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978-0-521-28147-8 - Religion and Fertility: Arab Christian-Muslim Differentials

Joseph Chamie

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Foreword

Our knowledge of important social-demographic interrelations is being greatly advanced by social surveys such as the study on which this book is based. Large parts of the world's population live in countries in which vital statistics and census data are grossly inadequate. New methods for utilizing such defective data to make indirect demographic estimates alleviate this situation in many cases. However, well-conducted surveys have the advantage of providing data on characteristics often not available in official statistics: religion, income, family planning, and fertility preferences in relation to actual fertility. The World Fertility Survey is providing such data for many countries of the world. However, the tragedy of the Lebanese civil war made the participation of Lebanon in this international survey impossible. It was, therefore, fortunate that the 1971 National Fertility and Family Planning Survey of Lebanon was conducted before the civil conflict and that Dr. Chamie was invited to analyze it while this was still possible.

Lebanon's demographic situation has a scientific and practical importance far greater than might be supposed from the country's relatively small population. This is a society that is a kind of social laboratory in the sense that in it one can observe important religious communities at different stages of social and economic development. It is possible in this setting to analyze the interacting effects of religion and socio-economic development on reproductive behavior. Such an analysis is the core of this book.

Empirical analyses often contradict the simple generalizations that are made in the absence of data. For example, presumed religious differences in reproductive behavior are often deduced from theological dicta and literature. Dr. Chamie demonstrates that in Lebanon the actual attitudes and behavior with respect to fertility and contraception do not correspond to doctrinal differences.

Dr. Chamie also shows that such broad religious classifications as Christian and Muslim can be very misleading. He demonstrates, for

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example, that two Muslim sects have such dissimilar reproductive patterns that one resembles Christian sects, whereas the other is quite different. In view of contemporary political events, it is significant that one of these Muslim groups is Shi'a and the other is Sunni. Western observers are learning that it is important to understand the difference between Shi'a and Sunni Muslims. This is not the first time that groups that are different demographically have been found to be politically different, too.

Received wisdom is also contradicted by the interesting finding that the newest, most modern, and most effective contraceptives are used most by groups in the population that have most recently come to fertility control, that have had the highest fertility, and that are least advanced in terms of such criteria as educational level. It is interesting that the religious groups in Lebanon with the closest ties to European culture have relied most on coitus interruptus, the principal contraceptive method in the historic decline of Western European fertility. Here again, there is evidence that fertility can be brought to relatively low levels without highly sophisticated modern contraceptives, if motivation is strong enough.

Another way of putting this is that sophisticated populations can control fertility levels with what appear to be unsophisticated methods. A contemporary example on a national scale is Japan, which has maintained low fertility at replacement levels for more than twenty years by relying almost entirely on the use of the condom, with legal abortion as a backup in case of failure.¹ Recent research in Indonesia also indicates that, as in Lebanon, advanced strata of the population that have practiced contraception longest are most likely to use traditional methods rather than sophisticated modern methods.² In Indonesia, as in Lebanon, population strata that have more recently begun to use contraception rely largely on the modern methods.

Perhaps the most interesting theoretical issue in this book is Dr. Chamie's argument that religion and socioeconomic status interact in their effect on fertility. He shows that effects are not simply additive. Instead, it appears that religious differences are greatest for the less advanced social strata and are of much less consequence for advanced social strata. One important implication of these findings is that religious fertility differentials cannot be explained simply by the socioeconomic characteristics of the religious groups. This is consistent with cumulating evidence that customary socioeconomic characteristics

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appear to be insufficient to explain fertility trends and differentials without taking into account such cultural characteristics as religion, ethnicity, language, and local regional traits.

These introductory remarks have been intended to indicate that, apart from its significance for understanding Lebanon, Dr. Chamie's interesting analyses are relevant to important general issues in the comparative study of fertility.

*Population Studies Center
University of Michigan*

Ronald Freedman

Preface

During my involvement in this research, Lebanon was plagued with the most devastating civil conflict in its history. In the twenty-month period from April 1975 to November 1976, roughly 2 percent of the resident population in Lebanon was killed and 5 percent was injured. Without a doubt, this conflict was one of the bloodiest civil wars of the twentieth century; rarely have such high percentages of a nation's population been killed and wounded in so few months.

The research described herein is in no way intended to contribute to the divisions that are currently separating the Lebanese communities. The focuses of this investigation are both the differences and the similarities in fertility, family size preference, and family planning behavior among Lebanese religious groups. It is the author's firm belief that the recognition of such differences and similarities is more conducive to intersectarian tolerance, understanding, and cooperation than is the disregarding or denial of them. It is hoped that these results will contribute to a diminution of the divisions among the Lebanese people.

The data reported in this investigation were kindly made available to me by the Lebanon Family Planning Association. I would like to thank all the members of the association – especially their previous president, Dr. Edna Aboujdiid – for their assistance and cooperation.

My deepest thanks also go to Dr. Adnan Mroueh, Professor of Obstetrics and Gynecology at the American University of Beirut, and Dr. Louis Verhoestraete, former director of the School of Public Health of the American University of Beirut. Dr. Mroueh's guidance, encouragement, and friendship were, and continue to be, greatly appreciated. The assistance, hospitality, and all-around goodwill of Dr. Verhoestraete made my stay and work in Lebanon possible and enjoyable.

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The Population Studies Center of the University of Michigan provided me with an ideal environment in which to work. I am grateful to the directors, faculty, staff, and students for their support and assistance. Very special thanks are due to Professor Ronald Freedman, who in innumerable ways has been a great help to me. In addition, the comments and suggestions of Professor Albert Hermalin have added greatly to this work. I am also indebted to Professor Jason Finkle, not only for being instrumental in making it possible for us to work in Lebanon, but also for his longtime support, encouragement, and friendship. I would also like to thank all the reviewers and the editors and staff of the Cambridge University Press who so generously offered suggestions on how to improve this work.

The opinions expressed in this work are those of the author and should not be construed as necessarily representing the opinions of the Rockefeller and Ford foundations, the Lebanon Family Planning Association, or the United Nations. The author is solely responsible for the errors and omissions in this work.

Finally, my deepest gratitude goes to Mary. Both in Lebanon and in the United States, she generously provided me with those very special ingredients that are essential to one's productivity and happiness. To her this book is dedicated.

Beirut, Lebanon
January 1981

Joseph Chamie