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Religion 101

Lebanon's clerics and sheikhs: Numbers and training

Owing to Lebanon's sectarian political structure, men of religion play an important and controversial role in the political, social and cultural issues of the country. Each sect aims to increase its number of clerics or sheikhs and encourages the younger generation to follow in that direction. While the number of Christian clerics is much higher than that of Muslim sheikhs, the country has been witnessing a decline in the former, compared with the growing number of sheikhs.

Training

● Clerics

There are two kinds of clerics:

■ Monks

Monks enter a monastery in the early stages of their education and receive standard schooling, in addition to religious studies. After completion of a secondary school degree, students head for theology schools in Lebanon or abroad. Some Christian theology schools in the country are located in Kaslik and Harissa (for all Christian sects), Balamand (only for the Greek Orthodox sect) and Hibrieh (for Maronite and Catholic sects).

One year is devoted to religious studies before students move on to the 5-year program, which consists of philosophy and theological studies. After completion, students may be designated as monks in their original monastery.

■ Priests

Priests at a diocese are usually appointed by the archbishop or the patriarch, and tend to be retirees. Most priests have a family whose members have also received

religious studies at a monastery or religious institute for a period of three years.

● Muslim sheikhs

■ Shia

The primary requirement to enter religious schools in the Shia sect is completion of an elementary education. Some religious schools also require a student to have a secondary degree. Five to ten years are then spent studying the Islamic faith (through the Koran, the Hadith and general history). However, Shia religious studies do not follow any fixed curriculum.

Based on a pupil's diligence and persistence, the student can join one of the groups of high-ranking religious men and receive a certificate in Islamic studies after 5–10 years of study. The student can also join a "hawzah," or religious school to continue studies (prior to 1980, there were only two such "hawzahs" in Iraq and Iran).

■ Sunni

As for the Sunni sect, students attend religious college after completing their intermediate education (some colleges require a secondary education). The duration of study is between 4–7 years, depending on the degree achieved.

■ Druze

Druze sheikhs receive religious training from elder sheikhs in a 'khilweh' (Druze holy place). Their education consists of six main religious books and the length of study is determined by a pupil's dedication. Some students go to Al Azhar in Cairo to complete their religious studies.

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