Politics and Religion (2024), 1–27
doi:10.1017/S1755048324000178

CAMBRIDGE
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ARTICLE

Neither secular nor sectarian: perspectives on social life and politics among Beirut's religiously devout youth

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Abstract

This paper explores the following question: How does individual religiosity and attachment to a religious community relate to sectarian political loyalties or interpersonal prejudices in a post-conflict, institutionally sectarianized society? The paper explores this question through dialectic, participatory methods with youth involved in community-based youth associations with a religious component. The paper investigates how religiously devout youth in Lebanon conceptualize the personal and communal elements of their religiosity in relation to sectarian politics. In this way, the paper contributes to a study of social sectarianism, in which scholars are striving to understand what individuals mean when they speak about sect, and how discussions surrounding sect mask more complex underlying social realities. Overall, these accounts suggest that personal and social religiosity both positively influence anti-sectarian political outlook among participants, while other factors, such as the institutional sectarianization of public life and a history of violent conflict maintain participants' default attachment to co-sectarian networks in terms of routine, economic security, and communal belonging.

Keywords: youth; associational life; sect; sectarian politics

Introduction

Lebanon recognizes 18 ethnoreligious sects, allocated political representation according to census data from before the 1975–1990 civil war. These include five Muslim sects (Sunni, Shi'a, Druze, Alawite, Ismaili) and 12 Christian sects (the largest of which are Maronite, Eastern/Greek Orthodox, and Melchite).[1] As a site of repeated political conflict over the past century, Lebanon is often used as a case study for research on post-conflict social cohesion and ethno-religious sectarianism. Lebanon lies at a point of intersection between regional literatures on religion and politics in the Middle East (e.g., Haddad and Hindy, 2019; Cammett and Jones, 2022) and a global literature on divided societies or post-conflict states (e.g., Kalyvas, 2003;

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Buckley-Zistel, 2006; Nagle and Clancy, 2010). Regional analysts are taking an increasingly nuanced view of relationship between religiosity and intergroup prejudice or and political choice of religious parties in Muslim-majority societies (Clingingsmith *et al.*, 2009; Pepinsky, 2022; Siddiqui, 2022). Lebanon is a more ethnically and religiously diverse state than those often studied within the regional literature. This paper brings regional literature into conversation with an ongoing debate in "divided societies" literature, about how much to attribute the maintenance of ethno-religious divides in sectarian, post-conflict societies to interpersonal or religiously based prejudice versus the more structuralist attribution to the design of political elites (Elliott, 2013; Majed, 2020).

This paper explores the following question: How does individual religiosity and attachment to a religious community relate to sectarian political loyalties or interpersonal prejudices in a post-conflict, institutionally sectarianized society? The paper explores this question through dialectic, participatory methods[2] with youth involved in community-based youth associations with a religious component. It investigates how religiously devout youth in Lebanon conceptualize the personal and communal elements of their religiosity in relation to sectarian politics. In this way, the paper contributes to a study of social sectarianism, in which scholars are striving to understand what individuals mean when they speak about sect, and how discussions surrounding sect mask more complex underlying social realities (e.g., Deeb, 2020).

The paper is organized around four main segments. First, the paper will explore how participants discuss their approach to friendships in their religious peer network and their attitudes toward interreligious friendships. Secondly, it will explore how participants describe their political outlook, and how they distinguish their political participation from what they consider a "sectarian" approach to politics. Thirdly, it will explore how participants respond to statements that associate religiosity with social division, and how participants verbalize religiosity and sectarianism as fully distinct, sometimes even counteracting, social forces. Finally, it will highlight intergenerational shifts and memories of past conflict that continue to shape participant experiences of sectarian social boundaries. Overall, these accounts suggest that personal and social religiosity both positively influence anti-sectarian political outlook among participants, while other factors, such as the institutional sectarianization of public life and a history of violent conflict maintain participants' default attachment to co-sectarian networks in terms of routine, economic security, and communal belonging.

Theory and terminology

Studying routine social life in a context riddled with labels of "secularism" and "sectarianism" runs into various terminological complexities. The labels "sectarian" and "nonsectarian" have been increasingly seen as unsubstantial (Majed, 2020), as they are often leveraged to either discredit or virtue signal (respectively), and often do not reflect functional differences between sect-labelled organizations and "nonsectarian" organizations, which often still function under the patronage of a sectarian leader (Clark and Salloukh, 2013; Makdisi, 2019). Further, we must distinguish between *sectarianism* as a public discourse and *sectarianization* as the institutional segregation of public life and development of sect-based dependency networks (Majed, 2020). The study of sectarianization includes, for instance, municipal-level geographic segregation influenced by electoral politics and the shifting politics of welfare and infrastructure provision (e.g., Cammett and Issar, 2010; Nucho, 2016; Bou Akar, 2018). The study of sectarianism, on the other hand, can be broken into various versions, including political sectarianism and the logic of elite networks (e.g., Leenders, 2012) and social sectarianism, or the lived experience of citizens within a "sectarianized" state and their attitudes toward and discursive use of the amorphous concepts of "sect" and "sectarianism" (e.g., Bayat, 2013; Deeb and Harb, 2013; Deeb, 2020). It is into this latter category that this paper falls.

It is unclear to what degree social "sectarianism," in the sense of intergroup prejudice, can be understood as an imposition "from above," exclusively. On the one hand, scholarship has established that "sects" are structural entities formed through the political instrumentalization (by elites) of communal identities (which may be religious, ethnic, or otherwise), and that these communal identities themselves, apart from political manipulation, are not necessarily as rigid as the concept of sect and may exist in a more fluid, "organic" form (Hashemi and Postel, 2017; Bishara, 2021). On the other hand, political elites are not the only actors to determine sectarian social realities (Farha, 2016), and politicians themselves are to some degree constrained or motivated by the sectarian balance of power within which they operate (Thurston, 2021). This implies that the system of sectarian divisions, while structural and "imposed" at its core, has nonetheless become self-sustaining as it constrains both social and political actors, and as efforts at "anti-sectarianism" often serve to unwittingly reinforce or concede to sectarian divisions (Kingston, 2013; Hashemi and Postel, 2017).

This paper begins from the understanding that social phenomena observed within sect-segregated societies are, in practice, reflective of constant "negotiation" (Bishara, 2021): between group boundaries and multi-faceted individual identity, between direct citizenship under the state and citizenship mediated through sect, between the communal belonging one is born into and the political loyalties one chooses. For simplicity in this paper's terminology, a "sectarian" socio-political outlook can be understood as that which seeks to maintain the structural segregation of citizens' political, geographic, or social lives into ethnoreligious groupings. Similarly, an "anti-sectarian" socio-political outlook is defined by seeking to transgress sect-based structural divisions in everyday life and to bridge boundaries between ethnoreligious groups in regard to political loyalty, geographic residence, and social networks.

Debates regarding religiosity, social divisions, and political loyalty

There is significant variation in how religion is understood in relation to political violence and prejudice, especially in states marked by strong ethno-religious identity groupings and with a history of violent conflict. Debate about the role of religion as a social identity and social network in breeding intergroup hostility has often been conducted through quantitative analysis. Empirical research by Sumaktoyo (2021) has shown a correlation between a high number of religiously homogenous friendships reported by respondents (in specifically Muslim-majority states) and attitudes reflecting interreligious hostility. Research by Kanas *et al.* (2021) in Indonesia and the Philippines has shown a correlation between "strong ethnoreligious identification" and support for some instances of out-group violence, suggesting that the stronger one's sense of ethnic or religious identity, the likelier it is that one will support violence as a method of communal self-protection against religious outgroups. At the same time, some religious practices are correlated with increased outgroup acceptance (Clingingsmith *et al.*, 2009) and some measures of religiosity are correlated with decreased support for outgroup violence (Siddiqui, 2022)—both studies in Pakistan. These studies on religiosity and outgroup hostility are each quantitative in nature, meaning they are not necessarily contradictory to each other, as they utilize different measures of religiosity and operate within distinct political contexts. However, they can tell us little about the ways respondents might narrate their religious identity and social outlook in their own terms.

A related question in scholarship involves the relationship between religious affiliation and support for religiously labelled political parties. Pepinsky (2022) demonstrates in the ethnically and religiously diverse, but Muslim-majority, contexts of Indonesia and Malaysia that support for Islamist parties is not always religiously motivated, while support for non-Islamist parties sometimes is. This is because Islamist parties, like non-Islamist parties, promote specific policies that are not purely religiously determined, and voters vote in line with their policy preference (which may or may not also be influenced by religious belief). While this study illustrates the fluid relationship between religious belief and political loyalty, other research suggests a more predictive quality to co-ethnic, coreligionist political support. Recent research in Lebanon suggests that voters support co-ethnic politicians for reasons beyond clientelism, indicating a preference for or slight loyalty toward co-ethnic leaders (Cammett *et al.*, 2022). Key questions arise from the contrast in these studies. To what degree is voter choice informed by religion as social identity versus by religion as belief (or "doctrine")? In a national context in which religious identity is politically institutionalized (sectarian/consociational), can we analytically separate the influence of religion as social identity from the influence of religion as belief? And how does an individual's social involvement in a religious community influence these factors (identity, belief, political outlook)?

Hoffman and Jamal (2014) usefully distinguish between the effects of personal piety versus communal worship on political behavior. Their statistical analysis of survey data on the Arab Spring suggests that personal piety motivated participation in anti-regime protest, while communal worship did not (see also Hoffman, 2020 which suggests that specifically *communal* worship can increase the salience of sectarian identity). However, the authors themselves acknowledge, "Even with access to survey data about the Arab Spring protesters, it remains difficult to identify who the protesters were and why they were mobilized into antiregime activity" (Hoffman and Jamal, 2014, 604–605). This indicates the usefulness of further research to explore the nuanced relationship between "who someone is," including their communal connections, and their political outlook and behavior. Due to the methodological limitations of survey-based research, the political implications of communal religiosity, or a perceived sense of "belonging" to a religious community, remains difficult to understand in sectarianized contexts. As personal religiosity implicitly stems to some degree from communal religiosity, it is difficult to disentangle the two within participants' political motivations. Qualitative, dialectic methods help to explore participant motivations in their own terms, which may blur the lines between scholarly conceptions of personal versus communal piety.

As with the above studies, a majority of research on religion and politics in the Middle East (e.g., Hashemi and Postel, 2017; Haddad and Hindy, 2019; Cammett and Jones, 2022) explores the ways religion is utilized by political actors or in political spaces. In other words, religiosity is observed at the point it reaches the ballot box or street demonstration. These studies tend not to, however, qualitatively explore the ways politics are perceived in religious terms or by individuals who are active within their religious communities. This is partially due to the categorization of religious spheres as separate to the political sphere and therefore outside the realm of analysis. The goal of this categorization is to avoid the problematic conflation of religiosity and political loyalty (Cammett and Jones, 2022). However, a side effect of this approach is that mainstream Western scholarship lacks an understanding of how politics, sectarianism, and religiosity are understood, in association with each other, by religiously practicing individuals or within religious associational spaces. While scholars analytically distinguish between religion and politics in careful ways, the distinctions individuals draw between their own religiosity and political outlook may not fall along the same analytical lines. Studies on religion and politics in the Middle East use religious community labels as units of analysis, especially in studying "sectarian" societies, but often without unpacking the social dynamics underlying religious belonging in a given context and its varied interaction with the political climate. This approach risks what Rima Majed refers to as a default "groupism" in how religiosity is spoken about in studies of regional sectarianism, despite attempts to avoid primordialist claims (Majed, 2019).

It is unsurprising that global literature on "divided societies" takes a more qualitative, ground-up approach to studying sectarian divisions, precisely to probe this analytical puzzle of how religious and sectarian identity can be simultaneously enmeshed in society and yet distinctly parse-able in people's own minds and daily lives (e.g., Papadakis *et al*., 2006; Leonard, 2008; Daiute, 2010; Komarova and Svasek, 2018; Palmberger, 2019). This body of scholarship, like Bishara's (2021) work mentioned above, looks at interethnic and interreligious relationships through the lens of how individuals, especially "youth" as a political category, navigate and complicate the social boundaries present in their daily lives. This entails a type of negotiation between the political polarities presented to individuals as competing options: such as the polarity between one version of ethnonationalism versus another, and the polarity between a colonial brand of secularism versus a similarly colonial brand of sectarianized social control.

In the Middle East, both secularism and sectarianization, while having nuanced pre-colonial histories, are also rooted in legacies of colonialism (Makdisi, 2019; Zemmin, 2021). The contested relationship between religious belonging and sectarian loyalty underpins the logic behind and contradictions within *political* sectarianism, understood as the strategic manipulation of religion as social identity. Political sectarianism depends upon the social dimensions of religiosity remaining strictly boundaried. Any socially bridging aspects of communal religiosity would threaten the logic of a sectarian state, in which political elites utilize rhetoric that associates the country's religious diversity with the ever-present risk of violent conflict, in order to further entrench loyalty among their constituents (Riskedahl, 2007; Hermez, 2017). Scholars have similarly highlighted the colonial history of state-imposed "secularism" in the global South as a means of controlling religious social influence, which at times has had adverse effects on minority rights and civic access (Chatterjee, 1999; Asad, 2003; Mahmood, 2006; Tejani, 2013). Scholars of sectarianism in Lebanon and in Northern Ireland have, to varying degrees, portrayed sectarianism as a colonial imposition aimed at maintaining social control, and as a post-colonial structure aimed at maintaining elite power structures and minimizing class consciousness (MacDonald, 1986; Elliott, 2013; Makdisi, 2019; Majed, 2020). In this way, both sectarianism and secularism can be seen to operate as paradigms of control or manipulation of religious influence. As seen in the previous section, however, debate among scholars abounds regarding to what degree "sectarianism" can be blamed on elites aiming for social control, and to what degree it is produced by individual-level religious prejudice or society-level intrareligious bonding.

It is commonly understood among scholars that a social shift toward support for "secularization" (the structural differentiation between the state and religious institutions) can occur without a corresponding decrease in religious belief or religious belonging (Zemmin, 2021). It has been less explored whether a shift toward support for the de-sectarianization of public institutions can occur without a corresponding diminishment of religious significance in society. While scholars would likely agree that "secularism," as the diminishment of religious belief and significance, should not be the assumed antidote to sectarianism, it remains underexplored how individuals within a sectarianized state explain their religious commitments and political outlook in tandem. In exploring this, this paper contributes an important understanding of how religious youth in Lebanon weave religious commitment and anti-sectarian rhetoric together. The paper finds that participants' rhetoric tends to simultaneously denounce a type of secularism (one which requires the minimization of religion in society) and social sectarianism (understood as prejudice against other sects), while leaving the actual processes of secularization (the separation of religious and state institutions) and de-sectarianization (the rearrangement of public institutions without sectarian divides) up for debate.

Case selection and methods

This paper draws on workshop and interview data collected between 2019 and 2022, with participants ages 18–30 (at the time of fieldwork) in Orthodox-, Maronite-, and Shi'a-majority youth associations. The associations selected for this project provide both a religious and a recreational element of peer-bonding to youth within a localized setting, meaning, to youth who live within a walking-distance radius of the hub of associational activities. Some participants involved in these associations were also involved in youth wings of political parties. I contacted participants through community-based religious associations, rather than youth wings of political parties, in order to capture the socio-political opinions of youth who are active in their religious communities. This includes religious youth who eschew political party involvement entirely and religious youth who dabble in party politics. The paper therefore assesses how religious youth relate their religious beliefs to their socio-political outlook and political engagement or disengagement.

The 18–30 age range was selected for study as it is the age group most active in associational settings in Lebanon, according to World Values Survey data (Haerpfer *et al*., 2020). As in all "youth studies," the concept of "youthhood" must be defined and de-essentialized (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2000). For the purposes of this project, "youth" are understood as the post-civil-war (1975–1990) generation, a self-created category by participants themselves—who wished to distinguish themselves from the civil war generation as more open-minded and less tied to identity-based politics. "Youth" in this context grew up in an era marked by the silencing of or strategic manipulation of civil war narratives and memories on the part of government parties since the war (Barak, 2007; Riskedahl, 2007). This generation's resistance both to the silencing of collective memories and identities and to the manipulation of sectarian prejudice to entrench power is reflected throughout the thesis. In this context, a nationally created mythology of "nonsectarianism" caters to the post-war generation's anti-prejudice sensibilities, without actually providing systemic alternatives to the balance of power that currently exists between sectarian elites.

Each association I worked with was based in a different neighborhood of Beirut, and each predominantly served youth living locally (within the neighborhood). The participants in these organizations were predominantly from lower-middle class backgrounds, with a minority of upper-middle class members interspersed amongst them. Most participants with whom I interacted in these associations self-described as semi- to highly religious, and as "nonsectarian" or "open-minded" socially. Some participants described themselves as "not political," while others described themselves as "nonsectarian" but engaged in party politics. The meaning of "political" seemed debatable and is addressed in the sections below. Sixteen participants from these organizations agreed to interviews, of various lengths. Two interviewees from the Orthodox and Shi'a associations agreed to follow-up interviews, providing responses to similar interview questions both before and after the events of 2019–2021 (the 2019 "*thawra*," the 2020 COVID-19 outbreak, the 2020 Beirut port explosion, and subsequent economic collapse). Data collection for this project involved several weeks of participant observation within each of these community drop-in spaces, individual semi-structured interviews, and participatory group workshops. Participant and association names have been pseudonymized for their protection.

Coreligionist and interreligious friendships

Participants involved in these local youth associations with clear religious affiliations reported having engaged in the association for several reasons simultaneously. A primary reason was social: the need to make friends. However, with work commitments, educational goals, and family responsibilities demanding their time, the option to socialize while also investing in one's faith and spirituality was a rational choice of how to best utilize limited free time. Almost all participants reported seeking social connection from these associations, often in combination with either the opportunity for religious instruction and spiritual development or the opportunity to contribute to one's local community through volunteerism. Participants also frequently reported not having time for in-depth social engagement elsewhere. This is consistent with survey-based findings on youth across the Arab Mediterranean, who often have to be highly selective about extracurricular involvements that are not directly career-oriented (Onodera *et al.*, 2018). Further, as opportunities for organized social/recreational activities appeared to be somewhat rare for young adults specifically (Roberts *et al.*, 2018b; Haerpfer *et al.*, 2020, 27), it makes sense that the search for socialization, recreation, and friendship played a key role in drawing members to these religiously affiliated associations.

The uniqueness of these peer socialization spaces stemmed, most prominently, from their embeddedness in pre-existing social and kinship networks. Friendships participants gained in these associations were not limited to the associational space or activities, but rather overlapped with other areas of participants' lives. One participant explained the uniqueness of his friendships within the Orthodox youth association this way:

> At university, I just want to pass my courses, take my certificate and stuff. But in [this association] we live together, three hours a day, it's like living with family. We share our problems. We give solutions for each other. We go on dinners trips. It's like family. So mainly, this is the reason…. It could be, maybe, if I spend the same time with my friends at university, we can become family. (Peter, Orthodox, 2019)

Another participant from the same association expressed it similarly, with further emphasis on the "completeness" of social resources found within his local social network, which was also his religious social network:

> I'm actually quite sociable at university… But it's not like the group I have at [this association]. The people I have here, it's like, I barge in the room, I take my clothes off in their homes, I talk to their dads as if they're mine…. It's a safe place, you know. I come to church and I see these people that are my friends from [the association]. And also it's really like, when I say [the association], I sometimes mean church, and when I say church, I sometimes mean [the association], because [the association] is so prominent in where I am that there's not much difference. I can be like, my parents in a faraway land and have no one and like lose my keys, and I know I have a place to stay… I know I have my safe place, and it's here. It's just basic human needs, you know? Like, I have my friends. I have everything. Everything, I can get from here. (Gregory, Orthodox, 2019)

This description of religious associational life mirrors the benefits other studies have identified for individuals involved in youth wings of political parties. By and large, political youth wings have had to cater to youth in similar fashion to civil society organizations, offering recreational drop-in and "hangout" spaces in order to attract new recruits (Bray-Collins, 2016). Such spaces are high priority due to limited electricity and Wi-Fi at home and limited extracurricular activities at school or university (Roberts *et al*., 2018b). In this way, participant involvement in religious youth associations seems to be an alternative option for young people trying to fill the extracurricular social gap in Lebanese youth culture, as well as a way to build extra-familial networks that provide basic social security and opportunity in an economically unstable context.

In discussing the role of religious belief, itself, rather than social networks, some participants began by emphasizing the importance of religious belief in their closest friendships and ended by explaining how the shared beliefs gave them a point of reference by which to judge a person's character. The clearest articulation of this came from a Shi'a participant:

> If I see a person, how much his religion takes from his time… I can take an idea that this person has a personality, character, that is honest. People can be honest, you know, even if he's not religious or he doesn't believe in God, he can be honest. But this thing helps you, only…. When you have a common experience with someone, you can compare what he's doing. You can take an idea about his character. (Hammoud, Shi'a, 2019)

Importantly, Hammoud did not specify whether such "evidence" of character had to come from someone of the same religion as himself. He selected words which ambiguated any distinction between religions and instead focused on the distinction between being religious or nonreligious.

The above comments suggest that, by and large, participants were not *solely* using this associational space, or these coreligionist friendships, for religious or spiritual purposes. Yet, the spiritual instruction and companionship added a bonus element to the primary need expressed among participants: social connection. The quality of social connection participants sought was reportedly not commonly found in school, university, or work (Workshop Notes, Orthodox youth association, Groups 1, 2019; Groups 1, 2022; 2, 2022; 3, 2022; Workshop Notes, Maronite youth association, Groups 1, 2019; 2, 2019). The priority participants placed on social connection within these spaces was evidenced by how participants spoke about their involvement in these associations. Out of the total 16 interviewees drawn from these associations, only two expressed that they used the association primarily for spiritual purposes and found their social/friendship needs met elsewhere (Dalia, 2019; George, 2022). The remaining interviewees emphasized that the bonds they formed within these spaces were "like family" and had an element of safety to them. While participants often emphasized social elements above the spiritual or religious dimensions of the association (e.g. Charity, 2019; Laila, 2019; Zara, 2019; Gregory, 2019; Mina, 2019, Sara, 2019), religious elements were clearly not irrelevant and were often interlinked with social needs (e.g. Diane, 2019; Gregory, 2019; Peter, 2019; Marta, 2019; Kareem, 2019). Co-religiosity played a role in creating the atmosphere of "familiarity" and "safety" required to create such authentic peer connections.

Participants went out of their way to describe the positive "bonding" elements of their friendships within these religiously affiliated spaces in such a way as to avoid sounding exclusive toward peers outside that space. Kara, from the Orthodox youth association, and Laila, from the Shia-majority youth association both expressed this—in separate interviews—via an almost identical pattern.

> I'm not saying that people that are outside from [association name] are bad or hurtful, but I'm saying that you won't always succeed in having people who have your back. What [association name] instils in you is that we're a community and that we take care of each other. (Kara, Orthodox, 2019)
>
> [Association name] is kind of a family that you belong to…. It doesn't limit you. It kind of defines you, in a positive way. However, it doesn't limit you in the sense of "I can only be friends to this group." (Laila, Shi'a, 2019)

These young women expressed their sense of "belonging" to their coreligionist friendship groups in terms of inclusivity toward the self (i.e., *in this space, I know I will be accepted*) rather than in terms of exclusivity toward the "other" (i.e., *my group is better than that other group*). This distinction is important in that it reflects the intention, across participants from different religious backgrounds, to separate their sense of religious communal belonging from the label of "prejudice" or from any association with animosity toward an "out-group."

Participants across the Orthodox, Shi'a, and Maronite associations, expressly stated during participant observation and interview-based discussions that their friends in the association and the values of the association itself encouraged them to form interreligious friendships and engage in interfaith cooperation. The following quote from Peter, a young man involved in the Orthodox youth association, illustrates this claim:

> We were raised on an idea that Muslims are not good, that Druze are not good, Christians are good. But in [association name] we learned that everyone is good. And we always have connections with Muslim people…. we see that the environment gives you an idea, and [this association] gives you a very different idea, and they are opposite. (Peter, 2019)

The reference within this quote to "the environment" and to the ideas "we were raised on" suggests that the social norms promoted among this participant's religious peer network ran counter to, not only the sectarian logic of the distant "state," but also the inherited knowledge of the local context and community in which Peter was raised. Kareem, a Shi'a participant in the Shi'a-majority youth association, reported a similar concept, saying that he and other Muslim friends were raised "since childhood" in the mindset that they must not work with or "exchange ideas" with another sect (Kareem, 2019). At the same time, he expressed that the Shi'a-majority youth association challenged this inherited instinct by intentionally cooperating with other youth associations (of different sect identities) to plan recreational events or to push for university-related policy changes affecting their lives collectively, as students.

Of the two participants who reported that they primarily sought spiritual/religious instruction from their associational engagement (rather than social connection), one was an Orthodox youth association member and the other a Shi'a-majority youth association member. Interestingly, both these individuals' accounts differed from that of other participants, not necessarily through illustrating heightened religiosity, but rather through illustrating more expansive social connections. Both George (Orthodox) and Dalia (Shi'a) were self-reported, highly devout individuals, who engaged with their respective youth associations primarily to receive spiritual "nourishment" and to learn more about the faith within which they were raised (Dalia, 2019; George, 2022). At the same time, George and Dalia explicitly stated that their respective religious networks were not their *primary* sources of social connection or community contribution. Both participants seemed to conceptualize community contribution and social connection in a more tangible, localized way. George reported that his primary duty was to his store, which he opened, and which helped local vendors in his neighborhood sell their goods. He also reported playing football regularly with local Shi'a peers whom he met through Orthodox friends. His explanation of his social world revealed a sense of community as locality, rather than associational or institutional ties. Similarly, Dalia reported using the Shi'a-majority youth association to fulfil her spiritual "needs," as she described them, for prayer and Quranic reading groups, etc. However, she did not consider the youth in the association her "community," as she put it, because she wanted to form a community of friends on her diverse university campus that was not organized around an abstract concept but rather was defined by the shared "community" of the campus itself. This is why she started her own student group for anyone interested in learning about and exploring Lebanese religious diversity. Both George and Dalia reported that their outlook toward interreligious friendships was consistent with the values held by their religious associational involvements, rather than in contrast to it. While Dalia suggested her approach to interreligious bridging was consistent with the association's Shi'a religious beliefs and values, she suggested that some of her peers within the association simply needed to leave their relational comfort zones a bit more.

Ten out of the 16 total interviewees reported that their closest friend, or one of their few trusted friends, practiced a different faith from themselves. Some of these same interviewees mentioned that interreligious friendships could be difficult (Hammoud, Shi'a, 2019; Kara and Mark, Orthodox, 2019; Peter, Orthodox, 2019). These difficulties usually involved relationships between genders, specifically with regards to marriage. During a combination of participant observation and interviews, several Christian participants reported that interfaith marriage, specifically with Muslims, would be difficult. When asked to explain why this was the case, the participants explained that their spouse might want more children than they did (based on larger perceived family size among Shi'a Muslims, specifically), that one of the parents would not be able to send their children to the same school they attended, that they would have to switch legal systems, that it would be difficult to decide which neighborhood to live in, and that daily routines would be complicated.

This logic was rarely applied to non-romantic friendships. One exception among this sample of participants was a Shi'a participant who attributed the diminished closeness between himself and a former Christian friend to differences in daily routine (e.g., prayer times), monthly commitments (e.g., fasting times), and current friend groups, and to his own expectations that they would end up in significantly different types of marriages and social circles (Hammoud, 2019). In each of these cases, participants cited a myriad of *practical* complexities to interreligious bonds, while aiming overall to avoid negative comments on the moral character of those of other religions.[3]

While the aversion to disparaging remarks against other religions could in part be an attempt, by participants, to cater to the researcher's presumed opinions, it is relevant that participants felt the need to emphasize the difficulty of interreligious relationship at all. This admission suggests, firstly, participants' cognitive and discursive awareness of the sectarianization of their social lives. It secondly displays the importance participants placed on distinguishing between personal prejudice (as they understood it) and structural barriers to cross-sect integration. The attempt to frame these barriers in practical, rather than moralistic terms, demonstrated an intentional rerouting of blame for social divisions to *structural* facets of a segregated society, rather than to individual prejudice or religious belief.

The above instances in which participants attempted to verbalize the difficulties with interreligious relationships illustrated the importance of social networks in participant lives. The need for "trusted" social networks and a sense of communal belonging stands out in participant narratives. According to some participants, this need was difficult to fulfil in friendships across sects, due to sect-segregated geographies, legal systems, and avenues for economic and political participation. Participants did not report that interreligious friendships were impossible or unwanted; rather, they reported that such friendships required a higher level of intentionality and effort than many individuals were willing, or perhaps able, to invest.

Political outlook

Several participants spoke explicitly against the political system as they saw it. This included statements criticizing the nepotism of crony capitalism (Gregory, 2019), the patronage of welfare systems (Gregory, 2019; Kareem, 2019), the blind sectarian loyalties determining the electoral process (Dalia, 2019; Kareem, 2019), and the ethnic prejudice and structural segregation imposed upon society by politicians (Gregory, 2019; Maria, 2019). Participants who engaged in political activities narrated their political engagement in precise language, distinguishing between their perception of the political *status quo* and the socio-political ideals they attempted to practice. Each of the narratives below demonstrates an attempt to situate one's political outlook within a collective Lebanese identity, superseding sect and party loyalties.

Several participants blamed blind loyalty to party leaders as a central problem with political sectarianism. Many participants expressed discontent with the party leaders affiliated with their own sect, while other participants expressed that their support for candidates or policies promoted by their sect came from careful consideration of the issues at hand, rather than automatic loyalty based on religion. One Shi'a participant who was also involved in partisan politics claimed his approach to politics differed from the mainstream approach, in that he supported policies on the basis that they would benefit "all of Lebanon," not just his own sect. He further explained that when he chose to promote a specific candidate, he wanted people to vote for that candidate on the basis of the policy platform alone: "I would tell the person why you have to vote for this person. Not because, if you vote, I will give you this and this and this…. You want to vote for him? Thank you. If you don't, it's okay. No one's forcing you to vote for him, for anyone" (Kareem, 2019). Here Kareem referenced the patronage and rent-seeking practices that sustain electoral support for political parties and the elite families that run them. This critique of patronage systems was shared by an Orthodox participant, Gregory (2019), who pinpointed the same issues as a key barrier to social and political de-sectarianization.

Also targeting elite responsibility for sectarian divisions, Maria, a Maronite participant, described her involvement in the 2019 nationwide protests as a movement "against the politicals," saying she and her friends (from the same church youth group) refused to align themselves with any singular party leader. This kind of loyalty to a party chief was seen among many participants as "politics" in a negative sense. When asked what she meant by "politics," Maria explained, "We don't do politics as parties," rather "we do politics as laws, as our rights, our duties." She emphasized the importance of good citizenship, on an individual level, and the need to diminish the hegemony of sect identity in politics: "It's very important that all of the youth and all of the people get out of the ethnic mentality…to respect the human being as a human being, not as a Muslim or a Christian or whatever" (Maria, 2019). This definition of "political" involvement addresses an apparent contradiction regarding young adults in the MENA region who claim to be apolitical while simultaneously being very involved in what we might consider political or pseudo-political activities (Cavatorta, 2012; Hanafi, 2012). While many young people are disenchanted with established avenues for either social or political engagement (Backeberg and Tholen, 2018), there appears to be a growing inclination toward more individual rather than collectivist approaches to politics (Onodera *et al.*, 2018). As seen in Maria's statement, however, this "individual" approach to citizenship is not without a communal element, in that it centers around "duty" and contribution to one's local community (illustrated by Maria's own leadership in the volunteerism of her youth association). Many participant accounts reflect this attempt to define community and belonging outside of ethno-sectarian terms.

Poignantly, some participants expressed fear of political partisanship on a deeply personal level, even between coreligionist peers. Gregory, a charismatic and devout member of the Orthodox youth association, described for me the link between small exchanges between friends now, and inherited memory from past war. I had asked him whether he felt others shared his concern with impending conflict, and he replied as follows:

> It's not something we talk about, so I really don't know if everyone feels the same. It's something I've just thought about to myself. I'm scared that one day the friend that was mocking me, because I liked that Miss Lebanon was coming back to the neutral [TV] channel, will be holding a gun to my face. That's what used to happen in the civil war. It was like one day you go out of your apartment, your neighbour that's right in front of you is holding a gun, and he's like "I'm going to kill you." (Gregory, 2019)

In this response we can hear both the self-censorship ("it's not something we talk about") and the fear of conflict *close to home*. When Gregory was telling me about conflict arising between friends based on politics, I assumed he meant friends of other religions. When I asked clarification on this, he expressed emphatically that this was conflict he feared among coreligionist peers. He expressed more fear of violent conflict emerging between himself and geographic neighbors of the same faith—who may be loyal to a rival Christian party—than of conflict emerging between Christians and Muslims generally. This knowledge is relevant in light of the way "sectarianism" is often understood as based in ethno-religious prejudice, a view which overlooks the broader corrosive effects on society as a whole, including the extreme toll political polarization takes on local communities, neighbors, friends, and families.

The ever-changing party alliances that comprise the Lebanese state's "balance of power" belie this fact: that "sectarianism" as a verbal stand-in for "prejudice" relates more to a mindset of political loyalism and rigid identity structures (akin to "nationalism") than it relates to any specific arrangement of political parties. Sectarian loyalties are not and never have been static (Makdisi, 2019; Majed, 2021). The most recent arrangement of party alliances relates to intense social divisions between supporters of the March 8th and March 14th blocs—which are political coalitions containing Muslims and Christians *on both sides* (Bortolazzi, 2013; Atallah and Zoughaib, 2018). Political strife does not always fall neatly along religious lines, a fact of which participants were keenly aware. Some participants spoke of century-old disputes between Christians and Druze, some spoke of civil war tensions between Christians and Muslims, some spoke of civil war violence between Christians and other Christians, some spoke of interpersonal conflict between religiously conservative Shia and less conservative Shia, and some spoke of strife between Sunni and Shia. Participants across the board expressed weariness with the kind of "identity politics" that predetermined all one's political views and loyalties without recourse to civil discussion and debate.

It is important to note that these narratives do not account for political *behavior* among participants, which is outside of the scope of this paper. Participants can report supporting candidates based on qualifications and policies alone, while also consistently voting for candidates from the political party representing them since birth. Similarly, participants can assign blame to political elites for social divisions, while simultaneously losing faith in the possibility of inter-sect cooperation on a social level based on lived experience with peers. These beliefs and behaviors are not inherently contradictory to each other, but rather illustrate the points of tension between lived reality and discursive ideals. Participant's political behavior tended to vary between religious groups, based on differences in structural realities shaping political choices, whereas discourse surrounding socio-political ideals remained remarkably similar across participants of various religious backgrounds.

Contrast between religiosity and sectarianism

Most participants, while denouncing "sectarianism" as interpersonally divisive, also spoke of religiosity—in both its public/communal and private/personal forms—as socially bonding and integrative. Using Jawad's (2009) distinction between "religion as faith" and "religion as identity" (also referenced in Haddad, 2020), we can see that participants in this project primarily expressed their religion as faith, and secondarily as one of several forms of communal identity. Participants resisted being *assigned* political loyalties based on their religious affiliation, either by society or by the presumption of their peers. Their narratives further resist the dichotomy laid out by “modernizing” versus “traditionalizing” forces, in which religious identity is seen, respectively, as either an insignificant and purely individualistic aspect of one’s identity or as hegemonic among all other forms of identity, superseding local/regional, civic/national, or interest-based forms of belonging. What both these modernist and traditionalist framings of religiosity have in common is the implicit belief that any collectivist/communal dimension to religiosity equates to sectarian division and political loyalty. It is this belief that participant narratives contradict and complicate.

Participants did not present their personal religiosity as purely individualistic. Rather, participants spoke of religiosity in communal and social terms, as well as individual ones. Participants presented the communal dimensions of religiosity as a force for social cohesion, rather than division. Take, for example, the following narrative from Dalia, a Shia participant who recounted a visit to a church with Christian friends from university:

> The way they were describing God…was really very similar. I was so spiritually enriched. I didn’t expect that that visit would make a big change in me… Now I look at Christianity, not only Christians, in a very different way. (Dalia, 2019)

As Dalia explained this experience to me, her eyes filled with tears. The emotion stemmed, in part, from the deep importance faith held in her life—which she had shared with me earlier in the interview process. This story was not “moving” to her purely on account of its interfaith narrative; rather, the emphasis in emotion was placed upon the mention of craving connection to “God,” a desire Dalia sensed her Christian peers also shared. Dalia also reported a strong desire for connection to her peers, and this dual desire for spiritual depth and for peer connection made a religious experience a powerful source of peer bonding for her.

This is consistent with other participant reports, which suggest participants found in religiosity both the potential for in-group bonding and the potential for intergroup bridging. Workshop data demonstrate this perception more directly. Workshop participants were presented with the following quote from a 2005–2006 ethnography conducted by Craig Larkin among young adults in Beirut:

> We need more parks, places to meet, don’t build more churches or mosques which are very valuable, but they are in a sense divisive, why not build recreational facilities? (University student discussing the construction of Beirut city centre in 2005; Larkin, 2010)

Some workshop groups agreed that more public parks could be “nice,” but overall workshop participants vehemently opposed the idea that public religiosity contributed to social divisions. Instead, they repeatedly spoke of religion as bonding, not only between co-religionist peers, but also between peers of different religions. One Maronite workshop participant expressed that his ability to worship in a church next door to a mosque meant more to him about national unity than any public park (Workshop Notes, Maronite youth association, Group 1). In another workshop group, Shi'a participants agreed with an exclamation from one participant in response to the provided quote: "Divisive? It's not! Churches and mosques make us belong to a certain place. These are actually tools of bonding together rather than separating us" (Workshop Notes, Shi'a-majority youth association, 2019). This statement links religious spaces to belonging, belonging to locality/place, and localized or place-based belonging to intergroup cohesion. As evidence of this belief, the group started listing specific social initiatives/programs in Lebanon that introduce youth of different religions to the religious traditions of their peers. Participants in an Orthodox workshop group expressed, in response to the same quote, that having shared public spaces did little good to promote social bridging, on its own, if there were not intangible meeting "spaces" in which young people felt they were forming genuine relational connections, listing their youth association as an example of such a space (Workshop Notes, Orthodox youth association, 2019).

Both individual participant narratives and workshop responses together show a stark distinction between how participants understood personal/communal religiosity and how they viewed sectarianism. They not only understood these as separate concepts, but more importantly saw them as having *opposite* social effects. Religiosity, in these narratives, bore the potential to bring people together both within and across religious communities, through connection to "place" and by creating "space" for genuine relational connections to form. These narratives suggest that religious devotion at times contradicted and superseded sectarian divisions in participant lives, thereby diminishing the allure of hegemonic political loyalties, which were perceived as creating divisions both within and between religious groups.

Participants who agreed to an interview both before and after the events of October 2019 ("Revolution") through 2020 (onset of pandemic) expressed dramatically increased frustration, both with sectarian elites and with the misdiagnosis of Lebanon's problems as religious or prejudiced-based (Gregory, 2021; Laila, 2022; Zara, 2022). After the "Revolution," "Beirut blast," and two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, I had a follow-up interview with Zara, a former Shi'a-majority youth association member, who had originally been a participant in the 2019 wave of fieldwork. In this interview, I revisited topics that had arisen previously: e.g., friendship requirements, the importance of religion in her life, and her outlook on current politics. While Zara's opinions on these issues remained relatively unchanged from 2019 to 2022, the follow-up interview revealed a new level of frustration with outside perspectives on Lebanon's struggles.

In autumn of 2019, Zara had explained that religion was not a key factor for her in forming friendships and carefully distinguished between universal, "ethical" beliefs that "mattered" to issues of social justice versus religion as an *identity*, which should not (in her opinion) affect friendships. In Spring of 2022, when asked whether political debates surrounding the protests, port explosion, economic crisis, or pandemic had affected her approach to friendships, Zara expressed confusion and frustration with the question itself, asking, "Why would it affect that?" After insisting, emphatically, that the past years' events had no bearing on interreligious friendships, she added the following:

> What you see on TV doesn't really show what's happening in our country. They exaggerate. They try to show that Lebanese people have many troubles between each other, and they hate each other, or this religion hates this religion. No. It's not happening in Lebanon. All Lebanese have the same thinking that, yes, there is economic problems in Lebanon. But such couldn't affect the belief to have a certain friend or not because he has different thinking, and a certain religion, and a certain political party. It couldn't affect that. (Zara, 2022)

Zara's frustration with media portrayals of social divisions in Lebanon related to the misdirection of blame toward presumed religious strife, rather than toward political corruption.

Zara went on to acknowledge that the Lebanese people did have sharp political disagreements, but she argued that these were not determined by religion:

> It's not related to the religious, because in every religion in Lebanon—either Muslim-Shiite, Muslim-Sunni, Christian, Druze—there are two parts. They are separated to two parts. Some are with, some are against. We can't have any certain religions that all the people have the same thinking. That's the trouble with Lebanon, we can say, because Lebanon is really separated to many political parties. (Zara, 2022)

Zara's statement paints a picture of a different type of social division than a religious divide. The social division that Zara pinpointed was that of political party loyalties and conflicting *intrasect* interests. Consistent with Zara's claims, visions of how to achieve a better political future varied drastically between individuals involved in this project. For instance, the 2019 protests highlighted uncertainties about political representation and what de-sectarianization would look like. Some participants felt disillusioned with the protests due to the involvement of "nonsectarian" political parties and NGOs with underlying ties to incumbent elites (e.g., Gregory, 2021). Others feared the shift to a fully "secular" party system in which religious belief would not come into public discourse at all, raising questions about the nature of secularity and democratic participation (e.g., Laila, 2022). However, these participants each insisted that religion *as identity* was not a predictive factor in determining their or others' political viewpoints, emphasizing their experience of heated disagreement with coreligionist peers on these topics and on the utility of the protests themselves.

Generational shifts and post-war memory

A key concern that arises from this project's methodology is whether these narratives can be considered evidence of a generational shift in attitude toward "sectarianism" and party politics, or whether these ideas are simply symptomatic of young adulthood—the "life cycle effect," so to speak. While it is difficult to measure the "life cycle" effect ethnographically, I was able to gather data on how participants perceive generational shifts and how ongoing fears of conflict related to intergenerational memories of past war. As mentioned previously, workshop participants read quotes gathered from Craig Larkin's (2010, 2012) ethnographic study among a previous generation of Lebanese "youth," who would have been 16–25 years old in 2005 and 2006.

Two interviewees from this previous generation had claimed the following: (1) "Grudges die hard, traditional misconceptions die hard. It's difficult to move forward from this old petrified mentality and the perception of the 'other'"; (2) "Young people…do not know 'the other'…they have never lived together a normal life" (Larkin, 2010). In response to these quotes, every workshop group across the Orthodox, Shi'a, and Maronite associations agreed unanimously that things had changed *somewhat* since 2005.

Responses from the workshop groups acknowledged both change and resistance to change.

> It's not as much now as before. If my grandma says something about another family, I hear it, but it doesn't affect me. We agree that grudges live forever, but not with this generation. (Workshop Notes, Maronite youth association, Group 1, 2019)
>
> What my parents tell me is not the same as what I see every day. I don't have to take what they say into consideration, unless I want to. What this guy said in 2005, that old mentality is really hard to overcome, and it's hard to move forward from what our grandparents and old society used to think. (Workshop Notes, Maronite youth association, Group 2, 2019)
>
> It is difficult to move on from such mentalities, but on our first days we cross this as [university] students. (Workshop Notes, Shi'a-majority youth association, 2019)

These quotes do not suggest a picture-perfect resolution to "sectarianism" as a social norm, a mindset of prejudice based on religion and ethnicity and wrought through years of civil war and political manipulations. The participant responses suggest, however, an increased cognitive distinction between inherited narratives and observed realities. Participants across the project repeatedly acknowledged that the structure of their lives—including jobs, relationships, political engagement, and education—were *constrained* by institutionalized sectarian boundaries. Yet they also acknowledged the constructed nature of sectarian identities for political gain and the difference between their understanding of friendship and identity versus that of their parents or grandparents.

A more extended example of this tension between agreement on nonsectarian ideals and awareness of generational wounds, combined with fear of future conflict, arose in a workshop with members of the Orthodox youth association (Workshop Notes, Orthodox youth association, 2019). During discussion on the provided quotes (about grudges dying hard), one workshop participant, Kara, expressed the following bleak outlook: "When the generation that fought the [civil] war die, and their kids die, their grandchildren will live in peace; but before we reach that point, there will be another war." Instantaneously, the rest of the group erupted with sighs of discouragement and statements of disagreement, some rolling eyes and exclaiming "There won't be another war!" Kara pushed back, comparing her life to that of peers she had met abroad, "My friends in Berlin were so surprised by bomb shelters, but for me that's normal! That's life! Everyone has PTSD. Just move on." This statement stood out as interesting due to how Kara combined a bleak outlook regarding the likelihood of further war with the admonishment to "just move on," expressing weariness with sectarian conflict and with discussion about past conflict. This combined expectation of conflict and desperation to be done with conflict formed a semi-hopeless type of "nonsectarian" outlook, in which one's ideals are seen as incompatible with the society in which one lives.

A handful of workshop participants agreed sombrely, after this moment, that there could be another war, but most insisted that, at worst, there would be a "social media war," but not a "real" civil war again. Someone then blamed western interference for Lebanon's problems, saying "We were happy for so long, just leave us alone" (directed at "the West"). Another participant immediately "corrected" this statement: "*They* were happy. *You* weren't there when *they* were happy" (emphasis added to reflect speech). The "you" in this statement referred to the young person previously speaking, and the happy times referred to the pre-war life often spoken about by participants' parents. This response highlighted that this generation could not remember a time without conflict or the fear of conflict; it also hinted at a fear that the "golden past" may be either mythological or simply unsalvageable, a fear which crept into most discussions of overcoming sectarian divisions.

An illustration of the social volatility, to which participants were responding, arose in a workshop setting with an older cohort of adults at one of the Orthodox association's summer camps. At one camp, in 2022, I was able to conduct three workshops in a row, with 20–25 participants each. Two of these groups fell roughly into the 18–30 age range, but one of the groups was attended by adults between the ages of 40 and 60—individuals who would have lived during the Lebanese Civil War in 1975–1990. I did not select workshop participants into these groups; rather, individuals self-selected into them, likely attending with whichever peers they were spending the most time with at the camp. The two younger group workshops proceeded similarly to others I had conducted in 2019, with only minor disagreement and a discussion focused primarily on the importance of individuality and nonjudgment in friendship (Workshop Notes, Orthodox youth association, Groups 2, 2022; 3, 2022). The group with older adults, however, proceeded quite differently, despite being presented with the same questions as the other groups. Within moments of being asked whether they felt they could make friends easily outside of their local community, one participant in the group discussion stated that one could never be friends with supporters of a certain Christian politician, because it was scientifically proven that his supporters were psychopaths. Suddenly, most other participants in the workshop were shouting and talking over one another, until one participant calmed the group down, and said to me, with a laugh, "This is why one should never discuss politics with friends" (Workshop Notes, Orthodox youth association, Group 1, 2022). This workshop illustrated an older generation's willingness to think in partisan political terms and identity groups, as a whole, in contrast to younger groups. Younger participants in interviews and workshops focused their relational desires and critiques in individualistic terms (wanting friends who are honest and non-judgmental, who think for themselves) and avoided critiquing politicians or political groups by name when discussing amongst each other. In contrast, the older workshop cohort displayed more willingness to express their partisan loyalties or hatreds openly, defend their opinions at length, and categorize people under collective identity labels.

The proposed antidote to intra-sect political strife in the older cohort above is also notable: do not discuss politics with friends. This sentiment contrasted to the sentiment expressed by participants in one of the younger workshops at the same camp. When asked whether it was important to know friends' "backgrounds," in terms of religion, sect, region, political leanings, etc., participant responses were split. Some expressed that those factors were not important to know because such things should not make or break a friendship, while others expressed that it was important to know these factors because it should be safe to be fully known by your friends (Workshop Notes, Orthodox youth association, Group 2, 2022). These responses illustrated a tension between the desire not to know, in order to avoid conflict, and the desire to know, in order to have authentic dialogue and relationships. This relates to a type of performative "sect-blindness" reflected in post-war self-censorship, aimed at keeping the peace, as well as to the prevalent fear among youth of ongoing divisions and tensions brewing under the surface of their relationships. Overall youth spoke of a desire both to avoid and to confront these issues: to avoid "politics" in terms of partisanship, and to destigmatize political debate through more individualism and open discussion. This latter endeavor seemed akin to diffusing a bomb, frightening but necessary. This helps explain participants' hesitation toward traditional political engagement, combined with participants' reported desire to see a change in sociopolitical realities.

The tensions both with society at large and with the burdens and memories of previous generations within one's own community were interwoven throughout workshop discussions and interviews. These conversations illustrate a mentality shift between the war and post-war generations, as well as the complexity behind thinking of oneself as "nonsectarian" or trying to imagine a "post-sectarian" reality. The blend of hope and hopelessness exhibited in the youth workshop interaction on "war" above (Workshop Notes, Orthodox youth association, 2019) is echoed across participant interviews, workshops, and discussion groups. It is further consistent, to some degree, with the displayed sentiment across a wide expanse of protesters, evidenced in the anti-sectarian, anti-corruption, free-election mottos of the 2019 "Revolution" (Lebanese Center for Policy Studies, 2019; Lebanon Protests, 2020). The protests were emotionally poignant, but short-lived, and many participants' excitement at the moment the protests emerged devolved into extreme disillusionment by the time we held follow-up interviews in 2021–2022. Still, the emergence of the protests further illustrated young people's widespread focus (across sect backgrounds) on directing blame toward political elites for sectarian divisions, in a way that had not been so clearly observed in ethnographies or public protests for the previous two decades.

Taken together, these data imply a generational shift toward viewing sectarian divisions as a primarily structural phenomenon, constraining individual choice, rather than as a social issue rooted in ethnoreligious differences. That being said, participants also expressed some level of awareness of the concession to prejudiced ways of thinking "from below," noting discriminatory behaviors among their parents and "other" peers. These narratives suggested that, while participants recognized social divisions as imposed “from the top” (and strategically exaggerated by elites), they also recognized that individuals and groups “on the ground” conceded to these structures in a way that enabled the *status quo* to persist across time, despite widespread shifts in socio-political ideals. Sometimes this awareness extended to themselves, as Orthodox and Maronite participants called each other out in group discussions, asking “Would you marry a Muslim?,” to which the answer was a reluctant “No,” followed by the explanation, explored above, which attempted to reframe this concession to sectarian boundaries in practical terms, rather than personally prejudiced ones.

After workshops, participants were given the option to write down questions they had for other young adults in future workshops, topics about which they would be curious to hear from their peers. One participant in the Maronite youth association wrote: “If I were born in another century, would we still differentiate each other based on these criteria; is this phenomenon innate, or do we learn to differentiate each other based on these facts?” This poignant question illustrates that participants were not unaware of the complex social processes underpinning the setting in which they lived, nor of the debates that scholars themselves have been asking. The participant’s question as to whether sectarian divisions are inherent and unavoidable, or rather learned, implies a desired answer: the hope that they are learned and can therefore be unlearned. In short, participants in this project expressed weariness with “sect” as a category of either belonging or division, and reportedly tried to overcome the hegemony of this category of division in their personal and public lives, despite the fragility of their hope that this would be possible.

Discussion

This paper has so far demonstrated that participants joined religious peer associations for predominantly social reasons—combining a desire for recreation, the search for trusted friends, interest in one’s faith, and a desire to “give back” to one’s community or to society more broadly. At the same time, most participants reported seeking out and maintaining interreligious friendships, despite structural barriers that make such relationships difficult. Participants aimed to distinguish their civic engagements and political activities from sectarian “politics as usual,” while upholding religiosity and religious community as having a stabilizing and even bridging effect across society. Overall, participants in this project, while acknowledging social divisions and interpersonal prejudice in society, redirected “blame” for social divisions on structural realities rather than individual close-mindedness, personal religiosity, or communal religiosity.

This project gathered insights on participant attitudes and self-reported behavior, rather than observed political behavior. It is important to recognize that participants narrate sectarian divisions as structural and practical rather than personal, whether or not these narratives obscure some interpersonal prejudice. If the social practice of religion is seen among devout individuals as a force for social cohesion and the socio-political mindset of “sectarianism” is seen as force for social division, any questions posed in scholarship or survey questionnaires that blur the distinction between religiosity and sectarianism will vastly misrepresent the growing socio-political consciousness of respondents.

An example of the usefulness of this framework can be seen in interpreting 2016 SAHWA survey results in Lebanon, in which “highly religious” respondents often simultaneously selected survey responses which were categorized (by researchers) as supporting the "fusion" of religion and politics and survey responses categorized as supporting the "separation" of religion and politics (Roberts *et al.*, 2018a; SAHWA 2016). This seeming contraction can be explained if many respondents do not think in terms of the secular/nonsectarian versus religious/sectarian dichotomy. More "highly religious" respondents (as labelled by the researchers) might see a role for religion in public and political life, while still desiring more freedom of political choice beyond the bounds of pre-set sectarian loyalties based on religious identity and inter-elite power agreements.

Survey findings on overall youth religiosity in the region provide a fascinating backdrop for this paper's conclusions. Rates of young people in Lebanon and across neighboring Arab countries self-identifying as "not religious" increased between the Arab Barometer's third and fifth waves, 2012–2014 and 2018–2019 (Robbins, 2023). The first wave of fieldwork conducted for this paper engaged with youth at the peak of that decline in self-reported religiosity, 2019. It is possible that the youth who turned to religious associations and religiosity as a source of peer connection and communal belonging at this time were bonding with interreligious peers over this shared choice, in contrast to an increasingly secular youth culture that, at the time, maintained strong ties to political parties, including both religious and secular parties perpetuating sectarian divides (Bray-Collins, 2016).

While participants in this project represent a subset of the overall youth population of the country, their experience is highly relevant, as self-reported religiosity has markedly increased since that time among respondents ages 18–29, across the Arab region. This was demonstrated in the 2021–2022 Arab Barometer survey wave (Robbins, 2023). Notably, in this most recent wave, youth decreasingly reported being "not religious" in all countries surveyed *except* Lebanon. In Lebanon, rates of respondents reporting as "not religious" increased. However, reports of religious *practice* among youth in Lebanon increased, in line with surrounding countries. Within these results, we see hints of the different operation of "religion as identity" versus religion as personal faith or religion as community investment, specifically in sectarianized societies. Youth respondents may have decreasingly identified as religious in light of deepening resentment toward sectarian leaders and toward the instrumentalization of religion for political gain. However, engagement in religious practice increased among the same respondents, suggesting youth may be looking for something within religiosity that is not only *different* from sectarianism, but actually runs *counter* to the logic and aims of "sectarianism" in their minds.

Project limitations and suggestions for future research

As a project based in ethnographic methods, sampling was non-random and possibly not representative of broader trends in attitude among religiously devout youth in Lebanon. While survey data and triangulation with workshop data demonstrate patterns of interest, further research is required to explore these patterns fully. Another concern relates to social desirability bias, in that participants in qualitative, participatory research can cater responses to the perceived preferences of the researcher. While impossible to escape entirely, the project aimed to minimize this through allowing participants to discuss topics amongst themselves in smaller group settings during workshops, before presenting their opinions back to me. This allowed for discussion among peers, disagreement, and the presentation of multiple views on the same issue—thereby minimizing the univocal presentation of an opinion tailored solely to my preferences as the researcher.

It is furthermore beyond the scope of this paper to explore the causal impact of religious youth associations on socio-political attitudes and behavior. It is unclear whether individuals with predisposed anti-sectarian mindsets were drawn to these associations or whether they developed such mindsets *because of* involvement in these associations. At this stage, the project's research reveals a *compatibility* between religious bonding and interreligious bridging within participants' associational life, indicating that religious in-group bonding does not necessarily inhibit interreligious friendship formation. It secondarily suggests that religious in-group socialization might, in some instances, positively influence interreligious friendship formation. Further research is required to understand the mechanisms by which and conditions under which this result might be possible. Continued research should also investigate attitudes toward religiosity and sectarianism among members of the youth wings of mainstream political parties. This sampling would provide an interesting contrast or correlation to the findings among youth in religious associations, although of course there is an overlap between these two categories.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that participants present their socio-political outlook in overtly anti-sectarian terms, interwoven with narratives of interreligious bonding. Participants express their socio-political and ethical values in ways they believe can be shared across religious groups and which are informed by their own religious beliefs. At the same time, participant accounts reveal concessions to sect-based norms, especially in regards to marriage, which they attribute to the institutional sectarianization of public life and corresponding segregation of geographic space and social networks—rather than to personal or, especially, religious prejudice. Finally, inherited memories of civil war and intergroup conflict shape participant outlooks by instilling participants with both fear of conflict and weariness with that fear of conflict. Participants report desire to speak openly about socio-political issues, including underlying causes for social divisions, and simultaneously avoid speaking about collective identities or engaging in partisan political debate. It is difficult to openly address the former without incorporating the latter, but these slightly contradictory inclinations stem from the same incentive: bridging social divides.

Research into the social dimensions of religiosity in "sectarianized" contexts is important in cases, such as Lebanon, where two factors hold true: (1) interreligious divides and the fear of violent conflict are essential mechanisms for the maintenance of elite power balances, and (2) the detachment of religiosity from sectarian identity threatens the partisan loyalty of sect-segregated constituents. Media narratives that portray ethnoreligious divisions as static and the relationship between religion and politics as predetermined to violent outcomes serve to demotivate a generation eager for a more inclusive future, in which religious affiliation and political loyalty are not so tightly matched. Further research on social sectarianism should explore the intersections of class, religiosity, and gender politics in how youth navigate the poles labelled "sectarian/religious" and "nonsectarian/secular" and redraw lines of social contestation in both the day-to-day and in public life.

Competing interests. None.

Notes

1. The final sect recognized is the Lebanese Jewish community, which is almost non-existent in Lebanon today—although exact numbers are impossible to report due to the illegality of conducting a census on ethnoreligious composition in Lebanon since the civil war.

2. These qualitative, participatory methods are modelled after multiple policy-relevant social anthropology research efforts among youth, and rigorously follow the ethical guidelines established therein (Pretty, 1995; Chambers, 1997, 2002; Johnson, 1998; Hart and Khatiwada, 2004; Chatty *et al.*, 2005; Schmidt, 2007; Ayala, 2009; Daiute, 2010).

3. I have excluded from this analysis a discussion of gender relations across and within sects. Observational data and passing comments during participant observation suggested that some female participants, either Christian or Muslim, viewed males outside their religion with an added layer of discomfort or mistrust. While this certainly can be expressed at times as a "moral judgement" based on religion, it is an intersectional judgment relating to debates/tensions regarding gender relations which may be heightened by sectarian divisions but also supersede those divisions. While this raises many questions worthy of study, it is outside the scope of this current analysis to explore the intersectionality of gender and religious identity. The topic of gender relations, as well as sexuality, remains a central point of debate and discussion among participants in this project, both in regard to relationships within their religion and relationships outside their religion.

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Marta (2019) In conversation with author, recorded. Remote.

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Cite this article: Renne FD (2024). Neither secular nor sectarian: perspectives on social life and politics among Beirut's religiously devout youth. *Politics and Religion* 1–27. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048324000178