

The Arabs and the United States: The Experience of Lebanese Immigrants

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The United States holds up the ideal of the “melting pot,” as a solution to absorbing immigrants. Other nations, for example Canada, encourage immigrants to cling to their traditional values in a “mosaic” of different cultures. The former encourages the individual to conform to the values of the state; the latter seeks to accommodate the values of the individual within the context of the state. The experience of late nineteenth-century, Lebanese Christian immigrants to America highlights the complexities inherent in both formulas. Impelled by poverty, Ottoman oppression and a sense of religious isolation, many Lebanese Christians immigrated to the United States in search of a better life. Unlike other immigrants, who established themselves in ghettos, the Lebanese fanned out across America, mainly as peddlers, settling in places where they believed they might prosper. Many of them were illiterate but others were tolerably well educated, many of them at American missionary school. Most were inspired by American values and ideals.

These immigrants left a substantial body of literature, some of it in English, some of it in Arabic. Their writings reveal that far from seeing themselves as simply impoverished, economic migrants in search of a better life, they also believed they were the bearers of a set of cultural values that would benefit their adoptive homeland. Foremost among these writers were Kahlil Gibran, Ameen Rihani and Mikhail Naimy.

Ironically, in spite of their receptiveness to American culture, they also felt a deep sense of isolation in their adoptive homeland and eventually returned to Lebanon. Initially, they had sought to temper raw, American economic determinism with Eastern mysticism but this was more difficult than they had realized. Biculturalism was not so easily gained.