

# Balancing the Traditional and the Modern

*Hratch Tchilingirian*

The post-cold war era has been a mixed blessing for the "new world order". On the one hand, there is increasing interest in social, ecological, gender and moral issues facing the world; on the other hand, nationalism and politicized religion have dominated the central stage of public discourse.

The current wave of "globalization" and "universalism" of emerging modern culture needs to be examined in the context of micro-social concerns of a given community in a given society. As the value system and identity references of society are rapidly modified and changed, the "old" and the "traditional" are easily discarded as archaic conventions of yesterday. Addressing the problems facing a community -- especially during such complex social transitions -- is a challenge to politicians, educators, scholars, and all those who are concerned with the welfare of society.

Azadouhi Simonian, a member of the faculty of the Lebanese American University, in *Youth and Education* (in Armenian, 1995), addresses the "modern problems" of the Lebanese Armenian community. She presents a diagnosis of the issues concerning youth in particular and the Armenian family in general, and suggests practical remedies based on her experi-

ence as an educator, columnist, activist, wife and mother. The thrust of *Youth and Education* evolves around the youth-family and woman-culture axes. In discussing the overall education of the youth -- academic, moral, religious, cultural -- Simonian concentrates on the role of the Armenian woman in the education of youth. She brings the Armenian woman out of the kitchen and assigns her a more active role in the social discourse of the community.

Comprised of ten essays, *Youth and Education* deals with a series of complementary and overlapping topics, such as: the traditional and the new in modern society, religious-moral education in the family, rebellion in youth, parent-child relationships, the Armenian woman as educator, youth and the educational challenges of modern times, and others.

Throughout the volume, the contextual framework of Simonian's propositions is the Lebanese education system. For example, she laments the inadequacy of the Lebanese Baccalaureate curriculum, which is based on the French model. The present curriculum falls short of providing a balanced higher education to the post-war Lebanese youth. While the current French educational system in France has been

significantly modernized and updated, the Lebanese curriculum remains to be updated. Therefore, supplemental and extra-curricular educational methods play an important role in filling the gaps in the state educational system.

In the introductory essay of *Youth and Education*, Simonian explains the need for achieving a balance between the "traditional" and the "modern". She cautions young people about the dangers of materialism, consumerism and opportunism, all traits that have come to characterize modern society in general and post-war Lebanon in particular. In explaining the traditional and the new, Simonian writes:

The traditional is [one's] culture. It is a man's [woman's] creativity in the arts, literature, music, architecture and other related creative expressions. Through democracy, freedom of thought and expression, respect of human rights, education, family and religion, society sets the parameter of its function.... Civilization is the new, the modern. It is the technical, the scientific advancements and material achievements.... The influence of the modern era is characterized by the stripping of the person from his/her traditionally upheld moral character and by empha-

sizing the material values [of modern life]"(pp. 9-10).

Without being anachronistic, Simonian weaves an appreciation of traditional values, i.e., the proven wisdom of life and qualities that are important in the Armenian ethos, and blends them with the modern norms and demands of life.

While being sensitive to the particular socio-cultural idiosyncrasies of the Lebanese Armenian community beyond the boundaries of its ethnic parochialism, instead of treating Armenian educational, cultural and religious values as sources of exclusion or differentiation, she presents them as sources of moral strength and wisdom which make a person a better person. The achievements of individuals are not measured by their academic education per se, but by their contribution to society, and ultimately to humanity.

Azadouhi Simonian has been, for over two decades, an active member of the Armenian community and has greatly contributed to the cause of Armenian women. Whether in her previous book, *The Armenian Women, Family and Youth* (in Armenian, 1988), or in this volume, or through her numerous lectures and seminars, Simonian has been among the few Armenian women who have had the courage to voice their convictions and thus become the conscience of their community.

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