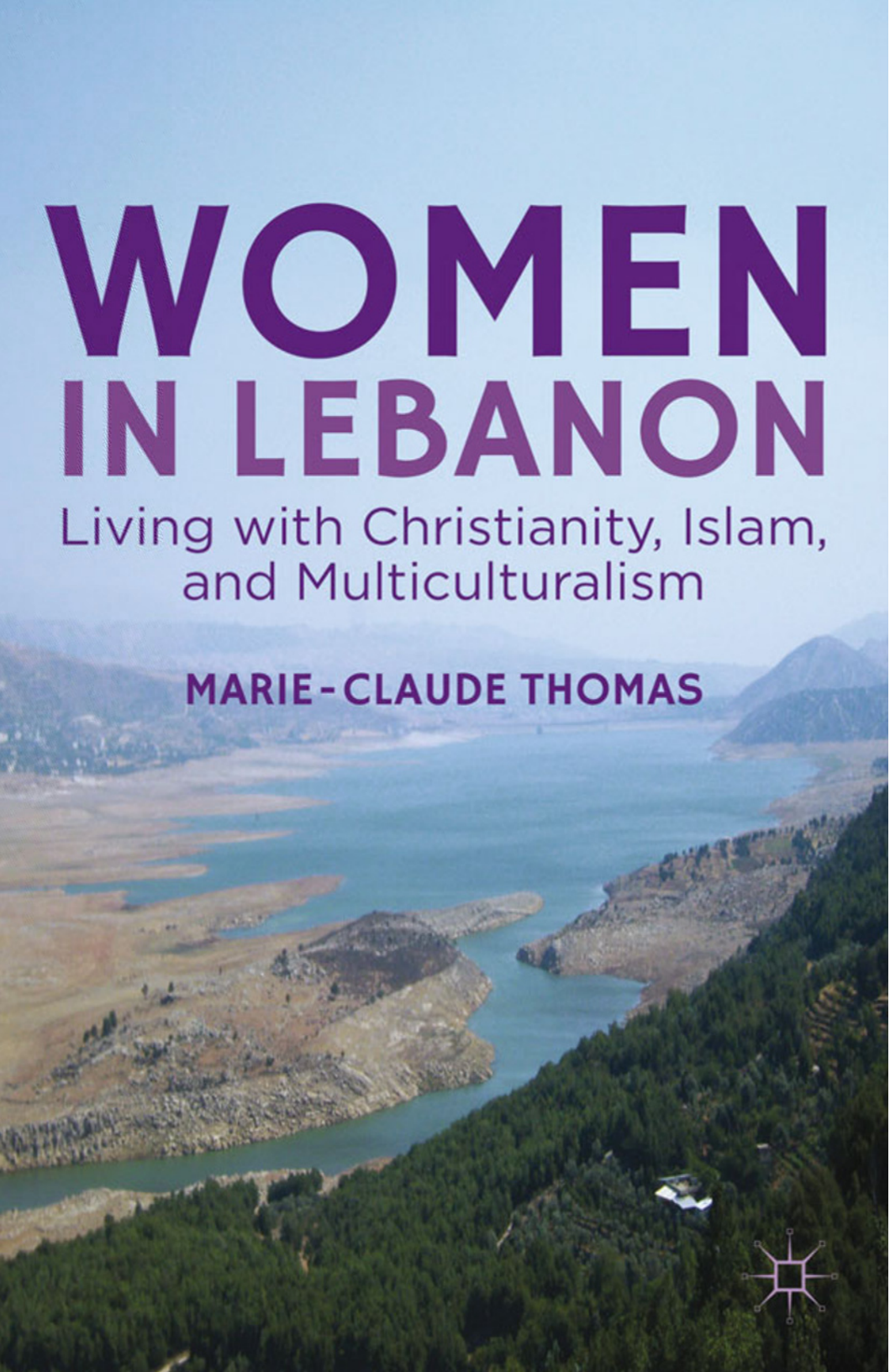
WOMEN IN LEBANON

Living with Christianity, Islam, and Multiculturalism

MARIE-CLAUDE THOMAS



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Introduction

On a Sunday in April 1975, I was visiting a friend in East Beirut. While sipping fresh lemonade on the veranda, looking at the pine trees of Sin el Fil, hearing the crickets chirp, and talking about our future in Lebanon, we suddenly heard the sound of repeated machine gun fire. Terrified, we asked, "What could this be?" Even as young people, we were aware of the quarrels that sometimes led to clashes in the western part of Beirut between armed refugee Palestinians and Lebanese soldiers. Yet this time, the repeated racket was close by, right in the heart of the Christian area. I ran home as fast as I could, telling myself this incident would soon be contained. I never envisioned that the consequence of this shooting would be a ferocious war that would ravage Lebanon for fifteen years and the suffering that would fall upon the entire Lebanese population.

On the evening news, I learned that the shooting was an exchange between the paramilitary Phalanges,[1] *members of the newly restructured Christian political party al Kataeb, and some Palestinian members of Fatah as they were crossing the Christian area of Ain el Rummaneh in a bus. The following Monday, we went about our business as usual, and life seemingly returned to normal as I took the final exams at my university. Yet, as the days passed, similar clashes occurred. A commando of Palestinians broke into the villa of former Lebanese president Camille Chamoun, situated along the Mediterranean Sea, with the aim of killing him. Fortunately, he was not home, but they destroyed his villa. Seemingly homeless, he moved into the apartment of Lebanese socialite and activist Maud Fargeallah, which happened to be in the building where my family and I were living. This temporary invitation lasted more than a decade, until his passing from old age in the summer of 1986. During this time, my building transformed not only into the residence of a former president, but also into the headquarters of the Hizb el-Ahrar, the Lebanese Christian National Liberal Party.*[2] *Camille Chamoun*[3] *actively participated in the civil war, and in 1976 he became the chief of the Lebanese Front encompassing all Christian militia. For me, the change meant the positioning of barricades along our street and militia soldiers in the entrance to our building, even though we did not fully support the politics of the Christian militia. That also meant that our political opponents ordered their militia to shell our area and specifically target our residence.*

This combination of circumstances obliged me to leave the country. In the beginning, my family and I thought that the situation would settle down after a few months, or at worst, a year. Thirty years passed before the end of the conflict. My leaving the country was gradual; in fact, I did not expect it to be permanent. As the war raged on, I postponed my return from one year to another until I ended up living in Paris for more than a decade. Then I met my husband and moved to the United States. I have returned to Lebanon several times to see my mother, father, and brothers, as well as my extended family and my friends.

Although Lebanon is no longer at war, it is still characterized by the many religious groups that once fought each other in the streets of Beirut but have somehow found a way to overcome their differences for the country's good. In spite of frequent political dissidence and periodic spurts of violence, Lebanon today is in many ways different from the Lebanon I left as a young woman. It has entered the contemporary age but because of its rich mix of cultural and religious fabrics, it has formulated its own definition of modernity. The women of my generation were privileged to have lived in a rather economically prosperous Lebanon and to have intellectually and creatively embraced the modernity emerging from the integrative Arab renaissance or *Nahda.* With a view to unifying—though unsuccessfully—the different cleavages within the Arab world, the synthesizing discourse of the *Nahda* steered away from sectarianism and fragmentation. The philosophical discourse of the nineteenth-century *Nahda* incorporated universal values and made significant contributions on issues pertaining to Arab women. In the diverse Lebanese society, progress meant openness and collaboration among Christians and Muslims for a democratic Lebanon that includes all confessions in the affairs of the state. Modernity for Christian and Muslim women meant openness toward rationalization, at once taking in Western culture while treasuring our own heritage. Urban Lebanese women, whether Christian or Muslim, followed similar paths in their evolution; no one tried to show the dominance of their own affiliation, at least not overtly.

Today, the Lebanon I knew seems to have been altered; a page has been turned. A different concept of modernity is emerging; a concept that some might describe as finding ways to benefit one community at the expense of the other, while others describe the change as an "enchanted modern." In the midst of this evolution,[4] Lebanese women of all religious groups are acquiring and adapting to new roles, while altering existing ones. Hizbullah's[5] women are embracing a new kind of modernity in which religion and identity are an integral part, an Islamic modernity based on the Iranian model propagated by Ayatollah Khomeini in the 1980s. Yet the Western model of modernity has

not disappeared. How then can one reconcile the two tendencies in a small country of 10,470 square kilometers?[6]

Is life better or worse than before? It is often in these terms that one poses the question of the status of women. The condition of women, in all of the countries of the world, is a subject currently at the heart of a great deal of intellectual debate. However, only rarely does one have the occasion to linger on the experience of a simple villager or urban woman in the midst of transformation, to ask her opinion on the issue rather than to extend abstract discussions, more so because she has her own say in this matter.

Until now no study has been dedicated to women's lives in the villages of the Bekaa in Eastern Lebanon. To sketch a coherent portrait of village women, one should not lose sight of the fact that rural life relies on traditions that evolve. No society can persist in a static state, and the notion of evolution is inherent in every anthropological study. I gathered evidence of the evolving status of Christian and Muslim Lebanese women based on my fieldwork in Saghbine and the surrounding villages in the Bekaa, first in 1981 and again in 2008 and 2009. My most recent research also included my participant observation of events in Beirut, in particular the legislative elections in June 2009.

Since my family is native to Saghbine, we spent our summer vacations there when I was a child. Saghbine is a Christian village in a region made up of 40 percent Christians and 60 percent Muslims. An economically self-sufficient and the most socially developed village of the region, its most striking feature is its cultural evolution and its openness to the outside, whether to big Lebanese cities or even to the West. Here, the status of women is close to that of the most evolved districts of Lebanon. Saghbine is one field of my exploration. This locality allows us to have access to different sections of the population, ranging from rural women to college students, from the woman working outside the home to the housewife.

When I did my initial research in the 1980s, I concluded that evolution in the lifestyles of Lebanese women came from their ability to link their modern conventions with traditional customs. This allowed women to move from a state of resignation to a more active role in determining their quality of life. In addition, I realized that Lebanese women experienced some sort of transcendental quality in the form of popular religiosity, which gave rise to a feeling of grandeur in some of them.

This feature is still prevalent given the rise in the status of women, both Christian and Muslim, in recent decades. Since the 1980s, many Lebanese men have found work opportunities in Arab countries, and women have successfully fulfilled the role of both mother and father. Many women remained unmarried because many men emigrated to the oil states or the West to work.

These women have proved to be capable of sustaining themselves and even financially supporting their families.

Religion has always been a dimension of Lebanese political and social reality. More and more today, and on a global scale, religions inform individual behavior and dictate state politics. It has become a means of modernization, an adaptation to globalization. Similarly, the increasing role of women in Hizbullah has reinforced the Iranian model because "they bear the burden of cultural authenticity as the markers of public piety. This social weight has added specific ramifications to their lives."[7] Hizbullah's women consider the wearing of the veil as a sign of embracing modernity, as they define it, while entering the public sphere.

Each time I return I realize that the love of one's country does not change; on the contrary, this love reinforces itself after many years of absence. A few social realities seem shocking at the beginning, such as the saturation of traffic or the lack of respect for traffic rules. In addition, the increased number of veiled women coloring the Lebanese landscape signifies an increased prominence of Islam in a country that was once called the Paris of the Middle East.

Despite these changes, I feel as if I am reliving the history of a unique country born at the end of the French Mandate in 1948. In 1943, Christians and Muslims agreed on the Lebanese Pact, an agreement based on religious pluralism. Some saw this agreement as successful, insofar as it takes the cultural and religious diversity of the Arab Muslim zones in the Middle East into account. Others, however, saw this agreement as the cause of a Lebanese identity crisis, insofar as the Lebanese formula or *sigha* does not contemplate anything beyond *communitarianism* or communalism in the sense that it demonstrates the limits of the quota system and of all attempts at unity through community.[8] In other words, communalism reflects the priority of group over national identity in the lives of individuals. As far as I could observe, however, the international reputation of Lebanon has survived. Lebanon remains what it has never ceased to be, a country of religious diversity, entente, and prosperity.

Though this study begins with a particular village, it also encompasses the neighboring villages and includes snapshots of contemporary Beirut. The particularity of my focus resides in the fact that Muslim-majority villages surround Saghbine, a Christian village divided between Maronites and Melkites. This proximity allowed me to compare the evolving status of women in Saghbine and of Lebanese women in general, including Muslim women. Does evolution allow the same rhythm for Muslim and Christian women? What are the motivations that determine their choices? Moreover, what are the major factors that slow down or impede the improvement of their social

status? According to my ethnographic observations, Christian and Muslim Lebanese women sometimes take divergent paths because of different ways of adjusting to modernity. This difference in perceptions is fueled by disparate religious beliefs.

In their path to evolution since the nineteenth-century *Nahda,*[9] and despite a discourse of difference, both Christian and Muslim women have presented more similarities than differences. The differences in views and values essentially relate to their respective religious backgrounds. Today, though Christian and Muslim women find themselves struggling with similar problems, some Muslim women, inspired by an Islamic-dominated sociopolitical regional context, are taking a divergent path from their Christian counterparts. Regional and global politics provide them with new resources to enter the public sphere and embrace modernity, which some perceive to be emphasizing differences rather than similarities. These women endeavor to reveal themselves as possible agents of reconstructing Muslim women's self. Are there future perspectives for a new kind of coming together that will enhance the status of all Lebanese women?

The effect of the Islamic modernity movement sweeping the Middle East since 1979 has impacted different aspects of Muslim Lebanese women's lives. The return of religion appears to be a more democratic, grassroots affair that is surprisingly more in tune with globalization. Today, and in this particular time in history, modernity is differently interpreted and lived by Shi'i women. These women no longer see modernity in the Western sense as progress and as a welcome development. My research indicates two models for women's identity: the Islamic modernity model that brings symbols of religion to the public sphere and the Westernized model adapted to the particular Lebanese context. The evolution of our society has led to a juxtaposition of the role of both Christian and Muslim women. My research strives to make sense of the meaning of this mixed modernity, whether the current religious resurgence is a passing phase or the adjustment of a secular civilization in crisis.

The two models are a reflection of two mentalities embedded in the pluralistic Lebanese mold. I believe that it is still possible for these two mentalities to find harmony as they evolve, to deepen the solidarity among Lebanese women and weaken sectarianism. A "United Lebanon" is not a myth. We hope that our new coming together will deliver Lebanon from being a land of constant confrontation between two models that are part of a bigger picture, the regional conflict in the Middle East.[10] The moral values that link the Lebanese people are powerful, and Lebanese women are marked by a common heritage of Christianity and Islam. The two monotheistic religions evolved in a common patriarchal society.

The equality between men and women and the entente between Christians and Muslims in Lebanon will not come out of the will and actions of men and women alone or Christians and Muslims alone, but from social relations and genuine dialogue that facilitate the coming together of all groups in the face of common civic responsibilities. A change of mentality is needed for social change and this transformation in women's rights and responsibilities must essentially take place in an open society.

What was presented for centuries as the nature of women has often proved to be a manufactured myth. Indeed, human nature must always manifest itself in culture. Culture has always supported masculine dominance in war as well as in the domestic realm. Women, by contrast, were relegated to a life of silence and resentment. The former era did not understand the complementary order of men and women, together as human beings, destined to speak in dialogue that allowed for individual gendered accomplishments. However, some women dedicated their lives to the liberation of their gender despite the fact that they received a compromised education. In Egypt, Kout el Kouloub lived the novel that she wrote about women's liberation at the onset of the twentieth century.[11] In Lebanon, Leila Baalbaki, a former student at the American University of Beirut, demanded the right of Muslim women to really live. She was considered risqué and daring in her themes. Like other female writers of the prewar generation (before 1975), she shifted away from politics and social issues in her writings to focus on women's issues, thus creating their own space for discussion.

Thesis, Methodology, and Goals

The Lebanese alternative modernities are analyzed within the intersecting framework of local, regional, and Western histories. The analysis traces the lives of Christian and Muslim women coexisting in a multicultural society and facing modernity. Since the Arab Spring has begun to draw attention to issues of change, modernity, and women's subjectivity, this book takes a unique approach to examining and describing the Lebanese "alternative modernities"; for Lebanese women, it is a state of being characterized by the relationship between religion and society, tradition and modernity. The transformation taking place illustrates that tradition and modernity can inhabit the same social universe and reinforce each other at times and be a cause of dissonance other times. Women from different groups may disagree in their interpretation of their alternative modernity; this lack of agreement threatens the unity of the country. This book is unique in that it brings together in a unified work the theme of women in Christian and Muslim contexts and that of multiculturalism.

The methodology is descriptive and analytical. I write as an insider while taking the responsibility of being self-critical. My ethnographical account is experimental in the sense that it simultaneously belongs both in the humanities and in the social sciences, and my analysis takes the split of the Lebanese people into account. My narration will be sensitive to the history and values of our cultural milieu. As a postcolonial ethnographer, I do not accept without criticism the superiority of Western conceptual categories or advocate for a Western system for our society; rather, I advocate for a rationale for change that reflects continuity with the past and the constitution of subjectivities.

Ethnography, like literature, reminds us of our presumptions; ethnography as a science is debatable since it consists of writing about cultures in a way that involves telling stories, making pictures, and formulating symbols. Ethnography explores the construction of a culturally constructed self; the "I" might shift from the individual to a collective voice, and thus ethnography could be termed experimental ethnography, navigating between the field journal and the autobiography. To render women's subjectivity and separate it from dominant narratives requires a deconstructive position aware of the difficulties and challenges arising from being accountable to different audiences. The changing paradigms and intractable problems encumber the holistic commitment of ethnography to fully understand a phenomenon. Rather, the researcher provides a meta-commentary, enacting a state of being in culture while looking at culture. Thus, experimental ethnography calls attention to feminist ethnography for the constitution of subjectivities and the risk of making assumptions, and my account in this research can be read as feminist or experimental ethnography.[12] Ethnography belongs simultaneously to science and the humanities, each having different norms to deal with truth and fiction; this is unlike the position taken by positivists who argue that good science is value-free and assume that truth is obtained by emphasizing objectivity and eliminating subjectivity in judgments and interpretations.

Instead of building a dichotomy, I will adopt a feminist strategy that builds on my connection with the investigated, using my own biographies and emotions as analytic guides. At the same time, I am aware that this approach can influence an objective interpretation and make me vulnerable to the biases of my own cultural assumptions.[13] I will strive to be aware, reflective, and critical of this dynamic rather than allowing it to maneuver my research implicitly.

In "On the Epistemology of Post-colonial Ethnography," Spickard argues that since the rise of ethnography in nineteenth century, and decades of colonial expansion, the Russians and the French hired ethnographers to record their subject's mores and customs, as well as their political structures and worldviews hoping that "power/knowledge"[14] would help them dominate the world. Unlike colonial anthropology, sociological ethnography grew out

of assimilation and a concern for social problems. Ethnography encouraged the notion that given the right environment and support, the socially disadvantaged would become just like us. There are two ways of presenting the "Other"; anthropological "Others" have usually lived in faraway places, and have been seen as exotic relics that need preserving while keeping away because they are not like "Us." Sociological "Others" are potential friends; we get to know them in order to change them and make them copies of ourselves.

Postcolonial ethnographers call these ideas imperialistic since they imply that the West has history and progress while the rest of the world is stuck in tradition. The colonial so-called objective and scientific ethnography encouraged this fiction, sustaining the perception that the observer knows it all. Matters have changed, at least among ethnographers, who rejected the colonialist-oriented roots of ethnography. "Rather than presenting results as a series of 'facts,' the new ethnography speaks of 'texts,' 'discourses,' and 'narratives.' " "Rather than taking the role of omniscient narrator, it touts 'reflexivity,' 'pluralism,' 'dialogue.' "[15] One cannot know "the Other" without involving the self and honestly presenting oneself in dialogue with the informant. Timeless culture will no longer do; rather than pretending to be a superior observer watching a subordinated observed, ethnographers now approach the issue of culture from both vantage points. Thus, ethnography based on the humanities becomes a path of knowledge that attempts to understand rather than objectify people to explain them; ethnography is this dual experience of science and humanity intimately and contradictorily bound. Truth and equality become the ideal regulative guide to the ethnographic researcher that makes progress possible through a dialogue of cross-cultural encounter rather than a one-way view. My research utilizes ethnography as a mechanism to enlighten readers, making the issues lived in Lebanon and throughout the Arab world more personal and more easily digested. Topics addressing current events such as the Arab Spring are increasingly in demand; there have been many titles on women and Islam, and on multiculturalism in Lebanon, but only a few have brought the themes together in a unified work.

Universalism is dialogue and respect for the voice of the "Other." "Universalism is no longer to believe that the West is universal, but the faith that humans can approach the universal by transcending their limited visions through dialogue with everyone."[16] What about ethnography's hidden politics? We are all human with different blindnesses and strengths, and as truth, equality has a special kind of ideal, one that pushes us out of our complacency. Commitment to any social value would add to people's biases; the beauty of regulative ideals is that while apparently limiting scientific inquiry, they actually deepen it. A commitment to truth and equality enables researchers to

understand the world more completely and their subjects more profoundly. These ideals are value-laden, as is science, precisely because of this commitment. I do not assume to be free of bias, and in my research, I work to listen attentively to the voices of the women, then I listen to my own voice carefully and try to be aware of the biases I hold, which makes a difference in the way I make sense of what the women are saying. My methodology tries to make as transparent as possible the bias in my work and in the sources I use for the reader to assess the information that I am presenting.

Regardless of their sects, Lebanese women are a product of Christianity and Islam, and my analysis of Christian and Muslim women stems from my Christian faith as well as my experience of growing up in Lebanon and mixing with Muslim families. Nothing seemed to me more natural than accepting different ways of worshipping or interpreting God's message in a slightly different way. Though I grew up in Ashrafieh, the Christian part of Beirut, my family's social circles transcended the locality where we lived. My parents always taught me to respect people regardless of their religion or their clothes. My father was a lawyer and his clientele included Muslims and Christians, and in Lebanon where people cherished togetherness and time spent socializing, it was natural to mix with Muslims, Druze, Alawite, or with any of the 18 sects that constitute the Lebanese fabric, without even being conscious of the fact. Any difference of religious worship and the usage of religious expressions while greeting someone seemed so natural to us. The presence of different faiths among us brought joy, enrichment, and self-reflection to our own way of life. I should also mention the solid personal friendships that were established between me and my Muslim friends, which never faded despite the many years of war that ravaged our common land. I therefore position myself as practicing the Christian faith within the unique diverse religious environment of Lebanon.

I began this project in 1980 when I was a doctoral candidate at the University of Paris. At that time, I studied a country marked by violence and conflict in the early years of the Civil War, which would last until the early 1990s. The role of women in Lebanese society was still traditional. Women found happiness in marriage, and both men and women perceived work as secondary compared to the primordial role of the family. Yet even then, the clash between tradition and progress was under way as the war upset and overturned the stability of the home.

Although my early research was focused on the life of Christian women in Saghbine, I could not help but observe how their lives compared to their Muslim counterparts. At the time of my writing in 1982, the effects of the Iranian Revolution on Lebanese Shi'i women were not yet evident; I found its influence to be much more prominent during my second phase of research

that began in 2008. In the past, the tradition of the veil was almost insignificant; now, this practice comes out of a resurgence of Islam that has captured the attention of scholars across the world.

In my more recent phase of research, I strove to identify the points at which evolutions in Lebanese society and evolutions in the role of women intersected for both Christian and Muslim women. I asked women if they felt that society was changing and asked them to elaborate on how they viewed their role in this transformation. At the heart of this endeavor was my desire to know how Lebanese women act as agents of change for their own status and for the evolution of Lebanese society overall. This study identifies elements of Westernization and the influence of Islamic resurgence on the lives of both rural and urban Christian and Muslim women. I explore the lifestyle of these women through my participant observations, in-depth conversations, and interviews.

During the second phase of research, I updated my data on Christian women in Saghbine, and I expanded my research base to include the transformation of Muslim women. I visited the southern belt of Beirut, the location of Hizbullah's headquarters. I spent the month of June 2009 in Lebanon to update my fieldwork and to vote in the legislative elections in which 600 candidates vied for 128 seats divided in parity between Christians and Muslims. This gave me the opportunity to observe the participation of Lebanese women in the political realm.

The book is divided into three main parts. Part I provides an overview of Saghbine, which allows the reader to see that the village is intrinsically a religious space, having been founded in between two churches. A traditionally rural zone, situated along one of several sources of water, Saghbine boasts a population that has been urbanized.

It is important first to depict the natural and social milieu in which the status of women emerges, for a better interpretation of their evolution. The geographic, historic, and demographic data presented in the two chapters in this part provide the concrete background for my broader analysis of gender and religion in Lebanon in the subsequent parts of the book. In addition, this part presents the lifestyles and values of rural and urban women of Saghbine. The first stages of life are described and analyzed, beginning from early childhood to adolescence, from motherhood to old age, all against the backdrop of the complexities of Lebanese culture and society. I analyze the modalities of marriages, the situation of married women and of mothers, aspects of women's daily life, widowhood, and women's work outside the house. Here, we will see the manifestation of these realities in the interview with Roula, a single woman who works in the village telecommunication office while taking care of her aging parents, and later in Part I the portraits of two Christian

women of the region: Laura, the wife of a former commander in chief of the Lebanese army and the mother of the current congressional representative of the western part of the Bekaa, and Georgina, who dedicated her life to charity work and the foundation of a medical dispensary in Saghbine.

Part II contains our discussion of women in Islam, including the emergence of the Shi'i community, the meaning of the National Pact,[17] and the consequences of *wilayat el faqih*[18] on Lebanon's future existence. I will underline the significance of the new women deputies elected to office in June 2009. Calling to mind the convergence of the past, present, and future, I will introduce the dilemma of modern Islam, the image of women in the Qur'an, and the nature of Islamic family law, especially the practice of divorce and inheritance. Islamic values now have great appeal to Muslims who reflect on some of their potential abuses as offset by financial safeguards, cohesive family life, security, and legal protections. This section also examines the growing practice of wearing the veil, and the role of women in Hizbullah. Muslim women speak about these issues in answers to my interview questions: Is the recent resurgence of the conservative veil a symbol of faith or a symbol of revolution? Is it a rejection of modernity and if so what kind of modernity? How has the Islamic revolution affected your life? Moreover, is the wearing of the veil a barrier to work opportunities? The interviews with Shi'i women from Mashghara who enrolled in Hizbullah will elucidate these questions.

Part III will examine the influence of multiple religious and cultural traditions on the evolution of mentalities, whether the change is harmonious or dissonant for women in Lebanese Christian and Muslim communities. Since the sixteenth century, Christianity contributed dynamic intellectual and practical structures of progress in the unique Lebanese "formula." The challenge has always been how to blend subtly modern conveniences with old and vulnerable traditions. The theme of dialogue between religions and cultures has always been at the heart of the Lebanese issue. Lebanon signifies a real synthesis of the questions related to Arab modernity. Are each religious group's international allegiances negatively affecting Lebanese national unity and sovereignty? It is crucial that the change that is currently taking place continue this message of progress while maintaining the international vocation of Lebanon. This research attempts to increase understanding of divergent points of view rather than portray one side as a detriment to progress. I take a unique approach in examining and describing Lebanese modernity; here, the evolution of society is looked at through the lens of women of different religious communities. My interview with young Shi'i women and the official who works at the library annexed to the mosque in Haret Hreik—the headquarters of Hizbullah in southern Beirut—as well as my interview with *Ustaz,* a former high school principle,[19] on the transformation of women's

lives in the last two decades is included. Also included is my interview with one of Saghbine's Maronite priests, who elaborated on the Lebanese message of religious coexistence, secularism, and the change that took place during the two phases of my research.

This volume takes into account historic and regional evolution, cultural identity, and openness to the West to discuss the status of women in Lebanon. A country of old traditions, multiple languages, a myriad of customs, and two monotheistic religions comprising 18 religious sects, Lebanon is primarily an expression of history and modern times. The religious element has recently become a dimension of international reality. Actors on the international scene have testified to this; this is exemplified by Pope John Paul II's statement during his visit to Lebanon in 1997: "Lebanon is more than a country, Lebanon is a message." Mohammad Khatami, the former president of Iran, identified Lebanon in 2008 as the country of cultural dialogue. Lebanon constitutes a model rather than a difficult convolution. The aim of coexistence is to intensify solidarity between Lebanese communities rather than intensify sectarianism. After all, the Lebanese identity is the product of a multitude of cultural and religious contributions. The political vacuum of the civil war years in Lebanon not only promoted a religious identity but also politicized it to the detriment of a national identity. Keeping in mind the mission of Lebanon, Muslim and Christian Lebanese women ought to primarily value their national identity while negotiating the delicate compromise between politics and religion. Pluralism is at the core of the Lebanese idea.

Finally, the current divergence between Christian and Muslim women related to the religious resurgence is no more than a passing phase, perhaps an adjustment of a secular civilization in crisis. Fortunately, the majority of young women believe in the future. Perhaps the future will see a reversal of the divergence between these two groups and the formation of a more inclusive civil society and a more unified Lebanese identity.

This book aims to prove that the unity of Lebanon can be looked at through the lens of the evolution of women. The two topics being intertwined, the more women's issues and rights advance, the more the commonalities found among women of different socioreligious groups, the more convergence can emerge and be achieved.

PART I

Saghbine, a Christian Village: Women, Religion, and Society

CHAPTER 1

Geography and Religious Spaces

Many people agree that the villager is a creation of the land that he or she occupies. In general, there are very few distinctions between Christian villagers and Muslims villagers from a sociological standpoint. Yet geography is not the only factor in determining the characteristics of a village, and the exceptional Christian villages that differ from Muslim villages are far from rare. Saghbine is one of these striking exceptions. We will more closely examine how the human aspect of village life presents itself in its geographic framework.

The morphological study begins with what can be observed and perceived of the social reality. I begin with a geographical analysis of the region, which must be studied from the standpoint of the inhabitants who use it and give it life. Next, I turn to the human geographic characteristics of the region—how it is constructed, what buildings, including religious ones, are the most important, and which have a great influence in crafting the destiny of the people. Finally, I will describe the religious affiliations and languages of Saghbine. The goal of this morphological study is twofold: one part will analyze certain aspects of daily life; the other will examine the status of women, which will be the subject matter of chapters to follow. But first, to understand women we need to understand the physical space.

Geographic Location

Spanning 10,400 km^2, Lebanon occupies an honorable position in the eyes of the United Nations member states. As small as it is, it has never gone unnoticed or unappreciated. Although it is a small country on the geographic scale, its social complexity could characterize an entire world. Yes, it is a world on a miniature scale, but a complete world, where all stages of civilization exist,