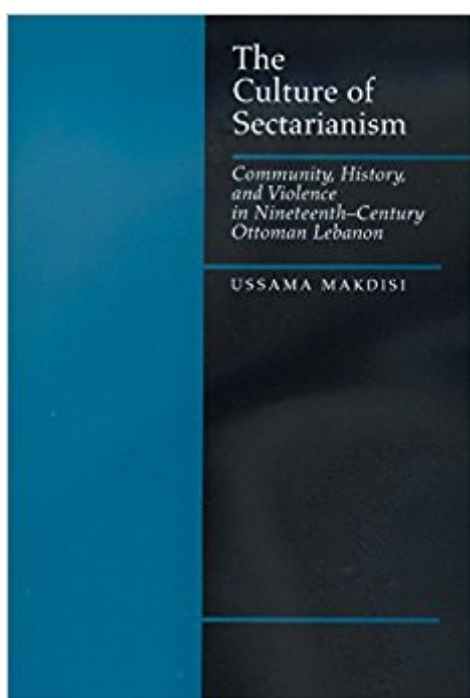


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The Culture Of Sectarianism: Community, History, And Violence In Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Lebanon



Synopsis

Focusing on Ottoman Lebanon, Ussama Makdisi shows how sectarianism was a manifestation of modernity that transcended the physical boundaries of a particular country. His study challenges those who have viewed sectarian violence as an Islamic response to westernization or simply as a product of social and economic inequities among religious groups. The religious violence of the nineteenth century, which culminated in sectarian mobilizations and massacres in 1860, was a complex, multilayered, subaltern expression of modernization, he says, not a primordial reaction to it. Makdisi argues that sectarianism represented a deliberate mobilization of religious identities for political and social purposes. The Ottoman reform movement launched in 1839 and the growing European presence in the Middle East contributed to the disintegration of the traditional Lebanese social order based on a hierarchy that bridged religious differences. Makdisi highlights how European colonialism and Orientalism, with their emphasis on Christian salvation and Islamic despotism, and Ottoman and local nationalisms each created and used narratives of sectarianism as foils to their own visions of modernity and to their own projects of colonial, imperial, and national development. Makdisi's book is important to our understanding of Lebanese society today, but it also makes a significant contribution to the discussion of the importance of religious discourse in the formation and dissolution of social and national identities in the modern world.

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Customer Reviews

"The Culture of Sectarianism is a nuanced critique of historical reductionism, scapegoats, and easy, simple explanations."--Daily Star of Lebanon

Focusing on Ottoman Lebanon, Ussama Makdisi shows how sectarianism was a manifestation of modernity that transcended the physical boundaries of a particular country. His study challenges those who have viewed sectarian violence as an Islamic response to westernization or simply as a product of social and economic inequities among religious groups. The religious violence of the nineteenth century, which culminated in sectarian mobilizations and massacres in 1860, was a complex, multilayered, subaltern expression of modernization, he says, not a primordial reaction to it. Makdisi argues that sectarianism represented a deliberate mobilization of religious identities for political and social purposes. The Ottoman reform movement launched in 1839 and the growing European presence in the Middle East contributed to the disintegration of the traditional Lebanese social order based on a hierarchy that bridged religious difference. Makdisi highlights how European Colonialism and Orientalism, with their emphasis on Christian salvation and Islamic despotism, and Ottoman and local nationalisms each created and used narratives of sectarianism as foils to their own visions of modernity and to their own projects of colonial, imperial, and national development. Makdisi's book is important to our understanding of Lebanese society today, but it also makes a significant contribution to the discussion of the importance of religious discourse in the formation and dissolution of social and national identities in the modern world.

Great book, thank you so much!

There is much that is thought provoking in this scholarly but never boring book; for example, the notion of simplistic, self referential perceptions on the part of western missionaries and diplomats of the various communities in Mount Lebanon coloring subsequent views - and consequently, policies - in that part of the world, and creating artificial stereotypes which were then conveniently exploited. Makdissi's analysis is cogent and stimulating. He presents a challenging and refreshing perspective on events in Mount Lebanon in the middle of the nineteenth century and their far-reaching implications to the state of affairs in modern Lebanon. One cannot help drawing a parallel with perceptions of the world today informed by CNN-cum fast food-style information: Everything one hears is simplistically and uniformly packaged to render it more easily palatable with little regard for the complexities of any situation. What is particularly disconcerting is that even our own perceptions are colored by that type of reporting and analysis! Makdissi's book reminds us of the necessity for questioning our perspectives and assumptions thus conducting 'reality checks' that may lead to some new solutions to misdiagnosed problems.

Makdisi reveals a perspective on the early missionary impact that you don't find anywhere else...or at least I haven't. Well worth reading.

ESSENTIAL reading for students of the region

I read this book for a college class. It was quite informative as well as extremely helpful. Pros: The author does a great job trying to articulate his point that the rise in sectarianism is not a product of the 20th century, but instead a product of more recent times. He tries to argue that the blame should be somewhat given to the Western powers for inciting the rise in major clashes between the Christians and the Muslims. The author understands that the Western perspective of Muslims being bad and all. He uses Lebanon to specifically showcase that our truths are in a way overblown. Cons: This book is definitely not for the faint of heart. While good, it can sometimes be convoluted in understanding what is truly going on. Definitely not for someone who has no interest in learning more about Lebanon.

The thesis of this book is simple: Sectarianism is not an age-old feature of Lebanese society but rather developed in a dialectical process involving locals, Ottoman reformists, and European interests. The argument is convincing, but it is still incomplete. There is virtually no treatment whatsoever of the changing economic realities the region experienced in the 19th century. As a social history, the work distances itself from the Marxist model, but unfortunately, this distancing resulted in neglect in terms of economic structures of Mt. Lebanon, especially with regard to the Christian peasant rebellions and the subsequent massacres which take up a large portion of the book.

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