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ARTICLE

Beyond sectarianism: Intermarriage and social difference in Lebanon

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Abstract

Based on interviews with Lebanese in over 150 mixed-religion marriages and their extended family members, I argue that sect may conceal or stand in for other forms of difference, including ideas about status and hierarchy related to class and regional origin in Lebanon. Because it is the most readily available discourse for understanding social difference, parents often use sectarian rhetoric to describe their concerns about a variety of problems they see in their children's chosen partners. By listening between the lines of parental objections, I suggest that expressions of bias against people of other sects may mask concerns with other forms of social difference, in effect reducing a complex and shifting social field of multiple axes of difference into sect. Rather than assume sectarianism's a priori importance, this approach allows me to bring other discourses of difference and analytic lenses to the foreground.

Keywords: intermarriage; kinship; Lebanon; sectarianism; secularism

Joanna's Orthodox Christian father disowned her when she began dating a Sunni Muslim.[1] A few years later, her relationship with her father resumed, and Joanna's parents grew to love their Sunni son-in-law. Layla eloped after her Druze father chased her Maronite boyfriend down the street with a rifle.[2] Muhammad's Sunni Muslim family refused to acknowledge his Catholic fiancé. Three kids later, they have still not fully reconciled. Sami described his Druze mother as having "a nervous break, having like spasms and crying constantly, like it was a medical reaction." Josef's Maronite Christian mother threatened disownment and faked heart attacks in her efforts to end his relationship with a Shiʿi Muslim woman. A decade and two children later, she has not acknowledged the marriage.

Over two decades of research in Lebanon, I heard or witnessed these stories and many less dramatic ones in which parents cried, pleaded, feigned health emergencies, called on extended family or clerical pressure, or cut off communication with their children—all to express their opposition to interreligious marriage. Such stories are no surprise to most Lebanese; they take it for granted that intermarriage is difficult, if not for the couple, then for all but the most open-minded parents.[3] But why is it so difficult? Many of the parents opposed to these marriages were not especially pious; many didn't practice their religion; some called themselves "secularists" (***ʿilmāniyyīn***); and a few said they didn't even believe in God. All of them had friends, colleagues, or business associates from other sects. So why did they reject future sons- or daughters-in-law because of religious, and sometimes sectarian, difference?

[1]All names are pseudonyms. In potentially identifiable cases, I altered details or used a composite character.

[2]Threats of physical violence figured in very few of my interviews, were more common than actual incidents of violence, and were temporally distributed from the 1960s to the 2010s.

[3]See Barbara Drieskens, "Changing Perceptions of Marriage in Beirut," in *Les métamorphoses du mariage au Moyen-Orient*, ed. Barbara Dreiskens (Beirut: Presses de l'Ifpo, 2008), for an overview of marriage forms and ideals in Beirut; Anne Françoise Weber, "Briser et suivre les normes: les couples islamochrétiens au Liban," in Dreiskens, *Métamorphoses*, on religious endogamy and interreligious marriage; and Sabiha Allouche, "Queering (Inter-Sectarian) Heterosexual Love in Lebanon," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 51, no. 4 (2019): 547–65, on the normativity of sectarian endogamy. Many of my interviewees described parents who readily accepted intermarriage as "open-minded" (*munfatiḥ).*

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At first glance, the answer may seem obvious: that people ought to marry someone from within their religious community is a presumed social norm. Family conflicts around intermarriage have occurred in Lebanon for generations, ebbing and flowing with migration, political violence, and changing university structures, among other factors.[4] As Barbara Drieskens notes, "Transgressing these rules of marriage within the confession usually leads to some form of social exclusion: from the community … from the family."[5] But allowing the answer to appear obvious in this way requires assuming that sect and religion align, religion matters to everyone, and sectarian identity is more important than other forms of identity in Lebanon.[6] The variety of family responses to intermarriage challenges these assumptions. Indeed, interreligious marriage emerges as a primary instance of reproducing discourses and practices of sectarianism.

In what follows, based primarily on interviews with Lebanese in over 150 interreligious marriages and some of their extended family members, I treat sectarian difference as one among many forms of social difference and argue that sect may stand in for other forms of difference, including ideas about status and hierarchy related to class and regional origin in Lebanon.[7] Because it is the most readily available and acceptable discourse for understanding social difference in this context, parents often draw upon sectarian rhetoric to describe their concerns about a variety of problems they see in their children's chosen partners. By listening between the lines of parental objections, I suggest that expressions of bias against people of other sects may mask concerns with other social differences, in effect reducing a complex and shifting social field of multiple axes of difference into sect. By not assuming sectarianism's primary importance, I am able to bring other discourses of difference and analytic lenses to the foreground.

Sectarianisms in Lebanon

Scholars have thoroughly debunked the notions that sectarian categories are unchanging and primordial and that sectarianism explains all conflict in the Middle East, showing instead that sect, like other communal identities, is socially and historically constructed and that political-sectarianism in Lebanon was not the inevitable outcome of age-old divisions.[8] Suad Joseph's 1975 anthropology dissertation argued that sects are constructed through social and political processes and matter *because* they are politicized.[9] Ussama Makdisi's work shows how Ottoman reform and European pressure in the 19th century produced sectarianism, such that sect came to define modern political identity in Lebanon.[10] Others have shown how sectarianism in contemporary Lebanon is maintained, reinforced, and reproduced at

[4]There are no good statistics on interreligious marriage in Lebanon. It appears to be more common than elsewhere in the region, and may be increasing, although it is not a recent phenomenon. One way university structures have been a factor is by the (continued) fragmentation of the public Lebanese University into multiple campuses during the civil war, reducing opportunities for non-elite Lebanese to meet potential marriage partners.

[5]Drieskens, "Changing Perceptions," 7. See also Weber, "Briser et suivre."

[6]There are, of course, people who oppose intermarriage on religious grounds. But among the cases I examined, representing multiple generations, classes, and sects, piety was not a primary motivator for opposition.

[7]Interviewees included people from most sectarian groups and class backgrounds, every region in Lebanon, and multiple generations (marriage dates ranged from 1957 to 2018). I have also followed the experiences of multiple couples since 1999. Additionally, I interviewed several interreligious queer couples. In these instances, although sexuality was the primary concern, several mothers made "jokes" highlighting consciousness of the interreligious relationship. One Maronite mother responded, upon meeting her son's partner, "Look, gay, fine. But Muslim, too much!"

[8]Iliya Harik, *Politics and Change in a Traditional Society, Lebanon 1711–1845* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968); Suad Joseph, "The Politicization of Religious Sects in Borj Hammoud, Lebanon" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1975); Ahmad Beydoun, *al-Jumhuriyya al-Mutaqati'a: Masa'ir al-Sigha al-Lubnaniyya ba'd Itifaq al-Ta'if* (Beirut: Dar al-Nahar, 1999); Caesar E. Farah, *The Politics of Interventionism in Ottoman Lebanon: 1830–1861* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000); Ussama Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism: Community, History, and Violence in Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Lebanon* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000); Fawwaz Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon* (New York: Pluto Press, 2007); Max Weiss, *The Shadow of Sectarianism: Law, Shi'ism, and the Making of Modern Lebanon* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); Karen Kern, *Imperial Citizen: Marriage and Citizenship in the Ottoman Frontier Provinces of Iraq* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2011).

[9]Joseph, "Politicization of Religious Sects."

[10]Makdisi, *Culture of Sectarianism.*

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the levels of state, municipality, civil society, elite networks, citizenship, infrastructures, urban space, and personal status law.[11]

This critical scholarship addresses sectarianism in the political, institutional, and legal registers rather than considering its social and interpersonal meanings. My focus is, however, on the latter: sectarian social difference and its relationship to personal bias or discrimination. When and how and why do people practice sect as social difference in Lebanon? Simply put, my interest lies in analyzing sectarianism as an "ism" akin to racism. Lest this goal seem incompatible with my insistence that sectarian categories are socially constructed, we need only recall feminist and anti-racist scholars' arguments that discrimination based on constructed differences has material and affective consequences. Social constructs and discursive formations have power.

The multiple levels of analysis that characterize academic attention to sectarianism point to a semantic problem in the scholarly and everyday usage of the term, as highlighted in the recent volume *Sectarianization*.[12] In Lebanon, sectarianism carries at least three meanings. Sometimes scholars (and my interlocutors) use "sectarian" as a synonym for local forms of discrimination against people of other sects. My interlocutors often stated that "being sectarian" or "thinking in sectarian ways" is a significant problem. Sectarianism or, more accurately, "political-sectarianism" also refers to Lebanon's political system since independence in 1943, with eighteen recognized sectarian groups, none a majority, in a country the size of Los Angeles County.[13] In Lebanon's parliamentary democracy, political-sectarianism means all elected and appointed government and public positions are distributed by sect (from prime minister and president to mayors to public university professors).[14] Finally, sectarianism also refers to every Lebanese citizen's personal status. At birth, the state assigns a person the father's sectarian affiliation. To do anything related to personal status, one must follow the laws of the assigned sect. There are fifteen different sect-based laws and no civil alternative for matters related to marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance.

What does this mean in practice for people who want to get married? It means a religious authority (priest, minister, or shaykh) has to marry you.[15] It means there are different laws about things like minimum age and prerequisites for marriage; Muslim authorities require blood tests for genetic diseases like thalassemia, whereas Christian authorities require baptism certificates. It means there are different personal status court systems with different procedures. And it means Lebanese women experience gender discrimination in different ways: although all female citizens cannot pass citizenship to their spouses or children, divorce laws, for example, differ among personal status laws.

[11]Suad Joseph, ed. *Gender and Citizenship in the Middle East* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000); Paul Kingston, *Reproducing Sectarianism: Advocacy Networks and the Politics of Civil Society in Postwar Lebanon* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2013); Janine Clark and Bassel Salloukh, "Elite Strategies, Civil Society, and Sectarian Identities in Postwar Lebanon," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45, no. 4 (2013): 731–49; Lara Deeb and Mona Harb, *Leisurely Islam: Negotiating Geography and Morality in South Beirut* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013); Melani Cammett, *Compassionate Communalism: Welfare and Sectarianism in Lebanon* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014); Bassel Salloukh et al., *The Politics of Sectarianism in Postwar Lebanon* (London: Pluto Press, 2015); Joanne Nucho, *Everyday Sectarianism in Urban Lebanon: Infrastructures, Public Services, and Power* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016); Kristin Monroe, *The Insecure City: Space, Power, and Mobility in Beirut* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2016).

[12]Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel, eds., *Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017). See also Fanar Haddad, "'Sectarianism' and Its Discontents in the Study of the Middle East," *Middle East Journal* 71 (2017): 363–82.

[13]The largest are Sunni Islam, Shi'i Islam, and Maronite Christianity. There are also significant populations of Greek Orthodox Christians, Melkite Greek Catholics, and Druze (counted as Muslim by the state but not always by other Muslim communities). The state also recognizes two additional Muslim groups ('Alawites and Isma'ilis), nine Christian ones (Roman Catholicism, Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholicism, Assyrian or Nestorian, Armenian Orthodox, Armenian Catholicism, Chaldeans, Protestants, and Evangelicals), and Judaism.

[14]The French, with local elites, established this system during their post–WWI Mandate to give Maronite Christians political dominance and reduce the potential for unified resistance to French colonialism. They based the quotas for this system on a questionable 1932 census that has not been updated. Those quotas were revised when the civil war ended in 1990, but power sharing was merely rearranged within the existing system.

[15]A few interlocutors reported that there are clerics (of all sects) willing to bypass or forge certain religious regulations or documents (for example, related to baptism or conversion) to marry a couple. Weber describes this, for baptism certificates, in "Briser et suivre."

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Individuals' official state-designated sect may have nothing to do with what they actually believe or practice religiously, how they identify, or their political views, or even how society views them. Maya Mikdashi's work addresses the misalignment between state designation and social recognition. By distinguishing between "sect" (*ṭā'ifa*) and "personal status" (*madhhab*), Mikdashi disarticulates the legal categories used by the state to apply laws to citizens from sect as a political, social, and/or religious category.[16] The categories used by the state do not necessarily accord with how people practice or experience sect as an identity in their lives. Mikdashi builds her arguments through an ethnography that shows how "religious conversion always engenders movement between personal status laws, but it does not always engender movement between sects or between religions."[17] Sect is the more expansive category here, incorporating shared histories, aspirations, and anxieties. In other words, a person can register a religious conversion with the Lebanese state (which people do regularly for pragmatic reasons) and change their personal status designation, but continue to be socially recognized in their original sectarian category. In a well-known example, Lebanese politician Walid Jumblatt, long-time political leader of the Druze community, converted to Sunni Islam to marry a Sunni woman, but remains Druze in the eyes of society and in relation to the political party he leads. The creative possibilities for mismatch between identifications related to the criteria of law, politics, faith, and social relationships are myriad.

This point is crucial for understanding why people object to intermarriage. Sometimes a conversion "solves" the problem of family objection; sometimes it does not. Lubna, a Sunni woman whose husband converted from Druze to Sunni Islam (just like Jumblatt) to marry her forty years ago, described this mismatch between social and formal sect in her life experience. Although her husband's conversion de-escalated opposition to the marriage, Lubna's extended family refers to him as "the Druze" to this day. The sticky persistence of sectarian social identity can even extend to the next generation. The state and family recognize this couple's sons as Sunni Muslims due to their father's official conversion, but other people in their Ras Beirut social circle describe them as Druze, an assessment based on assumptions made about their last name or knowledge of their father's "original" sect. Lubna learned of this social assessment when one of her children came home from the elite mixed-sect school [they] attended one afternoon and asked her why both a teacher and other students had told [them they were] Druze.

> I went to the school and said, "What gives you the right to tell my [child] that [they are] Druze? Based on what right? You have no right. My [child] does not know. [They know] that [they are] a Muslim because it is written in the ID … but [they do] not know what these things mean."[18]

Sect is treated here as an inheritable category of social difference, not one that can be readily altered via conversion, whether or not it involves a genuine declaration of new faith. Indeed, such cases render faith irrelevant.

There are Lebanese today who convert to marry across religious lines, but most of my interlocutors refused that option.[19] This left them, until recently, with only one alternative: to leave the country to marry under civil law elsewhere—which requires having the financial resources to fly at least to Cyprus, the closest possibility, where there is a brisk business in Lebanese weddings. One can then register the marriage in Lebanon and, in theory, follow the civil law of the place where one married for subsequent matters like divorce, although not for inheritance. In practice, the extent to which a woman can assert civil law in situations of divorce or child custody varies in relation to her economic, political, and social clout. In 2013, with much media coverage, Khouloud Sukkarieh and Nidal Darwish—both Muslim but from different sects—deleted sect from their state identities and then married under civil law in Lebanon. Over thirty couples have since followed suit. However, following changes at the Ministry of Interior, the state refused to recognize these marriages, and the legal status of children of these couples remains uncertain. That uncertainty, along with a growing chorus of threats, including

[16] Maya Mikdashi, "Sex and Sectarianism: The Legal Architecture of Lebanese Citizenship," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 34, no. 2 (2014): 279–93.

[17] Ibid., 282.

[18] I edited this quotation for gender neutrality to protect identities. Raising children with mixed identities in Lebanon was a major concern for all of my interlocutors who were parents.

[19] Quite a few couples held a symbolic religious ceremony in addition to their civil one, usually to appease family.

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threats of violence against their newborn son, the first Lebanese citizen born without a sectarian identity, prompted Sukkarieh and Darwish to emigrate to Europe.

Sectarianism therefore is a structuring concept in Lebanon for at least three areas of life or levels of analysis: discrimination and bias, the formal distribution of political power and public positions, and personal status law. None of this means that sect and sectarian identities are primordial or essential categories; rather, sect and sectarian identities are continually reproduced (and challenged) at multiple levels, including the social or interpersonal.

Sectarianism as Social Difference

How, then, to look at the ways people in Lebanon practice sectarianism as social difference in the context of kinship and family? Ghassan Hage's analysis of how racist imaginations work is helpful for understanding sectarian discrimination in Lebanon.[20] Hage proposes thinking through the lens of what he calls "generalized domestication," a way of being in the world that hinges on one's ability to enlist everything into "the making of one's home. It is a struggle … to be 'at home in the world.' Yet, paradoxically, it is also a mode of domination, control, extraction, and exploitation."[21] In other words, domestication is a way of shaping one's home or space—where kin, community, and nation can all be understood in these terms—through forms of control. That control rests on hierarchies of domination, which in turn rest on difference: between humans and animals or among humans (which often takes the form of racism). Racists (or, in this case, "sectarians") do things they think will protect their sense of "being at home" by "turning difference into a polarity."[22] This point is crucial to my argument, because a polarity is "a difference where a force is aiming to evacuate each element of what makes it similar to the other."[23] Once difference has been polarized, the racists (sectarians) work to manage their space (family, community) through forms of exclusion, elimination, or control of the other.

Thinking in these terms leads to questions about the moments during which people are creating social polarizations by attributing meaning to a particular difference. These are the moments when a parent, who has friends and neighbors and colleagues from multiple sects, panics when their child wants to marry across sectarian lines. How do these parents articulate objections in ways that create a polarity between themselves and their future child-in-law? What meanings do they attribute to sect to construct this polarization? How do they fill sect as a signifier with content and value? What is at stake in their efforts to control their home spaces, families, and communities? What do they stand to lose if their children marry outside the group? One of the logics through which the polarizing process works is through the attribution and articulation of significance to particular forms of difference. Family responses to mixed marriages provide one lens through which such signification is made visible.

Of course, family responses vary. Factors that matter include the historical moment that the couple met, age (especially for females) and financial status,[24] sibling or extended family reactions, how close the partners feel to their parents, and personalities. Characteristics, in addition to religious or sectarian endogamy, of a normative desirable spouse for one's child, such as wealth, status, education, reputation, residence, and age difference, also matter.[25] Most of my interlocutors' stories included some degree of parental opposition to the marriage. In most cases, with time (ranging from a few months to a decade), parents came around. There are stories of perfect unflappable family harmony and stories of dramatic

[20]Ghassan Hage, *Is Racism An Environmental Threat?* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2017).

[21]Ibid., 91.

[22]Ibid., 98.

[23]Ibid., 98.

[24]When women approach thirty, parental opposition often begins to evaporate, betraying the relative strength of pronatalism and social pressures around unmarried daughters over the preference for endogamy. Drieskens suggests that women's inability to find the right spouses may be driving the increase in average age of marriage for Lebanese women, from 24.1 in 1970 to, depending on the source, 28.8 or 30.1 in the 21st century ("Changing Perceptions"). Also, although most unmarried Lebanese live with their parents, the financial ability to live independently shapes responses to spousal selection.

[25]Drieskens, "Changing Perceptions"; Weber, "*Briser et suivre*." Nationality also factors into desirability. Intermarriage with a non-Lebanese partner introduces new desires and discriminations, including, depending on the nationality in question, xenophobia, white or European supremacy, class, political histories, and racist hierarchies of civilization.

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cross-continent elopements. And in the middle—where most experiences lie and the focus of this article—there are patterns of engagement with a variety of forms of social difference, among which sect is but one.

Nearly every objecting parent points to a conflation of religious/sectarian difference as *the* primary problem with the child's desired spouse. But what they say changes over time, and, when looking for patterns, the contradictions that emerge in collective stories of objection suggest that relatively few parents are deeply worried about religious rules prohibiting certain marriages or the souls of their unborn grandchildren.[26] There are a handful of devout mothers caught secretly baptizing their grandchildren in private rituals. There are also a handful of people for whom conversion or a religious blessing alleviates or neutralizes the problem. But they are relatively unusual. In fact, my data suggest that a parent's faith is just as likely to correlate with or facilitate acceptance of a mixed marriage as it is to fuel opposition.

I argue that at the core of parental objections lies the fear that they will lose their place in society because of their child's mixed marriage; their objections seek to protect their ability to live in their social worlds. To the extent that kinship is central to social and economic relationships, a child's inappropriate marriage may prove quite disruptive to these worlds.[27] The parental fears hinge on a complex and shifting social field of multiple factors that parents reduce to sectarian difference. To see beyond the normative dominance of sect, we need to refuse to prioritize sect in our analyses of rhetoric that appears to be sect-based. There is no a priori reason that sect must be the primary way to understand social difference in Lebanon. Instead, sect's dominance as a signifier of social difference is itself reproduced as part of this logic. By analyzing the discourses used to describe the apparently sectarian difference that threatens parents' sense of belonging, I bring additional kinds of difference that undergird sect to the foreground.

My approach also hinges on calling into question gendered assumptions about how sect works. Mikdashi argues that one cannot study sect without sex/gender; not only do they co-construct one another, but they also are inseparable from one another (and inextricable from state categorizations of citizens).[28] Pursuing such an approach ethnographically raises questions about the presumed relationship between state categories and patriarchal religious doctrines and social norms. Feminist scholarship addressing intermarriage in Muslim-majority societies regularly highlights the sex-specific doctrinal prohibition on Muslim women marrying non-Muslim men as the key issue that makes it far more difficult for Muslim women to intermarry than their male counterparts.[29] Anne Françoise Weber suggests more generally that, in Lebanon, women face greater pressure to marry within their group than men and attributes this difference to "*la structure patriarcale de la société libanaise*."[30] Yet I heard just as many stories of intense parental pressures placed on male children as on female children, stories that trouble assumptions about what this "patriarchal structure" means and how it shapes people's lives. I also build here on Suad Joseph's assertion that we must disentangle patrilineality from patriarchy in order to better understand the latter.[31] Although patrilineal descent remains codified in Lebanon's personal status laws, social responses to mixed marriages do not necessarily conform to these gendered religious or legal limitations. As I untangle sectarian discourses from other forms of social difference, I

[26]Compare to Weber, "*Briser et suivre.*" Although Weber suggests that in Lebanon, "la norme de l'endogamie religieuse est plutôt d'ordre social que religieux," she persists in describing these social concerns in relation to maintaining sectarian boundaries: "Il importe plutôt de ne pas donner ses droits, ses enfants ou ses possessions à l'autre groupe rival. Et de ne pas démonter les frontières entre ces groupes si bien définis et séparés par le système politique et juridique libanais." This tautological argument continues to hold reified sectarian boundaries as the explanation for opposition to intermarriage.

[27]On kinship's centrality to Lebanese economic and social relationships, see Suad Joseph, "Descent of the Nation: Kinship and Citizenship in Lebanon," *Citizenship Studies*, no. 3 (1999): 295–318.

[28]Mikdashi, "Sex and Sectarianism." This piece pushes beyond the intersectional approach taken in earlier work, such as Joseph, *Gender and Citizenship*.

[29]Homa Hoodfar, *Between Marriage and the Market: Intimate Politics and Survival in Cairo* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997); Lila Abu-Lughod, ed. *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Suad Joseph, "Gendering Citizenship in the Middle East," in Joseph, *Gender and Citizenship,* 3–32; Jane Bristol-Rhys, "Weddings, Marriage and Money in the United Arab Emirates," *Anthropology of the Middle East* 2 (2007): 20–36; Frances S. Hasso, *Consuming Desires: Family Crisis and the State in the Middle East* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011).

[30]Weber, "Briser et suivre."

[31]Joseph, "Descent of the Nation."

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also argue that we must decouple our understanding of the gendering of sectarianism from the gendering of personal status law. We cannot assume that, because religious and state authorities regulate the family in gendered ways, social practices will mirror this.[32]

To think about sect as part of a complex and entangled understanding of social identity and difference in Lebanon, alongside gender and class we must include region, especially urban-rural differences and an understanding of social status that requires thinking about how sect, wealth, and location have intersected with status historically. Sect and class have intersected in different ways throughout Lebanese history, including in relation to intermarriage. In the 18th and 19th centuries, for instance, status mattered far more than religion in marriage alliances among elite landowners.[33] In my interviews, people often used class similarity to explain why certain mixed marriages did not face considerable opposition, in phrases like "our families are from the same level, so that was more important" or "sect didn't matter because the social circle was the same." Understanding how sect, class, and status work together requires attending to the multiple social hierarchies cross-cutting Lebanese society. Different calculations of status may corroborate or contradict one another. For example, Mona Harb and I describe "the class-sect nexus" in Lebanon as a way to analyze why cafes in Shiʿi-majority neighborhoods could never attain middle-class status in the eyes of residents of other areas.[34] The axes of social hierarchy we identified included Sunnis viewing themselves (and being viewed by Christians and Druze) as having higher status than Shiʿi Muslims; Christians viewing themselves (but not necessarily being viewed by others) as having higher status than Muslims; and a hierarchy of religiosity from visible to invisible. The key point here is that there are multiple, shifting measures of status and definitions of "community," and in situations of intermarriage they can and do emerge in all sorts of ways.

A cursory observation of my data thus far would allow me to easily talk about patterns that appear to be "sect-specific." One could argue that Sunni families object to intermarriage in different ways than Druze or Maronite families. But using the same stories from the same interviews, one could also show that there are patterns of opposition that crosscut these sectarian identifications. It matters what we choose to *see* and *how* we choose to name it.[35] At the core of parental objections, I see that people believe their objections are protecting their ability to continue to exist within their social worlds, and that those worlds do not necessarily hinge on sectarian endogamy or similarity.

Seeing Past Sectarianism: Rural Versus Urban Differences

Samia, a wealthy Sunni mother in Beirut, led the family protest when her daughter declared her desire to marry a Maronite Christian she met at the private elite university they both attended. Samia—who by her own admission has never prayed regularly, only fasts partially during Ramadan, drinks socially, and says she will never wear hijab—focused her protest on the religious prohibition of Muslim women marrying non-Muslim men. She paraded a series of shaykhs through their living room to plead and, on one occasion, threaten her daughter, and refused to attend the wedding held outside Lebanon. After her first grandchild was born, they reconciled. But Samia remained unhappy about the marriage. Several years later, she said to me, "it would have just been so much easier if [my daughter] had found an Orthodox Christian instead of this Maronite guy." When I noted gently that it made no difference in Sunni doctrine what kind of Christian a Muslim woman wanted to marry, it was all prohibited, she explained,

> When [my daughter] told me she loved him, I told her, *layki*, Rūm Orthodox are everywhere in Ras Beirut, you could have loved someone from that sect since they are a lot like us.… Many times you can't distinguish a Muslim from a Rūm Orthodox person. In the city, we are the same.

[32]For an intervention showing the complex relationship among patriarchy, power, and couples' negotiations of intimacy, see Sabiha Allouche, "Love, Lebanese Style: Toward an Either/And Analytic Framework of Kinship," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 15, no. 2 (2019): 157–78.

[33]Makdisi, *Culture of Sectarianism.*

[34]Deeb and Harb, *Leisurely Islam.*

[35]See Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), for a call to broad ethical scholarly praxis that requires assessing *how* we think about problems and *seeing* different analytic terms. Sectarianism may seem far from Haraway's work on multispecies being together, but in her model for new ways of living difference together across species I see lessons for new ways of practicing difference among humans.

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Later in the conversation, she suggested, "*Layki*, in village areas where Shiʿa and Maronites live, you will find this kind of marriage would be easier, or Druze and Maronites, also that's possible. But not for us. This is Beirut." Over the course of our conversation, it became clear that Samia's disapproval of her son-in-law had little to do with religion, but was instead focused on the fact that, despite his upper-middle-class upbringing, Beirut education, and stable financial situation, he originally hailed from a rural area of the country.

In a gender reversal of this story, Sarah, from a Maronite family, and Muhammad, from a Sunni family, also met as undergrads at an elite university and decided to get engaged just after graduation. The initial meeting between Muhammad and Sarah's parents was "very formal." Her father expressed hesitation about both the religious difference and their youth, as they had yet to establish their careers or financial stability. Muhammad explained, "I told him pretty much that, 'Don't worry, unless, until I have a house, until I have a job, until I have some money saved up, I'm not gonna take her away from the comforts of her home.'" His parents expressed similar concerns about their age and lack of financial independence, but no opposition related to religion. His father even noted that Christian women are acceptable marriage partners for Muslim men and that their children would be Muslim anyway. The couple maintained their engagement privately for several years, during which both families tried to break them up through concerted matchmaking campaigns. By the time they set a date, Sarah's family had accepted the engagement, but Muhammad's parents had begun to say Sarah was an inappropriate bride for their son because she was Christian. No one from his side of the family attended the wedding in Cyprus. Over the years, Sarah's parents developed a warm relationship with the couple and later, their children. Muhammad's parents and siblings continued to insist that he had married badly because he had married a non-Muslim. They were rude to Sarah and refused to welcome her in their home. In an effort to mend these relationships, Sarah began reading about Islam, genuinely converted, and began to pray and fast. Muhammad is a self-declared atheist. Despite this conversion, and Sarah's commitment to raising Muslim children, his mother continues to shun her.

Juxtaposing these two cases shows us the limits of relying on patriarchal personal status law or religious norms as explanations for opposition to Christian-Muslim marriages. Like these stories, many of my interviewees described Sunni families objecting to their children marrying Maronite Christians on the stated grounds of religious difference. However, upending the expectation that such marriages should be more difficult for female Muslims than for males, these objections appeared just as frequently in response to the intermarriage of sons as that of daughters. Based on a reading of religious doctrine, patrilineal personal status law, and patriarchal social norms, this makes no sense. From a Lebanese Muslim male perspective, this is a religiously acceptable marriage and any children will be raised in the father's faith or at least stamped with his sectarian identity by the state. The mother in the first story, Samia, could initially draw on that readily available and socially sanctioned reason for protesting her daughter's marriage. But why should it be a problem if a Sunni man marries a "person of the book" or be better if a Sunni woman marries an Orthodox Christian instead of a Maronite?

To understand these situations, we must stop thinking about them as "Sunni families objecting on religious grounds" and instead lay class and status concerns atop discourses about sectarian difference. For many of these families, status hinged on their self-identification with an urban Beirut elite. For some, this elitist stance places Sunni Beirutis at the apex of a hierarchy built on assertions of original Beirut residency and long-term urban status, political claim to the position of prime minister, and historical status as non-minority Ottoman subjects. They link residency, political power, and claims to normativity to being Sunni in ways that do not always align with economic capital. By this rubric, an equally wealthy (or wealthier) Shiʿi Muslim family remains of lower status, labeled nouveau riche and assumed to have generated wealth in West Africa as opposed to the Arab Gulf, thereby incorporating global racialized hierarchies into this assessment. For others, status as part of an economic and urbane Beirut elite took clear precedence over sect, and a non-Sunni or non-Muslim suitor with shared status, thus defined, was preferable to a Sunni from elsewhere in the country. Certainly for Samia, the Maronite identity of her son-in-law signified his family's rural roots and tainted him with stereotypes about Maronites as less educated, backward, village Christians as opposed to the urbane Orthodox Christians that supposedly make up the intellectual elite. The fact that he came from a similar economic class did not matter to her. Although I could not speak with Muhammad's mother, he believed her disapproval of Sarah

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stemmed from her family's different social circle: "In Beirut, like there is a social circle with more social circles within it, everyone is a circle within a circle, so if Sarah was at least in one level of the circles, like, you know, the Rūm [Orthodox Christian], I think that would have been enough."[36] Although Muhammad did not invoke class, his family was the wealthier, which likely contributed to his sense of being in different social circles. It is worth noting that these Beiruti parents did not actually lose their social worlds, although they feared gossip, and many mothers expressed a version of "What will people say?" to their children. As we shall see in the next section, sometimes it is a parent's expression of opposition itself that eases this social pressure for them.

These ways of understanding elite status as tied in various ways to claims on both wealth and urban residency are neither Sunni-specific nor shared by Sunni Muslims across the country. Many Orthodox Christian families understand themselves in the same terms and object to intermarriage in ways that reveal similarly articulated status concerns. In several cases, once the initial shock faded, parents or extended family members drew on class similarity as a way to accept a mixed marriage. "It is not ideal," one aunt told me, "but at least he is from a family of our level (*mustawa).*" Status claims can also be provoked, usually in milder form, in relation to intersectarian unions. Several Maronite spouses of Rum Orthodox complained of in-law commentary, often cast as humor, about their allegedly less urbane ways, and multiple Shiʿi spouses vented that their Sunni in-laws looked down upon them and their families.

Seeing Past Sectarianism: Intergenerational Village Networks

Other markers of hierarchy define status in other situations. Both scholarly literature and common knowledge suggest that Druze families are the most likely to oppose intermarriage.[37] Several of my interlocutors who married Druze told me they had anticipated problems. One explained, "there was a question mark in my mind, not because she was from a different religion, but because [she was] Druze in particular. It is known that they are very difficult and don't let anyone marry outside the sect." Ideals of Druze endogamy manifest in events like the National Druze Convention that takes place in the United States. Several young people whose parents had forced them to attend described it to me as "a matchmaking festival." There is also a Druze-only dating app. Even the marriage of Lebanese-British lawyer Amal Alamuddin, whose family is Druze, to George Clooney, although lauded by most Lebanese due to his celebrity status, triggered speculation about the disapproval of community elders.

Here the prediction that families will oppose the marriage is not wrong: most of my Druze interlocutors shared stories of parental objection to their marrying non-Druze. And although elopements are rare in the 21st century, nearly every recent elopement story I *have* heard has been in response to the intractability of Druze opposition to the marriage. However, we need to revisit the common explanations for Druze endogamy. These explanations usually focus on a combination of faith and minority status. The faith explanation cites the beliefs that one cannot become Druze by conversion, that there are a limited number of Druze souls, which are reincarnated, and that one's children will not truly be Druze, even if you are male. This is potentially spiritually significant that rarely holds up to ethnographic scrutiny. None of my Druze interlocutors knew much about the intricacies of Druze heritability and reincarnation. It makes sense that people who believe Druze identity is inherited and one's soul will be expelled from the spiritual community for the sin of intermarriage generally do not intermarry.

Surprisingly, most objecting Druze parents insisted that these spiritual matters were not the problem and had raised their children with little discussion of the religious aspects of being Druze (which is common, as there are no regular Druze rituals for laypeople) as well as little mention of the social aspects of the Druze identity. It is possible they were simply unwilling to share their spiritual concerns with me, an outsider to the Druze community. But most of the time, their children also did not recollect them invoking such matters in conversations or arguments. One explained: "I mean, I don't think really any Druze know much about their religion…I mean my parents wouldn't even tell me if they wanted to, because

[36] I only interviewed parents with the permission of their child (my original interlocutor). Some parents were deceased or ill. I did not interview parents who fully supported the marriage or who were still not speaking with their child.

[37] Drieskens, "Changing Perceptions."

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they don't know anything. Maybe my great-grandparents or grandfather and grandmother did, but my parents didn't." The minority status explanation holds for explaining opposition to the intermarriage of Druze *daughters*, given that the intermarriage of Druze women does in fact translate to losing numbers in a political-sectarian context in which people think such calculations matter. If one does not subscribe to beliefs associated with Druze spiritual continuity but worries about population numbers, intermarriage should be acceptable for Druze men. It may even be desirable as long as the man does not convert and the couple has a civil marriage, because their children will count, according to the Lebanese state, as Druze, effectively growing the community.[38]

This gendered acceptability works for political leaders, even those who convert. Not only did Walid Jumblatt change his personal status but still count as Druze, his son also converted to marry a Shi'i woman, but continues to count as Druze, and last year received the political mantle of sectarian leadership from his father. However, once again, in contradiction to patriarchal norms, Druze parents oppose the intermarriage of their sons as frequently as that of their daughters. In these cases as well, we must decouple sectarianism from personal status, and take care not to allow the gendering of one to determine our expectations of the other. As one woman said, laughing at the gendered reversal of language, "*ana khaṭaftu!*" In Arabic, the term *khaṭifa* connotes bride theft or kidnapping; this non-Druze bride "stole" or "kidnapped" her Druze groom.

Furthermore, concerns with being a dwindling minority in Lebanon are by no means unique to the Druze community or somehow Druze in nature. All Christian sects are also minorities in Lebanon, amid political discourse that highlights fears about their dwindling numbers in both the country and the region. And once again, plenty of Christian parents objected to their son's mixed marriages as well as those of their daughters. There *are* patterns to these allegedly Druze or Christian objections, but they are patterns shared across these groups, not defined by or defining of them. Seeing these intersecting patterns moves us away from a reinscription of sect toward a complex understanding of status and sect defined in part by regional networks, a spatialized sociality.

One of these shared patterns reflects the value placed on strong intergenerational social and economic relationships that connect people living in Beirut to communities in mountain villages or towns (*bil-jabal*).[39] These parents usually describe difference in terms of sect, but refer to a much smaller, more specific, and spatialized social configuration as their community. They are more likely to make vague statements about the potential marriage as "something we do not do" or call upon the harm that will hypothetically befall elders, "this will kill your grandmother." Although sometimes parents enlist aunts, uncles, grandparents, and cousins to convince the child to see sense, more often than not they try to keep the problematic relationship a secret for as long as possible. Reliance (social as much as economic) on intergenerational urban-*jabal* social networks and the fear of losing those networks are the key motivators for these parents' objections.

Omar highlighted the high status his family held in the village as the source of the problem: "My family is not religious, but always played, like a role in the community, in the village, like a reference point for problems and counsel and stuff, so that was a pressure point, where you are expected to play that role model." Before his marriage, Omar's mother sat down with his fiancée to explain to her how important it was for her son to "maintain that family tradition and participate in village life and its formal social obligations," and that she would need to do those things "to maintain the status of the house."

Elie, a Maronite man, explained his parents' objections in similar terms: "This was all about what are people going to say, we have a certain status in the community, everyone knows us, everyone knows me and my parents, and they were worried about this issue." Both Druze and Christian parents who rely on community networks panic when their children violate the boundaries of those networks. In Hage's terms, they fear being shunned by the social and kinship worlds upon which their own wellbeing may

[38]The case of Walid, in Raja Abillama, "Contesting Secularism: Civil Marriage and Those Who Do Not Belong to a Religious Community in Lebanon," *Political and Legal Anthropology Review* (2018): 148–62, supports this gendered minority status explanation. He imagined that legalizing civil marriage "would make it possible to avoid the injunction of communal endogamy" for male Druze and "contribute to the community's numerical growth" (154).

[39]Other patterns, developed in my larger project, relate to spatial integration and segregation, especially following the civil war, and how social-spatial realignments have shaped understandings of difference among Lebanese and bolstered the insistence that difference is sectarian as opposed to something else.

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depend. Their assertions of social status depend on these networks, and the threat of their loss, for themselves, their children, and their grandchildren, is dangerous.

Eventually, sometimes years later, and usually after getting to know the potential partner, most of these parents reluctantly conceded defeat. More often than not, they learned that their social world did not fall apart; they could show their face in the village, and grandparents survived. Family opposition in these cases may well be the key to *maintaining* social status. A parent who can say, "I did my best to stop my wayward child, but in the end, I love them and can't break my own heart by disowning them," is more likely to be received with kindness than one who does not appear to make the effort. Maronite mother Giselle explained, "I felt that this role would protect me, that people would see me fighting him, saying no, not giving him my blessing." Dia, a Druze mother, concurred:

> My stand against [my child] made things easier. [My parents] saw that I did what I had to do. If in the beginning I had said that I have no problem and held a wedding, of course they would have boycotted me and stopped talking to me. Instead, they came and told me, "we will come and stand by you."

Many parents oppose a marriage, tell people they did so, embrace the ensuing sympathy, and then, as soon as it's all a done deal, accept the situation. "*ʿAmilt illī ʿalayyi*." I did what I had to do. I did what I could. I did my part.

Sometimes there are social consequences for the couple: their parents may treat them normally at home in Beirut, but other villagers may ignore their marriages or refuse to welcome spouses at weddings or funerals. In other cases, the moment a parent, usually the father, publicly supports their child, social and family networks fall into line and embrace the new couple, at least to their faces. Farid is a Druze man who married a Muslim without his parents' blessing, but afterward they embraced his new spouse and, years later, all seems well. As he explained, "Once it was done, it was done. And once my dad accepted it, everyone else did. You know, 'like it or not, here it is.'" In the rare instances in which a father immediately stands by his child and supports a marriage, people may gossip behind family members' backs, but they politely attend wedding-related events and perform their social duties. Here we see another way that patriarchy and social pressure can work together: public displays of parental support are gendered. A widowed Druze mother shared: "When he [her husband] was alive, we were a family who raised our children in a way where religion never existed at home.… We never said to our children, 'You can't marry a non-Druze person.'" But when her husband passed away, both extended families "started social pressure on me as a single mom." The relationship of fears of being ostracized to actual incidents of shunning depend on the identity, perhaps especially the gender, of the parent.

The power of fear also appears in the phenomenon of what several people called "opening the door." Dia ultimately accepted her son's wife and family, but noted that one of the reasons for her earlier objection was to prevent her other children from following his example. "I didn't want to set an example for my daughter, who was also dating a non-Druze guy and was waiting to see [what happened].… And if you ask me, 'Do you want your other son to marry a non-Druze girl?' I would say no again." When I asked why, she replied,

> Why? Because of the social pressure, I don't want to be seen as the strange/outsider *(gharīb)* woman who let all her children marry outsiders and did not care.… This is my society, the one I live in, those with whom I drink coffee every morning and spend the afternoon with … I don't want to be strange/an outsider.

"Opening the door" takes place at the village level as well: the first person from a village—no matter what sect or when they marry—to break the endogamy rules has the hardest time. A decade later, one is likely to find three or five or ten examples, each more easily navigated than the last. Several Maronite and Druze interlocutors, unrelated and unknown to one another, told me that after they married outside their sect, random youth from their village who they did not know began thanking them for being brave enough to "open the door."

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Seeing Past Sectarianism: Transnational Islamophobia and Secularism

Another pattern that cuts across not only Druze and Christian family objections but also some Muslim families' explicit opposition to intersectarian (as opposed to interreligious) marriage reflects identification with transnational discourses of Islamophobia, revealing the specific, gendered ways these discourses hail certain Lebanese. In drawing on common transnational Islamophobic tropes, parents assert their (higher) status as cosmopolitan and oriented toward the West, whether understood as Europe or North America. These parents also describe the problem in sectarian terms, but link religion or sect explicitly to what they call "differences of culture" *(thaqāfa)*.[40] They then define this cultural difference in Islamophobic terms: "He'll marry a second wife," or, "He'll force you to veil." In contrast, I have yet to hear of a parent objecting to their child marrying a Maronite Christian because "they don't allow divorce" or an Orthodox Christian because "he'll force you to baptize the children." In most such cases, parental consent emerges gradually through a process of getting to know the potential groom and establishing that he is "like us"—meaning quite explicitly that he drinks alcohol, a stipulation cited by many of my interlocutors.

Although Islamophobic rhetoric was more typically invoked in relation to Muslim grooms, it sometimes surfaced in relation to Muslim brides in the form of worries that she would not raise appropriately cultured children.[41] More often, because the female partner in most interreligious couples does not wear a headscarf, she is more quickly understood to be "like us."[42] In appearing "like us," these potential spouses effectively thwart parental efforts to construct a polarization out of difference, and instead insert themselves into, in Hage's terms, parental notions of home and comfort. Parents then often announce to friends and neighbors that the bride or groom is Muslim or Sunni or Shi'a, "but not like the others" drawing again on transnational discourses, this time of the "good" versus "bad" Muslim.

What is this "like us" conveying in terms of understandings of social difference and hierarchy? A key factor is the invisibility of religion and the relationship between sectarianism and secularism in Lebanon. Sectarianism, in all its entangled legal, political, and social registers, produces certain sorts of subjects, not only in terms of demographics, or in relationship to legislation or citizenship, but also in relation to how people understand themselves. People are shaped by living in a multiply sectarian society, both in line with and against various understandings of the concept. Many of my interlocutors, across generations, unequivocally denounced all things sectarian and described themselves as being "secular," whether in English, Arabic (*`ilmānī*), or French (*laïc*). These alignments are sometimes contradictory: it is common for people to be critical of the political-sectarian system as part of their "secular" outlook, despite the fact that the political-sectarian system is a secular form of government.[43] And self-described "secularism" is sometimes remarkably similar to those transnational Islamophobic discourses that find purchase with some objecting parents, including some of their own parents.

Here we see another way in which status in Lebanon emerges outside socioeconomic class. There exists a hierarchy of religiosity in which visible Muslim piety ranks below visible Christian piety, which ranks below visible secularity. By "secularism," my interlocutors meant a range of beliefs and practices, from atheism to invisible faith. But almost universally, they understood having a Christmas tree, no matter what one's sect, and raising their children with family meals on religious holidays, as marks of their secularism. Wearing a visible cross or a hijab is not a mark of secularism. Christian interlocutors who go to church on Palm Sunday and Easter and take part in associated rituals generally view themselves as secular in ways they do not view Muslim Lebanese who fast during Ramadan or go to the mosque on Eid. In short, the degree of permissible religious practice differs, in many of my

[40]Sometimes the marker of cultural difference highlighted in a particular argument seemed mundane and vaguely class-related (e.g., draining fried potatoes on paper towels versus newspapers was an issue of contention for several mothers).

[41]"Cultured" here included ideas about dress, language, phrases, habits, food, and taste that again came down to notions of similarity.

[42]An exception made the news in 2017: https://www.annahar.com/article/637991 (accessed 25 September 2018). See also Lara Deeb, "'Til Sect Do You Part?' On Sectarianism and Intermarriage in Lebanon," *Jadaliyya* (14 September 2017), https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/34552 (accessed 25 September 2018).

[43]Mikdashi, "Sex and Sectarianism"; Saba Mahmood, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016). Abillama, in "Contesting Secularism," argues that both civil and religious marriage legal regimes are secular, but misses a key dimension of power in its gender-blind analysis.

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interlocutors' assessments, for Christians and Muslims. Moreover, the degree to which they deem practices religious in the first place also differs. Many described walking around the church three times and attending services on Easter as a "cultural tradition," but label going to the mosque for Eid prayers a religious practice. These differences of phrase reveal a hierarchy of cultural value linked to ideas about social status.

These ideas about what constitutes secular practice were shared by many of my Muslim and Druze interlocutors. As Talal Asad has argued, we must understand the secular as deeply rooted in a European Christian context.[44] This context informs my interviewees' understandings, no matter what their sectarian background. They linked being "secular" to calculations of status: secular people are more cosmopolitan, open-minded, educated, and modern than other Lebanese. Some pointed to their willingness to break the rules around marriage as evidence of this status. There were also moments when the ways that my interlocutors talked about being secular began to sound like "secular" was a new sect, a "post-sectarian" marker of cosmopolitan social identity.[45] Socially, one can be recognized as Sunni or Maronite or Druze or secular, the latter indicating a pious disavowal of such categorization in the first place.[46]

Conclusion

My aim has been to look beyond sectarianism by articulating sect with various notions of status and showing its complex relationship to social difference in Lebanon. Although sectarianism is the most common discourse for talking about difference, it remains only one way a person can practice difference in this context. Parents who act in sectarian ways are best understood, in Hage's terms, as domesticators: people working, through practices of exclusion, to preserve a notion of comfort and well-being in their home/community, which includes their social status, reputations, and networks. As they invoke sectarian difference as a threat to this comfort, *other* discourses of difference emerge, related to rural-urban distinctions, intergenerational village networks, and transnational notions of secularity.

There remains the question of *why* sectarianism is the dominant discourse for expressing discomfort with others. Part of the answer lies in the entrenchment of sectarian political and legal structures in Lebanon. Sectarian calculations and rhetoric in political, economic, and civil society as well as social contexts have no doubt contributed to sectarianism's dominance as a normative model of thinking about the social world. Many Lebanese are comfortable dropping stereotypes or disparaging remarks about people of other sects into conversation, as long as no one of that group is present to hear them (and sometimes even if they are). Experiences of war and political violence, and postwar spatial segregation, fuel the availability of sect as the easiest way to talk about difference. The strength of religious endogamy as a norm is also a factor. No one wonders what is wrong with a parent who objects to an interreligious marriage; objection is the appropriate social response.

Yet normative social reproduction is also at work here. By drawing on sect to oppose intermarriage, parents are *(re)producing* sectarianism as the primary and acceptable polarizing form of difference. By seeing these other discourses despite this polarization, we can dislodge sect from the center of this tangle of meaning, so it becomes one kind of difference among many, rather than the dominant category used to define and subsume dense social fields. Even when people use sectarian discourses to set up a polarization

[44]Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003). Another explanation for why secular Christians comprise the unmarked category in Muslim-majority Lebanon is related to how some Lebanese seek to approach global whiteness by deploying transnational anti-Muslim discourses.

[45]These dynamics are neither unique to my interlocutors nor entirely new: There are middle- and upper-class Beirutis whose families do not include mixed marriages who share these views of what constitutes secular practice, and long histories of "secular" social and political configurations in Lebanon, especially related to leftist political parties, that prefigure contemporary anti-sectarian or post-sectarian activism and sensibilities.

[46]Younger interviewees more frequently spoke in these terms; older individuals tended to pair "secular" as an adjective with a state category (e.g., "I am a secular Sunni"). This generational difference in understandings of the relationship between secular and sectarian informed conversations about intermarriage. Some also linked identification with a "secular" Lebanese community to space: mixed couples who could afford to often chose to live in neighborhoods they described as "secular" or "mixed." These are not necessarily spaces where multiple religions are visible. Instead, non-religious Christian symbolism remains the unmarked aesthetic: Christmas trees, but no Nativities. Muslims are incorporated into these spaces if they are not visibly different.

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between themselves and an other in Lebanon, the criteria of hierarchy to which they are referring does not necessarily align with sect. Various elements have been delinked, such that the alignments of sect, wealth, status, and region are in flux. It may in fact be the density of meaning it carries, in a messy social field, that opens sect up and allows it to serve as a catch-all and convenient signifier of difference. Indeed, the variety of ways that people deploy sect suggests that it is moving toward a certain emptiness as a signifier, an emptiness ripe for multivalent and contested meanings and uses.

Despite what I suspect is the growing prevalence of interreligious marriages in Lebanon, most Lebanese conform to expectations of endogamy. Stories circulate about young people who avoid dating anyone of a different religion, "*li waffir ʿa ḥalī mashākil*," to avoid future problems.[47] For every situation in which the door is opened, there are several instances in which people complain that today's youth are "more sectarian" in their outlook and practices. Although these marriages and their reverberations open spaces of possibility, where people can, in their kinship choices, push back at the boundaries of sectarianism, broader social change remains uncertain.[48] Is it possible to change how people understand, articulate, and practice difference in a place where sectarianism holds forth politically, legally, and socially? Can intermarriage help us think of difference differently or work to shape a different social world? However unrealistic their expectations, many of my interlocutors answered these questions with a hopeful desire, describing their marriages as a small step toward a less sectarian future for Lebanon.

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[47]See Allouche, "Queering [Inter-Sectarian] Heterosexual Love."

[48]Similarly, Allouche, ibid., argues that inter-sectarian love "exhumes a particular agency … which attempts, albeit fails, to reverse the status quo" (552) and that its anti-normative potential queers it, where "queerness...is evoked as political hope" (559).

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