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MICHAŁ MOCH

## Memories and Identities of the Lebanese Maronites: The Interdisciplinary Research

### Abstract

The article has got two important parts and dimensions. The first is rather methodological and concentrates on giving ideas that could refresh and enrich the interdisciplinary research on ethnic issues in the Arab world. The author's point of view is the one of an Arabist who combines philology with the methods of contemporary social sciences. In the second part of the text the methodological context is practically utilized in the analysis of chosen examples. This would be the case of the Maronites of Lebanon – their collective identity and politics of history conducted by their elites. Lebanon itself is a unique example of Muslim-Christian 'confessional democracy' in a region dominated by the Arab-Muslim civilization. However uniquely diversified, it can also serve as an example of a more universal social phenomena concerning the entire Arab world. The Maronite question is very interesting in this context, because it illustrates a rare situation in which minority, ethnic and religious community, becomes the dominant group – only to return finally to the role of a minority fighting for its place in the society.

### 1. Introduction

The article consists of two basic parts. The first is methodological and concentrates on giving ideas that could refresh and enrich the interdisciplinary research on ethnic issues in the Arab world. In the second part of the text methodological context is practically utilized in the analysis of chosen examples. This would be the case of the Maronites of Lebanon – their collective identity and politics of history conducted by their elites.

The issue of methodology of research is not often broadly addressed in works of Polish Arabists. Arab Studies in itself is a broad and interdisciplinary field of studies. The author is presenting some ideas, less or better known in Polish academic milieu, suitable for describing some of political, religious and social problems of contemporary Arab world, which can be seen as dynamic and pressing subjects of contemporary humanities. It is important to propose the creation of new terminology and approaches that could refresh and enrich the interdisciplinary research on ethnic and religious issues in the Arab world.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The very term 'Arab world' is ambiguous and controversial. This is also the case of other geographical and political notions describing modern and contemporary Arab states, societies and Islam e.g. Islamism, Islamic fundamentalism and Islamist. It is treated in the following article according to the Arab concept (Arabic: *al-alam al-arabi*) of a community of states with Arabic as an official language, and what is more important, with the Arab-Islamic civilization as a dominating mode of

The Lebanese Maronites form a community living in the country of many religious and ethnic groups with different versions of identity and competing collective memories. It is a unique example of Muslim-Christian 'confessional democracy' in the region dominated by the Arab-Muslim civilization. However, sometimes it is also criticized as a model of sectarian society which had to collapse at some point of its history and this happened during the civil war between 1975 and 1990.

However uniquely diversified, Lebanon can serve as an example of a more universal social phenomena, concerning all the Arab world: tensions between Pan-Arab (*qawmiyya*) and local (*wataniyya*) levels of nationalisms, application of the Western ideas and institutions into the Arab world, functioning of ethnic and religious minorities in the Arab societies, insurgence of political Islam and local Christian reactions towards it.

This topic is very lively and dynamic and the results of this very discussion on Maronite collective consciousness can influence positions taken by all Christian communities in the Middle East. Taking these aspects into account, the author touches the crucial problem: whether the pluralist society embracing multilevel, multicultural, multiethnic identities, can really emerge in the Arab countries?

## 2. Ethnic and religious phenomena in contemporary Arab world

Traditional Arab Studies, born as a *stricte* philological discipline, put emphasis on knowledge of the language, its grammatical rules and precise understanding of primary sources. Acknowledging the importance and indispensability of Oriental Studies so understood, it can be claimed that a philologist's workshop is not sufficient enough from contemporary Arabist point of view. Especially while describing social processes, common interpretations of the history of the Middle East and Northern Africa, or while presenting individual and collective memory of inhabitants of these areas – in the most distanced way. Thus, an open and genuine discussion on the methodology of scientific research of Arab Studies, as well as introducing new scientific strategies and approaches, seems to be necessary. It may even be vital when considering all the challenges ahead in this scientific discipline.

In the sphere of politics in the Arab world, it is still the religious, denominational factor that dominates over other components of collective identity. One of the political analysts of so called "Arab Spring", a contemporary revolutionary phenomena in the Middle East, presents the idea that "the evidence in Lebanon and Iraq [two Arab countries experimenting with Western-influenced models of democracy – MM] points unequivocally to the fact that turning the political machine around, once it has headed off down the sectarian and ethnic route, is well nigh impossible".<sup>2</sup> In the cases of the Copts of Egypt and the Maronites of Lebanon religious peculiarity goes hand in hand with ethnic distinction, and political representation of both

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culture, and participating in the League of Arab States. Using this notion of the Arab world, it has to be acknowledged that this term itself is a projection of the linguistic and cultural stereotype shaped by the Pan-Arab nationalism in the thirties, forties and fifties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. At the same time, the term 'Middle East' represents the Westernizing view of the region as a periphery of the West. It is not possible to avoid stereotypical names and notions describing contemporary Arab states, however it is recommended to treat them with distance and criticism.

<sup>2</sup> G. Butt, "Do Arabs need a new awakening to win true democracy?", <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-19272199> (accessed 16.08.2012).

communities is almost equally divided between secular politicians and leaders of the churches, namely patriarchs and leading bishops. Thus, the strictly Lebanese idea of the National Pact and ‘confessional democracy’, launched in the colonial French era and confirmed in 1943 by the political leaders of Maronite and Sunni Muslim groups, suits well to the version of democracy which allows religious and tribal-ethnic affiliations to dominate.

The following phenomena are connected with the process of shaping identity based on religion: generating the belief of a group’s own superiority over other religious groups (i.e., mythical appraising of the outstanding role of pre-Muslim Egypt, contrasted with its decay in the Islamization period) and various aspects of coexistence and conflicts between the Christians and representatives of dominant religion of Islam. The first element has played an important role in shaping the dominant Maronite world-view in which native mountainous and fearless Lebanese Christians strongly differ from non-native Muslims of Greater Syria.

Returning to the question of scientific terminology, the different dimensions of collective and individual memory, the ways of managing the memory in the Coptic and the Maronite communities, (in relevance to the understanding of this expression by the scientists such as Pierre Nora, Aleida and Jan Assmann, or, in case of the Polish borderlands studies Robert Traba), should be taken into account.

The issue categorized as a collective memory was first introduced as a ‘historical consciousness’ to Polish social thought by Nina Assorodobraj in the article *Żywa historia* (“Living History”, 1963). This category can be considered as exceptionally unclear and difficult one to interpret. This is due to the ambiguous distinction between the understandings of this definition as a linear historical process and the acknowledged presence of the past in the present.

It seems more adequate and safe to opt for the term a ‘collective memory’, proposed by Maurice Halbwachs, a French sociologist and disciple of Emile Durkheim. His two works, *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (1925, *The Social Frames of Memory*) and *La Mémoire Collective* (*The Collective Memory*, published after the author’s death in 1950), are of the greatest assets for the future generation of researchers. Halbwachs dealt with the influence of society on individual memory and with collective memory. He formulated alternative research categories: autobiographical memory – historical memory; history – collective memory, thus, the opposition, between dead history living history and history known from sources versus history experienced everyday.

Another interesting and adequate definition of a collective memory would be the one proposed by Polish scientist Barbara Szacka: “collective memory of the past comes from the notion of the past of home group, constructed by individuals memories – in accordance with the rules discovered by psychologists – information of miscellaneous sources and reaches them via different channels. They are understood, selected and transformed appropriately to their own cultural standards with regards to their outlooks and beliefs. These standards are socially generated, therefore common to all members of a given community, and the notion of the past is so homogenized it allows them to talk about historical collective memory of the home group”.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Barbara Szacka, “Pamięć zbiorowa” (*Collective Memory*), in: *Wobec przeszłości. Pamięć przeszłości jako element kultury współczesnej* (*Towards the Past. Memory of the Past as a Piece of Modern Culture*), A. Szpociński (ed.), Warszawa: Instytut Adama Mickiewicza, 2005, p. 18.

The distinction between ‘communicative memory’ and ‘cultural memory’, introduced by Jan and Aleida Assmann, is also crucial. Communicative memory is related to everyday time domain, and its most important feature is the limited time horizon, from 80 to 100 years back. It is the period of time retained in the memories of a generation’s lifetime.<sup>4</sup> The cultural memory is distant from a daily life, and it has its points of reference located in the unlimited time horizon. Events that determine group’s fate constitute constant points. Cultural memory forms the identity of a group.<sup>5</sup>

An important methodological suggestion concerning the methods of researching collective memory, was formulated by Pierre Nora. The notion, ‘place of memory’ (French: *lieux de memoire*) has become a key category as a new form of writing and interpreting the history. It was named by Nora<sup>6</sup> ‘a history of a second degree’ (*histoire au second degré*). Its characteristics are: breaking with positivistic fact-collecting, history and linearity and turning to symbolic space. The very term itself, ‘place of memory’, which has its background in Ancient rhetoric (Quintilian), was given by Nora a whole new meaning – and it has become an idiomatic expression in the French language lexicon (hence the standard dictionary Petit Robert). Places of memory are present in the collective memory, giving shape to each groups’ identity, and to its self-image. Against the topographic suggestion, the term should be understood as a metaphor, a sign of history rooted in collective memory in contrary to analytical historical descriptions made by professional historians.<sup>6</sup> The following are the possible examples of the places of memory which could be derived from Nora’s methodological scheme and which could be associated with the examples concerning European, Lebanese Maronite and the Egyptian Copts :

– ‘historiographic places’, which serve to pass on a certain vision of the past (i.e. any cultural centers or museums presenting certain visions of history, like The Warsaw Uprising Museum or The Jewish Museum in Berlin), in the Middle East this role could be played by museums, scientific institutions and religious sanctuaries;

– ‘founding places’, which represent any group’s pedigree (i.e. the knowledge of canonical texts, specific for each religious tradition and creation of their vision of the world). This role can be attributed to the religious sources of the Copts and some versions of the genealogy of Maronites, e.g. references to Phoenicians and Mardaites in the official Maronite vision of history that focuses on the ancient, primordial character of the Maronite denomination and ethnicity;

– ‘geographical places’; rivers, mountains, oasis’, deserts, locations on hills e.g. Wadi Natrun – the spiritual center of Coptic Christianity with famous monasteries in Alexandria – the birthplace of Egyptian Christianity or Bkirki – the contemporary seat of the Maronite Patriarchate located in Mount Lebanon;

– ‘cultural and economical places’; streets, districts, markets and market squares, trade routes, train stations (e.g. the positive stereotype of Lebanon as a safe haven for merchants

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<sup>4</sup> Jan Assmann, *Pamięć zbiorowa i tożsamość kulturowa* (Collective Memory And Cultural Identity), „Borussia”, No. 29, 2003, p. 12–13.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>6</sup> Pierre Nora, “General Introduction: Between Memory and History”, in: *Realms of Memory, The Construction of the French Past*, Vol. 1: *Conflicts and Divisions*, Pierre Nora (ed.), New York: Columbia University Press, 1996, p. 14–21.

and “the land of the first boat and the first oar” with such important ports as Beirut, Tyre (Sur) or Byblos (Jubayl);<sup>7</sup>

– ‘architectural places’, as in the Nora’s research of The Eiffel Tower in Paris for the French;

– ‘real and mythical figures’, like Pope John Paul II for the Poles or the late Pope Shenouda III of Alexandria for the Copts; St. Marun (Mar Marun, probably died in 410), hermit and legendary pioneer of Christian monastic life in the Valley of Orontes has been perceived as the founding figure (and the source of the name) for the Maronite community;

– as well as all events, songs, banners, symbols, literary texts, holidays, rituals what means the sphere of mass nationalism.

It is vital to acknowledge a significant number of theoretical and scientific texts, created by researchers from the Middle East or coming from the Arab world and living in the West, which translate Western categories (nation, ethnicity, country, religious fundamentalism) into the reality of Arab countries. Most of these authors are characterized by a deep knowledge of Western theories of nation-making and identity and quite strongly identify with some of these approaches, e.g. as did the historians Youssef M. Choueiri (*Arab History and The Nation-State. A Study in Modern Arab Historiography 1820–1980*<sup>8</sup> and *Arab Nationalism. A History*<sup>9</sup>), Muhammad Muslih (*The Origins of Palestinian Nationalism*<sup>10</sup>) and Adeed Dawisha (*Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century: From Triumph to Despair*<sup>11</sup>). Sometimes the creators of this broadly defined scientific direction have also historiographical-ideological ambitions, such as the late Lebanese historian Kamal Salibi, who will be cited in the next chapters, because he created some landmark works on modern and contemporary history of Lebanon.

The weak points of some of the aforementioned works, despite of their crucial value for historical studies, are definitely: avoiding methodology other than historical and using only written sources, as well as the lack of broader discussion on the Western conceptual thinking and ways of describing nationalism with reference to the Arab reality. For instance, in the Dawisha’s work, which is an interesting attempt at depicting the phenomenon of Pan-Arab nationalism, methodological reflection is significantly underdeveloped. The author recalls the works and terms formulated by well-known researchers like Benedict Anderson (constructivist approach) or Charles D. Smith (ethnohistorical and symbolic approach), however without having these extremely different approaches properly contrasted and discussed in the specifically Arab context.

<sup>7</sup> Aleida Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume: Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses* (Spaces of Memory: Forms and Transformations of Cultural Memory), München: Verlag C.H. Beck, 1999, p. 132 (translated thanks to unpublished translation by Marta Karkowska).

<sup>8</sup> For more information on construction of the Lebanese ‘merchant’ myth and its ideological representation in the writings of Michel Chiha see: M. Hartman, A. Olsaretti, “‘The First Boat and The First Oar’: Inventions of Lebanon in the Writings of Michel Chiha”, *Radical History Review*, Issue 86, 2003, p. 37–65.

<sup>9</sup> Youssef M. Choueiri, *Arab History and The Nation-State. A Study in Modern Arab Historiography 1820–1980*, London–New York: Routledge, 1989.

<sup>10</sup> Youssef M. Choueiri, *Arab Nationalism. A History*, Oxford–Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2000.

<sup>11</sup> Muhammad Muslih, *The Origins of Palestinian Nationalism*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.

Still, while applying sociological and psychological approaches to Arab Studies scientific researches (less commonly used, however, than the historical ones), it appears that quantitative methods are too broadly used; and as these methods do not prove exactly correct in the Middle Eastern reality (i.e. application of the statistic surveys in the article: Mahmoud Mi'ari, "Self-Identity And Readiness For Interethnic Contact Among Young Palestinians in The West Bank"<sup>12</sup>). In this aforementioned text, the author tried to establish relations among ethnicity and religion, which were involved in creating individual identities of the examined group, in a statistical way. Young Palestinian students of well-known universities and research centers from the West Bank and from the Gaza Strip, were forced to formulate false classifications of their views and beliefs (i.e. they were to state clearly whether the identities: Arab, Palestinian, clan or Muslim [Islamic], were always of primary value and the greatest importance in each situation). Such a very "Westernized" generalization resulted in the unreliable outcome of the opinion polls, and certainly, in the process, complex, multi-layered character of the individual identities in the Arab Middle East was lost in the pursuit of artificial homogeneity. In the meantime, the experience of many various affiliations is often multileveled, for instance, acknowledging the fundamental role of religion is not synonymous to rejecting local nationalism (which uses the language that emulates the European ideas).

Highly interesting scientific tool from an orientalist perspective is an open biographical interview – known from the ethnological or sociological works. It is very often related to situations of communities inhabiting cultural and linguistic borders. The method requires interviewing in a rather free way, only slightly controlled, members of examined groups that live in certain, chosen areas. It seems to be a good solution to problems encountered by a researcher of national identities in the Middle East. It respects oral cultural traditions of everyday life, and encompasses sacral sphere (i.e. the role of memorizing the Qur'an and the Bible, the recitations of the Holy Book and its tendency to use parables, examples, tales); It also develops bonds with the respondents. It helps to gain their trust and faith and involves them in the conversation – what is crucial and extremely difficult in the unfriendly reality of authoritarian countries.

Implementing the new methods of analysis of national and religious phenomena to Oriental Studies requires combining the following research competences: knowledge of terminology and approaches, applied in the social sciences, and strictly philological background. This is especially true in case of the researcher of Arabic language and Arab culture, with regards to the diglossia and necessity of speaking both the literary official language (*al-lughā al-fushā al-arabiyya*), as well as local dialects (*al-ammiyya*). An interesting idea perhaps is to differentiate contemporary Islamic studies in order to distinguish *the Islamic Studies* – which would basically concentrate on the analysis of the source texts, and thus, similar to the traditional philology, and the *Islamology* (or the *Contemporary Interdisciplinary Islamic Studies*)<sup>13</sup> – closer to the sociology and

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<sup>12</sup> Adeed Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century: From Triumph to Despair*, Princeton–Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003.

<sup>13</sup> Mahmoud Mi'ari, "Self-Identity and Readiness for Interethnic Contact among Young Palestinians in The West Bank", *Canadian Journal of Sociology/Cahiers canadiens de sociologie*, Vol. 23, No. 1, 1998, p. 47–70.

cultural studies, which would describe contemporary Islam in the public space, and the concerning discourses.

Analogical distinction could be transferred into the sphere of the Arab Studies, so it would also comprehend history and modern times of the ethnical and religious minority groups (mostly, however, of non-Arab character), inhabiting densely Middle Eastern countries, but with an Arab majority. Throughout the centuries, the Copts and the Maronites alike (as well as the Kurds of Iraq and Syria, and to some extent the Assyrians), surrendered to the Arabization processes in terms of language, and came under the Islamic majority influence. Perchance in the future the Arab Studies will become more regionalized and focused on internal diversity of the Arab countries cultures, e.g. it is not impossible that the studies on Maghreb countries, the Gulf, the Christian Arab and Arabic-language communities etc. will form new distinct academic specializations.

Summing up, depicting the relations between Islam versus local and Pan-Arab national identities, examining the Christian and the Muslims multi-layered contacts in Arab countries, presenting the process of forming the sense of autonomy in culturally and religiously minor groups – are, undoubtedly, one of the most interesting tasks for the contemporary Arabist, open to accomplishments of contemporary social studies.

### **3. Attitudes of the Maronite elites at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century<sup>14</sup>**

The Lebanese Maronites form the most important part of mosaic Lebanese Christianity and are, politically, the most emancipated Christian group in the Arab world. The construction of Maronites' collective identity is strictly connected to the question of shaping the Lebanese 'imagined community'. Without the Maronite intellectuals there would be no conception of Greater Lebanon, bigger than the Christian stronghold in Mount Lebanon and consisting of Beirut and areas with Muslim demographic domination. Westernized consciousness of Catholic Maronites was also an important reason for cooperating with the French colonial administration that helped in fulfilling the very idea of Greater Lebanon as a French-sponsored Mandate (1920–1943). The Christian thinkers (mainly Maronites) invented the idea of Lebanon as Switzerland of the Middle East which was sound and successful in the West. It is intriguing how the Maronite elites have shaped their world-view and how is it reflected in contemporary history of Lebanon. In the last thirty years, the Maronites had to reconcile their vision of autonomous Lebanon with the dominating Arab-Muslim world-view.

The horror of civil war (1975–1990), the Syrian political domination over Lebanon, death of Rafiq Hariri, the prime minister, and so-called 'Cedar Revolution' in 2005, another war with Israel in 2006 – all these dramatic events had to influence the traditional historiographical and political approaches of the Maronite elites. Nor was it possible to ignore the growing role of Hizb Allah (Hezbollah, The Party Of God), powerful political

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<sup>14</sup> Some parts of this chapter are free translations of the passages taken from the MM monograph, that was prepared for printing in 2012 and entitled *Swoi i obcy. Tożsamość Koptów i Maronitów w arabskich tekstach kultury* (The Natives and the Others. Identity of Copts and Maronites in the Arabic Texts of Culture).

and military resistance<sup>15</sup> movement, representing demographically growing group of the Lebanese Shi'a. Relating to aforementioned Jan Assmann's category of cultural memory, it must be admitted that it suits well to the Maronite group. Their collective consciousness is very deeply rooted in history, but it's not the factual history, rather one of its interpretations, shaped in the Westernized modern Maronite milieu. It was critically analyzed by Kamal Salibi<sup>16</sup> who tried to show how a historically heretic (perhaps the Monothelite creed was their first denomination) and internally diversified group of Maronites (whose tribal background is not known) has become a metaphorical "rose among the thorns"<sup>17</sup>, a sign of Catholic orthodoxy among dominating forces of Arab-Islamic civilization and other heretic Christians. This manifestation of strong bonds with Roman and the Western Christianity was enriched in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries with a huge dose of anti-Arab sentiment and a vision of Lebanon as a platform between the West and the Arab-Islamic world, which should be neutral in all regional conflicts. For the most part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however fluent in literary Arabic and taking part in Arabic-language cultural life, the bigger part of the Maronite elites was still strongly tied to the concept of Maronite and Lebanese non-Arab identity, being rather hostile towards Pan-Arab ideas and indifferent to the idea of supporting the Palestinians in their fight for self-determination against the Jewish nation-state.

What remained of these Maronite ideas in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Lebanon has survived the bloody civil war and invasions of stronger neighbors and remained so far an independent nation-state. It must be relieving for the Maronites who invented the very Lebanese imagined community of many ethnicities and denominations with Christians as the dominating power-brokers. However, the shape of contemporary Lebanese 'confessional democracy' does not reflect the Maronites' tradition and world-views. They had to acknowledge the fact that Lebanon was and would be the Arab country, the participant of the Pan-Arab *ummah*, even if their presumptions were exactly the opposite. How do the Maronite elites react in this situation of demographic fragility<sup>18</sup> and political complexity?

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<sup>15</sup> The category of resistance (Arabic: *muqawama*) has been the focal point of political identification for such political-military movements as Hamas or Hezbollah. Resistance was often related to the question of Palestine and military fights against the Israeli forces (and not to the global *jihad* against the infidels in case of these two movements). However, the *muqawama* ideology has strongly increased the social status of radical Islamic parties, the enemies of Hezbollah criticize using the anti-Israeli resistance ideology as a pretext to gather arms and blackmail other political groups in Lebanon.

<sup>16</sup> Kamal Salibi, *A House of Many Mansions. History of Lebanon Reconsidered*, Berkeley: University of California, 1988, p. 72–108. Salibi gave a new controversial account of medieval and modern Lebanese Maronite historiography, hinting that crucial historians as the 17<sup>th</sup> c. patriarch Istifan ad-Duwayhi, have invented some elements of the Maronite past that seem to be natural and obviously contemporary.

<sup>17</sup> Salibi, *A House of Many Mansions...*, p. 72 et al. This metaphor, taken from the Song of Songs (2:2) was utilized in the landmark bull of the Pope Leo X which was sent in 1510 to then Maronite Patriarch, Butrus of Hadath. The bull underlined purely Catholic orthodoxy of the Maronite community and encouraged long process of integrating the Lebanese Maronite Patriarchate into the structures of the Catholic Church.

<sup>18</sup> According to the results of 1932 census the Maronites formed 29% of the Lebanese population and the total Christian population did have a small majority over all Muslim groups (52: 48 %, data

#### 4. Memory and commemorating

Political, social and ideological transformations among the Maronites overlap with the overall situation of ‘crisis of history’, as it was coined by P. Nora in his important essay *Time of Memory* (2001). Taking France as an example, the acclaimed historian traced the transition from ‘historical consciousness’ to ‘commemorative consciousness’.<sup>19</sup> This phenomenon happened due to specific factors. The examples were rooted in the history of France, but the very terminology of P. Nora can adequately describe the situation of Lebanese Christians as well. The effect of the aforementioned transformation of social roles of history have been both political and symbolic because it has resulted in the triumph of memory over history. This was helpful in the formation of a firm concept of a ‘national’ or ‘collective memory’.

Referring to the historical approach of K. Salibi, it is worth emphasizing that the post-modern era has turned previous canons: history has become subjective and personal, while memory has become one of the properties and characteristics of the community. The historian ceased to be the depository and authoritative interpreter of “History” with a capital H, but one of its many “producers”.<sup>20</sup> He shares this role with politicians, judges and legislators, as well as with direct witnesses of history and mass media. This situation leads to the democratization of history, however it also dangerously leads to mass popularity of simplified visions of the past that blur in the ocean of the mutually excluding interpretations.

The Maronite question is very interesting in this context, in fact it illustrates a rare situation in which an ethnic minority and religious community becomes the dominant group only to return finally to the role of minority fighting for its place. Contemporary ‘acceleration of history’<sup>21</sup> has also affected the Christians in the Middle East, forcing them to adapt to changing conditions. History is no longer a confident reference point for the present, its dominating aspects are rather those of inconstancy and uncertainty. The present ceased to be a solid bridge linking the past and future. What will happen in the future and its unpredictability raises terror, because there has been a breaking of historical linearity that means the lack of continuity of the historical process. The only salvation could be a return to the ‘collective memory’ because the effort of ‘commemorating’ allows one to find roots in history. To quote Pierre Nora<sup>22</sup>, since “we are cut off from history” and do not know its meaning, there is a kind of “duty of memory”, or “pious collecting, in a somewhat

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after: Claude Boueiz Kanaan, *Lebanon 1860–1960. A Century Of Myth And Politics*, Beirut: Saqi, 2005, p. 135). It has been the last official census until now, but the fears of demographic outnumbering have been very powerful in the Maronite milieu. Unofficial data present a different picture of the contemporary situation, however the fact of growing Muslim (especially Shiite) majority is obvious. For example, according to the CIA World Factbook from 2012 there were 59,7% of Muslims and 39% of Christians in Lebanon: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/le.html> (accessed 08.2012), however no precise numbers for members of specified denominations were given. Some contemporary commentators think that Lebanon should be now described as a country of three minorities: the Sunni, the Shiites and the Christians.

<sup>19</sup> P. Nora, “Czas pamięci” (The Time of Memory), *Res Publica Nowa*, No. 7, July 2001, p. 37.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>21</sup> P. Nora utilized here the term coined by Daniel Halžvy.

<sup>22</sup> Nora, “Czas...”, p. 40–41.

undifferentiated manner, of all visible traces and marks of all the material, which shall certify (perhaps), what we are or what will we prove to be". The past has nowadays become a mysterious area, and an extremely difficult one to recover. What remains is protecting the available historical evidence and "the reconstruction work on documents, archives and monuments"<sup>23</sup> which may lead to the strengthening of the national identity. However, this effort of "remembering", "commemorating" or reconstructing<sup>24</sup>, no longer belongs to the order of history, but rather to the sphere of constructed collective memory. This leads to symbolic exchange of roles between "memory" and "history", what can result in dangerous consequences. In other words, the 'collective memory' takes over the role of the official version of national history.

The contemporary Maronite group is furthermore representative of the aforementioned social processes, testified by the various types of texts created by prominent representatives of this community. Out of necessity, the researcher describes a phenomena of contemporary times primarily on the basis of ad hoc analysis of different texts (political texts, journalistic articles) as well as careful observations of public events connected with history. The conclusion on the Maronite experience, which can be drawn by the researchers, is that the community is in a period of very strong manifestation of identity based on their collective memory. Referring once again to the apparatus of P. Nora<sup>25</sup>, it can be concluded that the Maronites are living in the "era of commemoration" and their collective memory is very "hot", alive and open for internal conflicts. Within the Maronite group there exists a violent struggle on whose interpretation of history will gain the status of an official and uncontested form of collective memory.

A good example of such conflicts were the celebrations of the 1600<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of St. Marun (Arabic: Mar Marun). In 2010, the event took place in two localizations and seemed to be a kind of a political competition. It seems that more important than the religious dimension of the ceremony was presenting the contrasting political views on the Maronite community and its way of functioning in the Arab world. The official celebration, supported by the Maronite Patriarchate in Bkirki, took place on 8<sup>th</sup> February 2010, at St. George Church in Beirut. The liturgy was led by Patriarch Nasr Allah Sufayr who, in his pastoral word, put emphasis on the importance of Lebanon's independence and stressed that the Maronite Church has always played with his attitude a very important role of national co-existence between Christians and Muslims (*yashhadu laha Allah bi-qiyam al-aysh al-mushtarak bayna al-masihyyin wa al-muslimin wa la siyama fi ard Lubnan*).<sup>26</sup> At the same time, however, the second ceremony was held in the church in Brad, on the outskirts of Aleppo, on the Syrian territory. The mass was attracted by some Maronite

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>24</sup> It is possible to relate this notion to the contemporary wave of reconstructions of historical events, often based on the expectations of a post-modern spectator e.g. the field reconstruction of the battle of Grunwald or the city games concerning the dramatic events of the Warsaw Uprising. In The Arab countries there is a phenomenon of TV series depicting the golden age of Islam, e.g. the life of prophet Muhammad, the Rightly-Guided Caliphs and the Caliphates.

<sup>25</sup> Nora, "Czas...", p. 43.

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.naharnet.com/domino/tn/arabicNewsDesk.nsf/getstory?openform&571AE D8ED80D176DC22576C50020FC64> (accessed 9.02.2010).

political celebrities as Michel Awn, Sulayman Faranjiyya and Amil Lahoud, the former President of Lebanon at the time of Syrian domination. Political leaders who had gathered in the Syrian church pointed out that they came to a genuine place of residence and death of St. Marun. However, the choice of the ceremony venue did not arise from the fascination with archeology and theology, but rather from a different vision of politics of history and brutal fighting for formation of the desired version of collective memory. The figure of St. Marun, patron and founder of the community, was taken out of context and rewritten in the historical context of the two narratives. The first narrative was contained in the official liturgy of the Maronite Patriarchate, celebrated in Beirut, and stressed the universal heritage of the saint and an attitude of friendliness towards the West. In this approach there exists a very close relationship, even union of the Maronite community with peculiar, nationalist and pro-Western vision of the Lebanese national identity.

The solemn mass at the Brad church was associated with a completely different message. It was well expressed in the press interview of a close associate of M. Awn, a member of the Lebanese parliament, Nabil Niqla. He did not conceal at the same time that the Syrian event is closely connected with ‘the duty of memory’, as it was coined by P. Nora:

“Going to Syria to commemorate St. Marun’s anniversary aims at reactivating the memory, especially that of the Christians, reminding them that they are the sons of the Orient (Arabic: *awlad ash-sharq*) and not intruders (...) We also wanted to remind the Western countries that we are the descendants of Eastern people (*annana min asas ash-shu’ub ash-sharqiyya*), and not the remnants of the Crusader invasions (*lasna min baqaya al-ghazawat as-salibiyyin*)”.<sup>27</sup>

This position manifests an entirely different approach from the aforementioned attitude of the majority of the Maronite clergy elites. The most important factor in the second narrative is showing solidarity between the Arab societies and the wider Muslim world. There is no distinction between Syrian and Lebanese Maronites, in that narration they all form one community, hence the independence of Lebanon is praised. This is only if the country’s goals are consistent with the policy of Assad-ruled Syria. Such an approach shows respect not only for their nearest neighbor, but also seeks to establish friendship and alliance with Iran. It results from the cooperation of some Maronite parties with the Shiite groups – Hezbollah and Amal parties. Consequently, even if these Maronite parties (the Free Patriotic Movement, Marada Brigades and other smaller groups) officially affirm the Lebanese identity, they do so because of radically different reasons and associated with it a completely different ideological content than most of the clergy and the more traditional Maronite forces (Kata’ib Party – the Phalange and Lebanese Forces). Unexpectedly, this new tendency was somewhat supported by some public statements of the new Maronite Patriarch, Bishara ar-Ra’i, elected in 2010. He showed empathy and even political support towards the embattled (during so-called ‘Arab Spring’) Syrian regime and Hezbollah, e.g. by visiting its strongholds in southern Lebanon. Surprising and often self-contradictory rhetoric of the new patriarch seemed to cause great division and bustling discussion among the Maronites.

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<sup>27</sup> The unknown author, *Hass Naharnet, Niqla: “Nahnu abna’ ash-sharq wa lasna min baqaya as-salibiyyin*, <http://www.naharnet.com/domino/tn/arabicNewsDesk.nsf/Lebanon/8C992B21E42B349CC22576C70062C522?OpenDocument>, 11 February 2010 (accessed 11.2011).

The described pro-Syrian orientation was sharply criticized by Samir Ja'ja' the former leader of the Christian armed militias during the civil war period (1975–1990). The Lebanese Forces leader perceived an attitude of submission towards Syria and Iran as an “unnatural denial of the foundations of the historical policy of Christians in Lebanon” (*tahaluf maghayir li at-tabi'a wa didda mabadi niqat irtikaz as-siyasa at-tarihiyya li al-masihiyyin fi Lubnan*).<sup>28</sup> The historical argument serves to express his very firm belief that Maronites are a ‘belligerent nation’, which from generation to generation brings an innate reluctance to surrender to oppression (*shab muqawim la yastaslimu bi-tabi'atihi*).<sup>29</sup> A sense of superiority towards other communities and conviction about the leading role of the Maronites is implicitly included in such views.

An important phenomenon in Lebanese Christian circles seems to be the radicalization of young generation of political activists, based on views resembling aforementioned S. Ja'ja' theses. This sentiment is expressed by Sami Jumayyil (born in 1980), the son of Amin Pierre Jumayyil, long standing leader of the Phalange movement, and nephew of Bashir Jumayyil. The youngest political representative of the famous family, personally not remembering the greatest crimes of the civil war, presents an apology for the past connected with the belief that the Maronites fought only in self-defense, forced to do so by the enemy. If the symbolic center of the world-view was for the older generations of Phalangists the independent Lebanon protecting Christians, then for S. Jumayyil and contemporary activists like him a sense of their work becomes the exclusive focus on the fate of Christian communities and their strong separation from the Muslim neighbors.<sup>30</sup>

## 5. Conclusions

The analyzed material proves that in the Lebanese public discourse there are two very radically defined visions of the world which are highly influential in the Maronite environment: one assumes autonomy for Christians, their isolation from other groups and contains a strong anti-Arab resentment, the latter is based on the total identification of Christian positions with the political views of other Arab countries and Iran, but does not aim at reducing the Maronite privileges in independent Lebanon. Both views seem to be rather socially harmful, and the solutions should be found in the future to reconcile the contradicting world-views. The question is whether Lebanese Maronites would preserve their own voice and awareness of their historical and religious peculiarity, but at the same

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<sup>28</sup> <http://www.naharnet.com/domino/tn/ArabicNewsDesk.nsf/getstory?openform&1B49FE D8DC2EED48C22576F70040427E>, 31 March 2010 (accessed 11.2011).

<sup>29</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>30</sup> See: Phillip Smyth, *A New Kataeb*, <http://mepei.com/in-focus/580-a-new-kataeb> (accessed 06.2010). An example of isolationism of young Phalange leaders is their interest in reviving of “Aramaic” elements of the collective identity of Maronites. According to P. Smyth, they try to organize a movement of ‘Sunday School’ that propagates the teaching and learning of Modern Aramaic language. They also have expanded the “Aramaic” style of writing proper names connected with using the graph in the Latin alphabet. An example might be a group of activists called Bnay Qyomo, which, using modern Internet sources, seeks to rehabilitate the “Aramaic roots” of Lebanese Maronites. This evokes an association with the “Syriac-Aramaic” tendencies, emphasizing the role of the classical literary Syriac language as a liturgical language and the language of communication within the Christian community.

time would they harmonize their differences with the wider experience of non-Christian Lebanese and Arabs. This process of rethinking the Maronite collective identity can follow some important results: shaping the more democratic and multilayered view of their history, a criticism of collective historical memory and rejection of anti-Arab stereotypes ruining relationships with other Middle-Eastern communities.

In Lebanon, as it was proved earlier, exists a specific ‘culture of commemoration’, based on the ‘duty of memory’ and historical narrations accenting the peculiarity of the given ethnic-religious communities. Each group celebrates its own martyrdom, at the same time depreciating the tragedy of other communities. This tribal attitude is usually hidden under the facade of ‘national dialogue’ that is a strictly political case and is conducted mostly by former warlords who become civil politicians still ruling their denominational groups.

For instance, the services in memory of “Christian martyrs” highlight not only their sacrifices, but lead to the avoidance of questions about their own responsibility, e.g. for the death of Palestinians in the Sabra and Shatila camps in 1982. Relations between various Lebanese communities are thus based on nurturing their own martyrdom and self-harm at the expense of relationships with other groups. The dominance of ‘the duty of memory’ and ‘culture of commemoration’ causes the isolationist tendencies of ethnic and religious communities; individual approach to the history of religious groups is based on remembering specific events. As an example, the Maronites would choose the feast of St. Marun (which is, as previously shown, a vehicle for different political messages), the commemorations of the Christian victims of the civil war, or the anniversary of B. Jumayyil’s death. The Druze would commemorate the tragic death of Kamal Junbulat, their great leader and the Pan-Arab giant, and Shiites – their religious feasts in addition to the focus on memories of the end of the Israeli occupation in South Lebanon (2000) or “the victory” over Israel (2006). However, there is a lack of a more universal perspective in describing these events and views of peculiar groups.<sup>31</sup> One of the proofs that the more general Lebanese perspective could emerge are the works of the mentioned Kamal Salibi. The historian strongly believed in the idea of Lebanon a “good house for many mansions”.

Without a dialogue between different groups and open discussion on their visions of history and identity the real Lebanese national community, connecting on an equal footing Lebanese of different faiths, will not emerge. It requires compassion and accepting the fact that each group took part in the civil war, both as victims and executioners, and that there is no single all-encompassing interpretation of this terrifying fratricidal conflict. The other issue is how to organize the school programs and academic curricula in order to present and teach more inclusive version of Lebanese past and present.

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<sup>31</sup> The account of war in Lebanon that was highly appreciated in the West was an animated documentary, partly autobiographic, film *Waltz with Bashir* (2008) by Avi Folman, the Israeli film director. However inventive and moving, this film concentrated on experiences of the author and other Israeli witnesses of history and it consciously lacks of the Arab/Palestinian/Maronite /Lebanese approaches and points of view. Sadly, important Arabic language and Lebanese accounts of war as novels by Rashid ad-Da’if or the drama film *Bayrut al-Gharbiyya* (*West Beirut*, 1998, directed by Ziyad Duwayri) didn’t succeed as much among the Western audience despite of good international reviews.

The empathic approach would show the Maronites cooperation with Israel and a subsequent murder in Sabra and Shatila in 1982 as a tragic chain of historical events, a kind of a bleak historical destiny. If there was a consensus over such an understanding of this part of Lebanese contemporary history, the Maronite environment in this situation would recognize their guilt, as well as cherish the memory of their losses caused by violent Palestinian groups and associated Lebanese militia, leaving behind themselves an empty rhetoric of “Christian resistance movement”, which was always attacked by demonized enemies. Similarly, Shiites have the right to feel a completely justified sense of marginalization and underestimation in the history of independent Lebanese state, and general acceptance of this assessment would help them in rethinking their own “dark sides” of history, as the actions against the Palestinians during the so-called “War of the Camps” (especially conducted by the Amal movement) in the mid-eighties of the twentieth century or some violent acts committed by Hezbollah.

Such a work on collective memory seems to be still a challenge, perhaps beyond the capacities of Lebanese denominational groups. It is due to their constant involvement in violent conflicts tearing apart the Middle East. The key to solving the problems of Lebanon as a nation-state, and the Maronites – the builders of modern Lebanese political nation, seem to be not concrete political solutions, but rather an attitude of openness, compassion and initiating a free debate on the contemporary history of Lebanon. Collective memory should not be sanctified in order to become a weapon or a form of exclusion.<sup>32</sup> Contrastingly, it should be a kind of a process or unfinished, still growing unit of information, which includes both negative and positive experiences of the community. Only openness to the nearest Other, which would be in this case a neighbor, could save the Lebanese people, disintegrated and affected by all the possible historical shocks. It could allow the Maronite group to continue playing an important role in Lebanon, the Arab world and the Middle East as well.

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<sup>32</sup> Compare: Nora, “Czas...”, p. 43.

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