In October 2008, the graduate programs in urban planning and design at the American University of Beirut (AUB) organized, with the International Institute for the Study of the Muslim World (ISIM, Leiden), their annual conference, City Debates, on the theme of ‘Spaces of Faith and Fun’. Papers investigated the impacts of the socio-cultural dimensions of the Muslim public sphere upon the built environment, looking specifically at new urban and rural geographies of pious leisure in the Middle-East. This theme stems from ongoing research I am conducting with Lara Deeb, which theorizes transformations in the city induced by the leisure practices of politicized and educated pious middle-classes. These transformations take multiple forms in terms of new visual vocabularies, new leisure sites and new socio-spatial practices. They materialize changes in the economic, political, socio-cultural and geographical spheres beyond the scope of this discussion. City Debates documented these changes in the built and visual environment and examined their impacts on city-making, society and politics.

City Debates started from the assumption that religion is a social practice embedded in cultural, historical and political-economic contexts, and an interpretative process based on multiple understandings that depend on global and local dialectics, class, gender and individual morality and disposition (Asad, 1993; Ismail, 2004, among others). Political Islam has led to the consolidation of the process whereby the educated, professional, pious middle classes appropriate urban and rural spaces, and determine new market demands (Brenner, 1998; Eickelman, 2000). Urban neighborhoods and rural landscapes have been reshaped by Muslim entrepreneurs and the norms and values of pious publics (Gole, 2000; Haenni, 2005). Yet we still know little about how spaces shape and are shaped by pious morality practices.

Geographers of religion have begun to address that lacuna. Kong (2001) argues for an investigation of the spatiality of religion that combines the poetic and political, anchored in studies of gender, race, class and transnational flows (see also Holloway and Valins, 2002). In this spirit, City Debates 2008 explored spatially the relationship of faith and fun, investigating the production and transformation of the religious in the built and imagined landscapes. Adding to these frameworks, the conference moved beyond the sacred to address the relationship of leisure to morality and investigate moral geographies in relation to processes of identity formation, as well as socio-spatial
exclusion and inclusion, on multiple scales. In so doing, the conference contributed to an emerging literature on religious spatialities, pious urban mobilities and Muslims’ territorialization practices (Secor, 2002; Al-Hamarneh and Steiner, 2004; Martin and Mason, 2004; Schielke, 2006; Pinto, 2007).

Specifically, City Debates built on scholarship that emphasizes the role of the market in relation to leisure in Muslim contexts (Moors and Tarlo, 2007; Yaqin, 2007), and nuanced it further by considering fun and leisure as complex processes emerging at the intersection of multiple ideologies, moralities and spatialities. In addition, by spatializing understandings of pious leisure, the conference reconsidered how pious leisure may simultaneously further exclusive subjectivities and boundaries and create possibilities for encounters and interactions.

City Debates 2008 investigated places in and outside the city that bring together faith and fun, i.e. that comply with piety considerations while providing leisure and entertainment. Papers described these sites ethnographically and focused on their socio-spatial practices, reflecting on the relationship of piety to consumption, commodification, morality and identity. How is piety negotiated socially and spatially? Are spaces of faith and fun contributing to the dilution and/or the reinforcement of practices of Muslim piety? The conference also critically examined the impacts of spaces and practices of faith and fun on city and society, exploring how socio-spatial relationships are negotiated and transformed. Is the built environment further fragmented into exclusive spatialities, favoring self-sufficiency and social segregation at the expense of interaction and mixity, or are differences being accommodated and plurality further negotiated to accommodate a wider range of consumers?

**Opening lecture: on the subversive power of fun**

Asef Bayat (University of Leiden, the Netherlands) inaugurated the conference with his lecture highlighting the subversive dimension of fun, potentially threatening to faith. He opposed spontaneous fun — associated with youth and potentially subversive — to regulated fun. While noting that tensions between a desire for and a battle against fun were part of Islamic history, he also showed how the anti-fun doctrine has religious roots in Christianity and has also been associated with secular authoritarian practices — for example, in the cases of the French Jacobins and the Communist Bolsheviks.

Accordingly, he argued, anti-fun ethics could be associated with the project of modern rationality: fun as a waste of time that takes one away from reasoned behavior. However, given that anti-fun ethics were expressed across historical eras, Bayat related such practices to doctrinal regimes that did not appreciate fun as a ritualized form of rebellion and expression of class. Indeed, in its spontaneous individual free form, fun acts against authority and is subversive because it challenges the dominant order, structure and hierarchy. Yet, Bayat added, fun can divert the dominant power paradigm only when it includes an individual disposition about one’s self and a technique of power to challenge moral authority and enabling instantaneous fulfillment. Capitalist commodification, pacification, containment and institutionalization may dilute fun’s subversive powers.

During the discussion, a more flexible interpretation of ‘fun’ as a learning process that could be initiated by a passive practice of consumption and develop into moments of subversion defying faith-based institutions was suggested. The importance of taking into account social norms and political ideologies that alter interpretations and representations of right and wrong in fun practices, in addition to personal subjectivities, was also emphasized. The relationship of pleasure to piety could thus be seen as cutting across the religious dimension where fun could be about the interplay between structure and anti-structure.

---

2 This was based on Bayat (2007).
Panel 1: Commemoration and pilgrimage as entertainment

The first session focused on commemoration and pilgrimage practices as entertainment with case-studies from Syria, Lebanon and Bahrain. By exploring Shi’i pilgrimage to Sayyida Zainab in Damascus, Paulo Pinto (University Federal Fluminense, Brazil) examined how pilgrimage connects the local and global through systems of beliefs and practices which create transnational shared identities. He showed how Syria and Iran’s geopolitical relationship contributed to the religious objectification and consolidation of a public Shi’i identity and a sacred geography of transnational Shi’ism. The influence of political Islam as well as the pan-Islamic dimension of geopolitics translated identities architecturally and spatially in buildings and infrastructure. In addition, the demand for objects and images from pilgrimage sites participated in the commodification of religion and the circulation of symbols and practices.

Through the study of the appropriation of a rural landscape in a South Lebanon village for the organization of popular Ashoura theater, Sabrina Mervin (CNRS, France) investigated how spaces are claimed as religious and symbolic. The domination of Hezbollah over the Shi’i political scene in Lebanon translated into an institutionalization and professionalization of the Ashoura village play. Here, religious entertainment is again infused with the global and local and reflects its tensions culturally, symbolically and spatially — by appropriation and reinterpretation of land, history and collective memory. Fatima Bustani (AUB) examined Ashoura rituals in Bahrain and how they provide an opportunity for youth to flirt, interact and meet, using gazing and Bluetooth technology. She underscored how information about these encounters is disseminated on the internet, where intimacy skills and mating competencies emerge and encourage peers to participate similarly in future ritual events.

Papers in this session highlighted how the spatiality of faith can take either permanent or temporary forms (through building or staging), claiming urban and rural landscapes as religious. Spaces become imagined, narrated and represented, bringing together differently politics, economics and culture, locating physically the global and the transnational.

Panel 2: Everyday practices as challenges to/within pious circles

Discussion in the second session emphasized the power of fun practices to challenge pious morality structures, using music, fashion and new media technologies. Talal Atrissi (Lebanese University) examined Hezbollah’s anashid — political songs — and their transformation over time. In the 1980s, religious topics dominated Hezbollah’s political songs, highlighting belonging to a community of the oppressed and the need for a revolution. These songs did not possess noticeable artistic value: they were lengthy, relied on two instruments, and used classical Arabic and monotonous rhymes. Twenty years later, anashid have undergone a revolutionary turn: they rely on popular rhythms and language, use several musical instruments, are promoted by attractively produced video clips and are sung by youth. In addition, their themes celebrate Lebanese national symbols (e.g. cedars) reflecting a move towards enjoyment.

3 Based on Pinto (2007).
4 Based on her forthcoming paper ‘Kull Ard Karbala: The Space of the Shi’i Theater’.
5 Fatima Bustani is a graphic designer who graduated from AUB in June 2008. Her presentation was to be based on a term paper she submitted for a course this author taught at AUB in Spring 2008 (UP639: Spaces of Faith and Fun), entitled: ‘Mourning and flirting during Ashoura in Bahrein’. Bustani was not able to present her talk at City Debates due to the May 2008 events in Beirut that forced the organizers to postpone the conference to October — she had left Beirut for Bahrein by then.
6 Based on his work of which a partial overview has been published in Atrissi (2008).
Annelies Moors (University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands) underlined the rich diversity of fashion styles among pious women across contexts, emphasizing the role of diaspora and globalization in creating different circuits of influence as well as meanings and tastes of dress. She revealed the tensions between forces of homogenization and diversification that make dress a contested issue in identity politics and ideas of morality, yielding to the emergence of hybrid fashion styles, across generations and contexts. Pardis Mahdavi (Pomona College, USA) emphasized how globalized youth urban culture is both cosmopolitan and modern, demonstrating its competencies in having fun and challenging authority through use of the internet in Iran. She revealed how, through the interplay between virtual reality and real virtuality, young Iranians use the internet for expression and as a source of information about sexuality.

The debates in this session brought to the fore the issue of definition: what is fun and how should we understand this concept? How is fun associated with leisure and entertainment? How does fun translate in Arabic: is it about *lahu* or *tarfeeh*? It was suggested that fun should be associated with *lahu* and the notion of expenditure put forward by George Bataille: fun exists when it involves loss rather than when it is associated with entertainment. Discussion also highlighted the importance of understanding fun empirically. Field research reveals a new kind of hedonism associated with faith-based practices. It could be that people are using religion to transgress its norms, and that globalization has facilitated new claims to places and identities.

Panel 3: The spatialities of Muslim piety

The final session focused on the spatiality of Muslim pious practices in Britain, Turkey and Lebanon. Richard Gale (University of Birmingham, Great Britain) accentuated the importance of the spatial turn in the geography of religion, which emphasized how space was active in building religious identities. He illustrated his argument with the story of the construction of a mosque in Birmingham and the negotiation that accompanied its planning. Heiko Henkel (University of Copenhagen, Denmark) investigated how pious Muslims in Istanbul weave religious practices and institutions in their modern heterogeneous lifeworlds through actively perceiving and anchoring elements of their private/domestic and public/urban spaces. He argued that Muslimness is not an all-encompassing fixed identity but is rife with ambiguities and contradictions that vary. Henkel highlighted the importance of urban spaces and spatial experiences in the development of these Muslim identities through everyday practices of work, family and leisure.

This author presented her ongoing research with Lara Deeb on pious entertainment practices in Beirut, showing how cafes and restaurants have multiplied in the southern suburb of the city (*Dahiya*) since the liberation of South Lebanon in 2000 and the war on Lebanon in 2006. She explained how these places challenge conventional boundaries and lifestyles in *Dahiya*, introducing new social and sexual practices that transgress established moralities while remaining within the realm of possibility for a moral lifestyle. In these sites, values and norms are negotiated and transformed by the tastes, practices, desires and hopes of pious youth. These places produce new leisure geographies in the city, providing opportunities for the young pious middle classes to express their subjectivities.

---

7 Based on her work and Moors and Tarlo (2007). Unfortunately, Moors could not attend City Debates 2008.
8 Based on her work and Mahdavi (2007). Unfortunately, Mahdavi could not attend City Debates 2008.
9 Based on Gale (2007).
10 Based on Henkel (2007).
11 Based on their ongoing research of which an overview was published in Deeb and Harb (2007).
The discussion highlighted how religious practices are becoming prominently inscribed in the public domain, accentuating contestations about otherness. These new socio-spatial phenomena are reconfiguring identity constructions and negotiations and redefining one’s position in the city according to politics of power.

**Closing remarks**

Building on scholarly work that demonstrates how religion is not only a quest for meaning but also a justification for power and political economy (Peet, 1997; Schmelzkopf, 2002), City Debates 2008 reasserted that religion needs and uses space to subsist and to accumulate capital (Lefebvre, 1991; Harvey, 1996). The conference underscored the importance of understanding how the built landscape, ideology and social relations intersect to reproduce power spatially (Mitchell, 2000). In addition, City Debates confirmed the ability of faith and fun to interact, corroborating that the sacred operates as a flexible category that can be grounded in material practices and can redefine, mix and contest established limits of gender and sexuality, public and private, and morality and immorality (Schielke, 2006). The conference demonstrated how temporalities and spatialities are redefined by pious entertainment practices in the built environment and are able, occasionally and often only momentarily, to challenge and maybe reverse power hierarchies.

City Debates also highlighted the transnational dimension of the faith/fun phenomenon, which encourages the circulation of models, practices and references, especially amongst youth. This globalization is simultaneously coupled with specificities — largely determined by the role and nature of the state — that engender a wide variety and heterogeneity of practices across contexts. The materialization of claimed identities takes different spatial and temporal forms: they can translate physically into new landmark buildings (cf. Gale, Pinto), renewed programmatic and functional activities (cf. Henkel, Pinto, this author), or temporary appropriations of landscape (cf. Mervin, Bustani). These new material assertions in the built environment have major impacts on the geographies and mobilities of social groups, reproducing boundaries, social and spatial segregation and territorial claims in urban and rural spaces.

Mona Harb (mh22@aub.edu.lb), Faculty of Architecture and Design, American University of Beirut, Bliss St., Beirut 11072020, Lebanon.

**References**


