Women in Lebanon: Living with Christianity, Islam, and Multiculturalism, Marie-Claude Thomas, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 245 pp., $85.50 (Hardcover), ISBN 10: 1137281987 / -13: 978-1-137-28198-2

Sylvie Avakian

Women in Lebanon: Living with Christianity, Islam, and Multiculturalism is an 'experimental ethnography' as it gives a detailed description of how people and cultural—societal phenomena operate in Lebanon, basing its claims on observation, field notes, interviews and participation in the life of Lebanese communities. The author of the book, Marie-Claude Thomas, a Lebanese whose 'family is native to Saghbine', distinguishes three phases of research: a first phase (1980-82) targeted the years of the Lebanese Civil War, a second phase (2008-09), and a 'more recent phase' in June 2009. Thomas uses her assumed prior knowledge of the country for the purpose of presenting the results of her research-study to the particular community which conducts her research. Her work has three parts. In the first part Thomas starts with Saghbine, 'a Christian village in the Western Bekaa', engaging expressions which reveal personal relatedness to the object of study. Thomas presents an overview of Saghbine including geographic and demographic data. She also provides a description of the lifestyles of the village women, having the different stages of life in prospect. In the second part, Thomas proceeds to speak of women in Islam. She presents several Islamic practices and values, based on their presentation in the Qur'ān. In chapter 5 (in this part pp. 83-101) the author moves to a remarkedly different style and theme as she undertakes a chronological presentation of Lebanese history (1943-2008), incorporating into it the history of the rise of the Shi'i community in Lebanon. The author also reflects here on

‘modern Islam’, engaging several feminist voices, and refers to the negative role of Western Colonialism, which induced Islam to adhere more vigorously to Islamic values, rejecting modernism and feminism as they were perceived to be Western—Colonial—phenomena.

In the opening of part three Thomas again displays personal dispositions describing her return to Beirut in 2008. She further examines the Christian-Muslim relations and the possibilities of change and progress—in both Christian and Muslim Lebanese communities—having particularly women in mind. Here she states that her ‘model of modernity’ is ‘the universal Occidental Western model in the Hegelian sense’ (p. 161). Further, she asks: ‘What elements can be taken from the French and American models to create an authentically Lebanese national model?’ (p. 166).

Thomas’ work is an auspicious contribution in the domain of experimental ethnology, in that she succeeds to incorporate her fieldwork and the different techniques and to offer significant insights into the specific domain of study. Her work also creates awareness and assists the particular communities to rediscover several aspects of their culture and traditions for the sake of adjustment and reformation. I have, however, one major remark concerning this work. Toward the beginning of her work, Thomas asks: ‘how [do] Lebanese women act as agents of change for their own status and for the evolution of Lebanese society overall’? (p. 10) Despite the great significance that the question conveys, the author does not supply the reader with a holistic and a comprehensive understanding of what ‘evolution’ or ‘modernity’ implies. In different instances Thomas tends to perceive ‘modernity’ in several current phenomena of Lebanese societies, she writes: ‘Another important element of modernity is the formation of Public Square where young men and women can gather’ (p. 29). In another section she refers to the ‘free choice’ that the couple can claim and impose over their

parents (p. 52), or ‘the current transformation in inheritance practice’ (p. 66), or to be ‘courageous enough to be sexual’ (p. 196). Do these examples adequately demonstrate ‘modernity’ in the sense of progress and advancement? I believe not! Thomas embraces the ‘Occidental Western model’ of ‘modernity’, yet, she does not attempt to penetrate its deeper sense and significance in relation to the Lebanese context. Western model of ‘modernity’ would not have been realized without going first through the experience of Enlightenment, namely the experience of challenging the old presuppositions and hierarchical social orders through the contribution of human reason and philosophical inquiry. Should one ask whether the Western model of modernity had any impact on the life in the Middle East, one has first to inquire about the possibility of acquiring Kant’s credo: ‘dare to think for yourself’. Any other expression of external change or freedom would reflect ‘an outward imitation of the West’, as ‘Roula’ says in an interview presented by Thomas in her book (p. 75).

A few minor remarks might be appropriate to make here. First, in some domains of her work Thomas lacks preciseness and comprehensive information, e.g. her discussion of Protestantism (pp. 23-25) and her claim that the question of separating religion and state is a major difference between Protestantism and Catholicism (p. 162). In another instance Thomas suggests ‘two trajectories of modernity in the academic and educational system’ in Lebanon: one Christian ‘integrating Western values’ and another ‘adopting Islamic values.’ (pp. 40-41) How precise is this? Is it the case that Christian schools in Lebanon and Christian education promote Western values and secularism?

Second, the author embraces the Christian ‘Maronite’ pattern almost with no critique. In many instances when she describes the status of Christian women in Saghbine, her statements reflect conventionalism and lack of critical approach concerning the limited role of those women (pp. 33, 35-38, 44-50, 64-66, 168, 187-188). Toward the end of the book the author presents the case of ‘Georgina: The

Paradigm of Devotion' (pp. 188-192). The whole story highlights traditional values, Georgina's conformist attitude and her resignation to the will of the powerful and it seems to the reader that the story's only merit is that it tells about a 'Maronite' family from Saghbine. Another disadvantage is the scarcity of appropriate dates. In several places the author states: 'today…' and for the reader it remains unclear whether this particular information belongs to the first, the second or the third phase of the author's research. Also Thomas presents an interview with 'Roula' (pp. 75-79), which is an inspiring section of the book, without supplying it with its appropriate date. Finally, another problematic issue in the work is the intermingling of the scientific method with the personal affectionate style of writing. Somehow, the author oscillates between the method of an objective scientific research and a non-scientific—autobiographical—account, while it would have been more constructive had the researcher not placed herself within the ethnographic frame and could persist on the first methodology rather than shifting between the two.

Despite these several remarks, Thomas' book remains a pleasant reading, particularly to those interested in Middle Eastern studies. Further, Thomas' insistence on the role of Lebanese women as 'agents of change' gives her work additional value. Finally, as Thomas also contends, the uniqueness of the work is in that it combines the theme of women in both Christianity and Islam with the ethnographic research concerning the multicultural reality of Lebanon.