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LOCAL NEWS

One man's bid to put Buddhism on Lebanon's map

By Christian Porth

Special to The Daily Star

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BEIRUT: A veritable cornucopia of ecclesiastical beliefs, Lebanon is home to one of the most diverse religious landscapes in the world. The Lebanese Constitution officially recognizes 18 different religious groups, accounting for 98.7 percent of the total Lebanese population.

Among the many unrecognized religious groups in Lebanon, Buddhists represent a unique perspective, a dovetailing of East and West. They are a tiny community, however, comprising an estimated 0.1 percent of the country's population.

Enter Paul Jahshan, Lebanese Christian by birth, professor of American studies at Notre Dame University, world traveler, fluent in Chinese, and author of two books: "Henry Miller and the Surrealist Discourse of Excess," and

"Cybermapping and the Writing of Myth."

In 2006, Jahshan established the Buddhist Society of Lebanon, and recently he created what he describes as a new school of Buddhist thought - "Progressive Buddhism" - in an attempt to provide a forum for Lebanese and other Buddhists.

"What we're doing with Buddhism is stripping it of a lot of its rituals, its more archaic principles, in an attempt to create a more modern and usable 21st-century Buddhist thought," Jahshan said.

Being a Buddhist in Lebanon is certainly an interesting proposition, but is there a Buddhist following in Lebanon? "I am sure that there are a lot of 'closet' Buddhists in Lebanon, but nobody has gone as far as openly professing it. Not that they would be persecuted or anything; it is just something that has not been done," Jahshan said on the Web site www.bsolleb.org. "Most Lebanese don't know what Buddhism is about, so it's relegated to the status of just another exotic religion of

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the East. It's a new thing to them," he added.
<http://www.dailystar.com.lb>

What is Progressive Buddhism?

According to the society's Web site, "Progressive Buddhism is not a new fad. In it, there are no rituals, no conversions, no initiations, no sacred books, no chanting, no exotic foreign languages, no esoteric teachings, no secrets, no surprises.

Progressive Buddhism is only a convenient term ... to describe how the advice given by the historical Siddharta Gautama can be practically and usefully adapted to any contemporary environment with the aim of producing awakening.

Progressive Buddhism restarts every time a historical change takes place and is therefore not tied to a person, time or place. As such, Progressive Buddhism is and should be constantly changing."

Buddhism is not a religion, said. Instead, "it is a way of life, a way of seeing things, a philosophy and mainly a psychological tool to attain enlightenment."

With themes of adaptation and awakening, perhaps the Lebanese, plagued by cyclical crises, may want to take a closer look at Progressive Buddhism.

The philosophy, Jahshan said, is about "knowing yourself and focusing on the present and also compassionately dealing with your fellow human beings."

Tags: Lebanese, Lebanon, Progressive, Religion, World



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