ‘Ali. Equally tragic to Shi'ites was the loss of Hussein, a brave and righteous leader and grandson of the Prophet. This loss reverberates today across the Shi'ites of the world. It is reflected in the feelings of oppression Shi'ites have, because of both their ancient and modern histories. The Shi'ites have suffered at different times under various Sunni Muslim rulers and under the various invaders and occupiers of the Middle East. My interviews with members of the Lebanese Shi'ite community and with non-Shi'ites who have lived among them reveal concerns that the Shi'ites seem to have a somewhat low self-esteem. The Shi'ite population can be found concentrated in the southern and eastern sections of Lebanon, as well as the impoverished “belt of misery” of west Beirut. For centuries, the Shi'ites have had virtually no institutions such as schools, hospitals and social service agencies. However, this has begun to change during the past two decades. The elder Shi'ites began sending their children to higher quality schools and as adults these children traveled to and worked in Africa, where they made small fortunes. Much of this income was either brought or sent to their families in Lebanon. These factors, combined with a high birth rate, have made them an influential and strong community in Lebanon. Modern Shi'ites of Lebanon have a political and social connections with Iran, which has the largest Shi'ite Muslim population in the world. Those with whom I have spoken tend to consider themselves Muslims first, with their Arab identity a very close second. Today, a Shi'ite Muslim party called “Hezbollah” or “Party of God” has led Lebanese resistance to the Israeli occupation of south Lebanon.

The Sunni Muslims

As stated earlier, in 1932 Lebanon conducted its first and only official population census. At that time, the Sunni Muslims were deemed the largest Muslim community of Lebanon and the second largest community overall in Lebanon behind the Maronite Christians. It is now widely accepted that the Shi'ites of Lebanon, and not the Sunnis, are the largest religious sect in Lebanon overall, although an official census has not been taken for 70 years.

Sunnis Muslims do, however, represent the largest Muslim population throughout the Middle East and the Muslim world. Since the Sunnis of Lebanon were the second largest sect in Lebanon in 1932 (the Maronite Christians being the largest), they were given the position of prime minister of the country. Still today the position is designated for a Sunni Muslim. Sunnis were and somewhat are still concentrated in the important port cities of Lebanon: Tripoli, Beirut, Sidon and Tyre. The Sunnis have a history of being shipping merchants and became powerful businessmen in the twentieth century. The Sunnis of Lebanon and the rest of the Middle East have a keen affinity for their Arabism and a strong dedication to Islam.

The Druze

The Druze religion developed as an offshoot of a form of Shi'a Islam in eleventh century Fatimid Egypt under the “caliph” or righteous leader, al-Hakim. In the beginning, conversions to the faith were allowed. However, Egypt at the time of the Fatimid dynasty hosted a large Sunni Muslim population that was not at all keen on converting to a different religion. The caliph, al-Hakim, is said to have disappeared unexpectedly, after which large numbers of Druze migrated to a lightly inhabited mountainous section of Lebanon. In Lebanon, the Druze encountered some Shi'ite
Muslims who were said to be more open to conversions and or less apt to interfere with the Druze’s ambitions. After becoming the largest single community of Lebanon, the Druze stopped accepting conversions from other faiths. Interfaith marriage was also disallowed. To be a Druze, one had to be born a Druze, a practice that continues to this day. Eventually, this had a diminishing effect on the Druze population, as did migration and some instances of interfaith marriage. The Druze do not follow the fundamental tenets of Islam with its five pillars of faith, which has led to their being severely criticized and oppressed within the larger Sunni Muslim and Shi’ite Muslim Middle East. The Druze profess a clear and strong Arab identity. When I speak with members of the Druze community, they insist that they are not an Islamic sect. The Christians of Lebanon, for the most part, consider the Druze to be Muslims and the Druze are recorded as such within institutional settings such as schools and political organizations, yet often with the stipulation that they are Druze. I have also observed members of the Druze community identifying themselves as Muslims to Sunni and Shi’ite Muslims. This may sound duplicitous, but it is an old coping mechanism allowed by Druze clerics and leaders. All of this is done as a means fending off discrimination and maintaining the well-kept secrecy of the Druze faith. Rather than praying in churches or mosques, the Druze normally conduct prayer services at house gatherings. A sixteenth century Druze leader named Amine Fakhrreddine (literally “faithful pride of religion”) is credited by historians as being the founder of Lebanon as a separate entity unto itself.

The past two centuries have witnessed a community power shift in Lebanon. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it was the Druze and Maronite communities that were most influential (politically, economically and socially) overall in Lebanon. The late nineteenth century saw the Maronite Christian community come to the forefront of influence in Lebanon along with the Sunni Muslim population. Today, it is the Shi’ite Muslim community that has risen to increased influence in Lebanon with the role of the Maronites and the Sunnis somewhat reduced. One can see how each community has had a major role in the formation and structure of Lebanon's independence, society, politics and religiosity. Besides the Druze, it was the large Maronite community that spearheaded the drive for Lebanese independence by 1943 and would since hold the office of the presidency of Lebanon. The Greek Orthodox and Greek Catholic Christians are descendents of the great Byzantine Empire under which Christianity flourished and remained prominent in Lebanon and the Middle East for over one thousand years. The Greek Orthodox and Greek Catholic Christians, along with some other Lebanese groups, were instrumental in the early translations of great scientific and philosophical works from Aramaic to Greek and Arabic. It was the Sunni Muslims who were in the forefront of Lebanon's merchantile and seafaring industry and trade. Shi’ite Muslims, long oppressed in Lebanon and the Middle East, are credited with the once ominous task of resisting the occupation by the formidable Israeli army until the point of near complete withdrawal from all Lebanese territory. After nearly twenty years of Israeli occupation and hegemony in Lebanon, the Shi’ites were successful in driving the Israeli army from Lebanon. It is interesting to know that all these communities, with the exception of Sunni Muslims, are fairly marginalized minorities throughout the rest of the Middle East, yet each has excelled in their own way in Lebanon. Unfortunately, the accomplishments of each community were not reached in concord with one another. At times in Lebanese history, different communities fought fierce battles with each other, followed by long periods of co-existence, only to resurface in war, time and again. A review of the brief history of each group also reveals a conflict of identity. Identity issues were and are a main point of contention between Lebanese communities. Are the Lebanese Arabs? Do they feel assimilated into the larger Arab Middle East? Do the Lebanese rate their religious faith above or below their nationalist feelings? Does the “umma” exist in Lebanon and whom does it include? Should the Lebanese culture be Western or eastern oriented? Each of these issues remains a sticking point among Lebanese to this day. I am impressed, however, that with all that Lebanon has been exposed to throughout history (a procession of invaders, civil wars, etc.) the relationship between the Christians and Muslims is not worse than it actually is today.

Aspects of Christian-Muslim Relations in Contemporary Lebanon

There is a great deal of agreement between the Christian and Muslim communities in Lebanon regarding many social issues. Both communities (especially their religious leaders), for example, are opposed to having civil marriage legalized in Lebanon. Both communities reject civil marriage and as such these marriages are not recognized inside of Lebanon. Both Christians and Muslims (especially their religious leaders) want marriage to be a religious, sanctified affair. An irony, though, has presented itself in regard to civil marriage. Civil marriages that take place outside Lebanon are recognized as legitimate inside Lebanon. In other words, Lebanese can, and many do, marry civilly outside of Lebanon and return with their marriages recognized as valid. I know several Lebanese who travel to nearby Cyprus for a day or two and return to Lebanon with their civil marriage recognized by the government. Also, some Lebanese protest the ban on civil marriages as an impediment to interfaith marriage. Their position is that if civil marriage were to be allowed, then religious conversions, which are often necessary in interfaith marriages, would not be obligatory. My own take on this is different. Although I have noticed a slight increase of interfaith marriages in Lebanon, I have found that the interest in civil marriage is not geared toward the facilitation of interfaith marriage. My experience has revealed that younger generation Lebanese want to utilize civil marriage as a means of their marriage being officially recognized by another country which will then assist them in migrating to that country. Another important issue for Christian-Muslim relations involves religion in schools. For many years, it had been mandatory for
religious studies to be taught in the Lebanese public schools. In 1998, moves were made by the Lebanese parliament to abolish such obligatory religious instruction. Religious community leaders quickly mobilized to thwart such a move and ultimately succeeded. In 1999, parliament was forced to amend the resolve. As a compromise, religion was placed under "cultural studies." The significance here is that an individual has to study not only his or her own faith, but also other faiths, as well. Each year since 1999, the issue of de-mandating religious studies in public schools arises, with both Christian and Muslim religious leaders mobilizing to prevent it. Both Christians and Muslims have made great strides in officially recognizing each other’s sacred holidays. Lebanon recognizes the religious holidays of both faiths nationwide. For instance, I am presently employed at a Catholic university. The university lists the major Muslim holidays, such as Ramadan, Adha, and the prophet Mohammed's birthday on its calendar with all classes cancelled on those days. Additionally, the university also lists Greek Orthodox religious holidays, such as Christmas and Easter, and cancels classes on those days as well. Both public and private schools of both faiths, for the most part, honor each other's religious holidays, as do government institutions such as banks and municipalities. This, I believe, will continue to help strengthen interfaith relations.

A survey that I conducted with nearly 200 Lebanese college students yielded some interesting, though preliminary results. More than 70 % of all the students rank their religious affiliations as the single most important aspect of their identities and lives in Lebanon. It is equally interesting to note, however, that each group tends to disapprove of this choice on the part of the other. In other words, Christian university students felt that Muslims place their religious faith as number one in their lives when they should place Lebanese nationalism as number one. However, the same Christian students, while dismayed by the belief that Muslims are placing their faith before nationalism, also place their Christian beliefs above nationalism. This preliminary collection of data, when completed, needs to be shared with each community in order to demonstrate the harmony of thought that exists on this issue and to help quell misconceptions of each other. As it stands right now, religious sectarianism is a stronger bond among the Lebanese than is the national bond.

Another interesting aspect of contemporary Christian-Muslim relations in Lebanon is raised by the recent issue of human cloning. Each of the Christian spiritual leaders as well as most of the Sunni Muslim spiritual leaders denounce human cloning as an abomination on the grounds that cloning and its potential abuses are a disruption of God’s natural plan. On the other hand, an important and widely respected Shi'ite Muslim Cleric, Sheikh Muhammed Fadlallah, expressed his view in a weekly Lebanese magazine titled the "Monday Morning" that cloning is permissible. Sheikh Fadlallah stated clearly that cloning is permissible from an Islamic point of view. Theologically, he bases this on the "Inshallah" or "God willing" principle in Islam. Sheikh Fadlallah remarked that human life is created by the joining of X and Y chromosomes and this cloning would not be possible if it wasn't willed by God. The combining of X and Y-chromosomes within cloning is not "haram" or "forbidden" according to Sheikh Fadlallah. The most obvious and compelling element of Christian-Muslim relations of Lebanon, of course, remains its political make up. Unlike any country in the world, Lebanon strictly maintains a confessional government. From the president and prime minister and all through Lebanese governmental posts (including "mukhtars" or "mayors") civil service jobs, local, provincial and national posts, there is a complete confessional representation. Each of the eighteen different religious sects in Lebanon must be and is represented in numeric proportion throughout Lebanon's government and civil service. No matter how large or small, each religious sect is proportionally represented. In many ways, this system seems to resemble a democracy. Every sect is represented. However, as an American, the system appears to me as an affirmative action policy gone completely wild. Why can't a Druze or Shi'ite Muslim become president of Lebanon? The Lebanese presidency was originally assigned to the Maronites because they were the largest population, but today this is no longer the case. If one were to assign the presidency to the largest religious sect, it would go to the Shi'ites. In the same light, why can't, for example, a Melkite Greek Catholic become the prime minister of Lebanon, a position that now can only be held by a Sunni Muslim? While the case can be made that the confessional system did serve an important purpose in Lebanon's early years of independence, this same system now seems outdated and counterproductive. Most Lebanese now decry confessional sectarianism and claim they want change. This does not necessarily mean that if Lebanese politics were de-confessionalized, a more harmonious outcome would prevail. Although Lebanese disapprove of sectarian confessionalism, they do not appear to have enough trust in each other to follow another political structure. Many Lebanese want guarantees of their community's representation, and are not ready to believe that a democratic form of election will serve their community's interests. In addition to this there remains in Lebanon the phenomenon of the "Zuama" or "clan leaders." Some of these "Zuama" are in fact antiquated political hacks and bosses who make their confessional constituents feel dependent on them for resources, services and employment.

I conclude my lecture by responding to Jane Smith’s question regarding my hopefulness for solid, fruitful relations between the Christians and Muslims of Lebanon. I am very optimistic, although not certain, that the Lebanese will flourish as a people who have mutual respect for one another. The Lebanese share a history and destiny. Many times past and present, the destiny of the Lebanese people has been formidable challenged. It must be difficult to be confronted with challenges to one’s destiny on a seemingly weekly basis. Such is the case with the modern day
people of Lebanon. They are fighting the battle of destiny. Inherent in this battle and of paramount importance is the relationship between the Christian and Muslim communities of Lebanon. These relations are basically good and must continue to grow as the best way for Lebanon to win its battle with destiny. This destiny, which I truly hope and believe can be reached, is the sustaining of brotherly and sisterly relationships between communities.

I thank Dr. Smith so very much for inviting me here today. I am so happy to be back here in Connecticut, my home, and at Hartford Seminary, where I have learned so much.

References


JOURNALS

The Arab Studies Quarterly. [1999]. Lake Forest, Illinois: Association of Arab American University Graduates

NEWSPAPERS

The Daily Star. Beirut, Lebanon: Jamil K. Mroue, Publisher

The International Herald Tribune. Nueilly-sur-seine, France: David Ignatuis, Executive Editor.

MAGAZINES