Coptic-State Relations:
Looking Back to Look Forward

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The Revolution, What Now?

The January Revolution and subsequent political events have been exciting and unnerving for all Egyptians. Images of protestors carrying signs for "life, freedom and human rights," and the participation by people of all economic, social, and religious backgrounds at Taḥrīr Square will be cherished in Egyptian history for many years to come. And yet, the necessary steps forward toward a new Egypt must go through an uncharted path. The ongoing negotiations by different parties, including the very diverse Islamic organizations, have been the cause for concern for many Egyptians. While nationalist political parties, liberal secularists, reformist Muslims, *Salafis*, and the Coptic Orthodox Church all publicly debate the future shape of Egypt, the question of Coptic Evangelical participation is an important one. What role will the Evangelical community play? What resources do the Evangelical community have to offer the public debate and conversation about the future of Egyptian society and government?

Coptic Evangelicals have historically been quietists in respect to religion and political life. By this I mean that Evangelicals have not historically pursued projects leading to the transformation of political institutions for religious reasons. They certainly have been in the forefront of founding schools, hospitals, orphanages, etc., but in terms of public advocacy they had been content with working with individuals or small communities, not

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addressing larger national issues.[1] The original Presbyterian and Anglican missionaries whose work ultimately created indigenous Egyptian Evangelical communities were predominantly Pietists. The Pietist perspective focused upon the salvation of an individual believer through the reading and explication of Scripture. In their view, this would naturally and inevitably lead to the regeneration of a believer's individual morals and affect society at large. Thus, American and English missionary methods focused heavily upon education.[2] There was no need to be concerned with larger social issues as the natural progression of individual regeneration would ultimately lead toward a moral and ethical society. And yet, like the Reformation in Europe, the Evangelical reformation did not lead to such a transformation of society but the creation of a new community, the Evangelicals. This community, since its recognition by the Ottoman Empire in 1850, is now its own *millah* with its own set of communal laws and mores.

While Copts have always been committed to their national identity and have participated fully in the governance of Egypt as well as its defense, there has been little discussion given to a theological and scriptural basis for an Evangelical public engagement with and for Egyptian society. The January Revolution and subsequent political events have prompted many Copts to fear an Islamist or *salafi* government. The dramatic events may even have prompted some Evangelicals to begin searching through Scripture for Apocalyptic signs of the end times.[3] However, the historical record demonstrates that the Coptic Church has faced numerous challenges and opportunities throughout its nearly two thousand years; and that the present events, as important as they

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[1] By contrast, the European Calvinist and American Reformed theology assumed that Christian community would become a "city on a hill" (Matthew 5:14) that would change social and political structures toward a more righteous society.

[2] For the method of education utilized by Protestant missionaries see Paul Sedra, *From Mission to Modernity: Evangelicals, Reformers and Education in Nineteenth Century Egypt* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011).

[3] This has been a common response by Christians in response to Islamic threats. See Robert G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam As Others Saw It* (Princeton, N.J.: Darwin Press, 1997).

are for the future of Egypt, are yet another period to engage the public sphere. This essay is not an attempt to provide such a Coptic Evangelical theology of public engagement or social ethic. Rather it is intended to prompt some thinking on this topic. Our hope is that this essay might prompt further conversation to look forward to a new Egypt.

(It is important to note that in this article I will use the term "Coptic" in reference to the Christian tradition in Egypt, while the specific adjectives "Orthodox" and "Evangelical" will refer to particular Churches. This general reference to Coptic should not be passed over, and is important to my overall argument of the history of the Church in Egypt.)

Looking Back at Coptic-State Relations

It is perhaps tempting to categorize the periods of Coptic interaction with the State in four separate periods: pre-Christian, Christian, Islamic and Modern Secular rule. However, this classification would gravely misinterpret the historical sources and only support various ideologies. Such thinking also creates anxiety that the current political period threatens to remove the Copts from a Modern era back to the medieval prisons of "dhimmitude."[4] While it is clear that the world now rightfully presses forward toward implementation of the equal and human rights of citizens within democratic governments, such countries have hardly ever existed.[5] It is not a given that Christian and Modern Secular governments have provided golden ages for the Coptic community, while Roman pagan and Islamic rule have been the periods of Christian persecution. History is not that neat. Rather, the historical record demonstrates that at any one given moment Copts were either granted economic and political opportunities or communally repressed depending on the particular views of each

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[4] This has been the argument of Bat Yeor, in *The Decline of Eastern Christianity under Islam: From Jihad to Dhimmitude* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996).

[5] Even the United States did not grant equal citizenship rights to African Americans in 1868 and to Women in 1920.

ruler in power, regardless of his religious persuasion, and that while one segment of the Coptic community might suffer, others might flourish.

The Middle East Council of Churches' publication, *Christianity: A History of the Middle East*, rightly provides several chapters on the "Rise of Eastern Churches" that review the fifth to the eighth centuries. Mār Sāwīrus Isḥaq Saka states that the seventh and eighth centuries, after the Islamic conquest, were a period of administrative, spiritual, social and intellectual renaissance for the Syriac Church.[6] According to Fr. Samīr Khalīl Samīr, the rise of the Abbasid dynasty gave rise to the participation of Arab Christians in the Arab Renaissance with the likes of Ḥunayn ibn Isḥāq and Qusṭā ibn Lūqā, among others.[7] Thus, the common narrative that the coming of Islam overcame Christendom and suppressed the *dhimmi* may be a contemporary re-reading of history based upon our current experiences rather than actual fact.

Early Roman Rule
At the shrine of St. Mark in Abbasiya, worshippers can view a painting of the martyrdom of St. Mark by the crowds of Alexandria. From this large mural one can sense that Coptic Christianity has from its very origins until the present day been under siege from society at large. However, historical sources seem to indicate that early Christianity grew within a pluralistic society in which the Roman government tolerated numerous sects, secret societies, and religions. While Christians in Palestine or Asia Minor may have had to fear occasional oppression from the Romans, as we find with the letters of Pliny to Trajan, Egypt was quite different. When the Romans came to Egypt in 31 BCE, they encountered a large Egyptian pantheon as well as a well-established Jewish community. This atmosphere allowed Christians to maneuver and propagate with little problem from the State. After all, Paul had argued that the Christians were to sub-

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[6] Mār Sāwīrus Isḥaq Saka, "The Rise of Eastern Churches and their Heritage: The Syriacs," in *Christianity: A History of the Middle East*, ed. Habib Badr (Beirut: Middle East Council of Churches, 2005), 242.

[7] Ibid., 495–529.

ject themselves even to Pagan rulers (Romans 13:1–7), while Clement even stated that Christians were to ask for blessings upon the Roman rulers (1 Clement 63:1). This religious pluralism was also manifest within the Christian community. Most scholars agree that the Nag Hammadi texts, now displayed in the Coptic Museum, reveal that Christians held a variety of theological and ecclesiastical positions.[8]

Age of the Martyrs

It was not until after the Bar Kokhba revolt of 135 CE that the Romans began to view the Jews, and subsequently the Christians, as dangerous to the Empire. The second century was a difficult period for the Christians within the Roman Empire. Whereas Emperor Philip "the Arab" extended favor to Christians, possibly due to his exposure to Christians in Syria, his successor was not so gracious. Decius was proclaimed Emperor in Alexandria in 249 and immediately ordered all Romans to offer sacrifices to the gods. The Coptic Patriarch Dionysius has recorded stories of mobs lynching Christians in the streets and forcing them to renounce their faith.[9] This was, unfortunately, only the beginning. The next emperor, Valerian, kept Christians under pressure. However, it was in 303 that Emperor Diocletian unleashed the Great Persecution. Christians were killed, churches were burned, and scriptures seized. Known as the "Era of Martyrs," it is this period that has left its permanent mark on the Coptic Church. It is this period from which many of the Orthodox saints originate. It is also from this period when the Coptic calendar begins its reckoning, from the beginning of Diocletian's reign, solidifying the idea that the Coptic Church is built on the blood of the martyrs.

The Christian Empire

Constantine's Edict of Toleration of 313 was not so much an imposition of the Christian faith on the Empire as an imperial recognition of its right to exist alongside other ancient religions.

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[8] C. Wilfred Griggs, *Early Egyptian Christianity: From Its Origins to 451 C.E.* (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 229.

[9] Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* VI.41.10–12.

Late antique archaeology points to the continued practice of traditional religion and the Egyptian priesthood alongside Judaism and Christianity. It was Emperor Theodosius, however, who declared non-Christians "mad" and liable to imperial punishment.[10] It is in the early 5th century that we find violence perpetrated against the ancient Egyptian cults by the Coptic priesthood and monks. The Church historians Rufinus and Sozomen note Patriarch Theophilus' destruction of the Serapeum in Alexandria in 391 (against the will of the Emperor). Theophilus' successor, Cyril, presided over the martyrdom of the pagan philosopher Hypatia in 415. Cyril also expelled the Jews from Alexandria and had serious disputes with the Roman magistrate Orestes. Thus, we find throughout the 4th and early 5th centuries a gradual violent cultural movement to "Christianize" the country, while the government still held to a policy of open toleration of these religions.[11] It was in 529 that Emperor Justinian closed all Greco-Roman and Pharaonic temples, effectively outlawing all religions but Christianity. As Alain Ducellier notes, the Church in the new Byzantine Empire utilized the imperial social and administrative organization and "modeled its own structures after those pre-established by the State."[12] Bishops and priests, in effect, became civil servants and administrators. The Church and the State were two sides of the same coin. But as Athanasius wrote to Emperor Ossius, "To you God has handed over the Empire, whereas to us, he has entrusted the affairs of the Church."[13]

The Chalcedonian Schism and the Development of an Egyptian National Church

It has been argued that throughout the Christological controversies of the 4th and 5th centuries that the Egyptian Church began to

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[10] Henry Bettenson, ed., *Documents of the Christian Church* (London: Oxford University Press, 1943), 31.

[11] Stephen J. Davis, *The Early Coptic Papacy: The Egyptian Church and Its Leadership in Late Antiquity* (Cairo: AUC Press, 2004), 64–74.

[12] Alain Ducellier, "Autocracy and Religion in Byzantium in the 4th and 5th Centuries," in Badr, *Christianity: A History of the Middle East*, 102.

[13] Ducellier, "Autocracy and Religion in Byzantium in the 4th and 5th Centuries," 111.

secede from Byzantine control as a nationalist movement and protest against foreign authority.[14] Eastern and Coptic histories are replete with their condemnation of the oppression of the Byzantines. The watershed event, of course, was the Council of Chalcedon where Emperor Marcian attempted to unify the universal church under one Empire. However, this resulted in the first major split of the Church, where the Egyptian, Syrian, and Armenian bishops refused to acknowledge the Greek imperial formula of the "two natures of Christ." Their disagreement was not with the concept of the divinity and humanity of Christ, but the enforced Greek imperial terminology dictated from Constantinople. Because of the Coptic Church's refusal to accept the official and imperial Chalcedonian formula of faith, they lived for almost two hundred years under Byzantine pressure, discrimination, and in some cases persecution. Stephen Davis has called this "ecclesiastical colonialism," where the Imperial Church sought to impose its views on the Egyptians.[15] This schism reached a critical point when Emperor Heraclius appointed Cyrus the Bishop of Alexandria in 630. Cyrus served as both the de-facto ecclesiastical and political head of the Empire in Alexandria and violently suppressed those Coptic priests and bishops who refused to acknowledge the Chalcedonian formula, and exiled the beloved Coptic Patriarch Benjamin.

Arab Muslim Conquest
Much has been written and discussed about the Islamic Conquest of Egypt. Many views, however, are often expressed within the context of the current tensions of the rise of the *salafism*. While there is no doubt that the Arab Muslims militarily conquered Egypt, their coming was experienced as no different than any other empire that conquered Egypt over the centuries. In fact, the establishment of *Fusṭāṭ* as a separate Arab Muslim encampment

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[14] Aziz S. Atiya, *History of Eastern Christianity* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame, 1968), 69–78; Griggs, *Early Egyptian Christianity* , 229–231; and Theodore Patrick Hall, *Traditional Egyptian Christianity* (Greensboro, N.C.: Fisher Park Press, 1996), 38–50.

[15] Davis, *The Early Coptic Papacy*, 87.

north of Babylon demonstrates that, from their earliest policy decisions, the Muslims were content with merely occupying and benefiting from the rich resources of the Egyptian Nile river valley, rather than imposing Islamic *sharī'a,* a concept that would not begin to take root until after al-Shafi'i in the 9th century.

Many of the Coptic sources look back on this time as a punishment on the Byzantines for their heresy and oppression of the true Church. The 7th century Bishop John of Nikou noted, "This expulsion (of the Byzantines) and the victory of the Muslims is due to the wickedness of the emperor Heraclius and his persecution of the orthodox [Copts]."[16] Likewise, the 10th century *History of the Patriarchs* noted "The Lord abandoned the army of the Romans [Byzantines] as a punishment for their corrupt faith."[17] Scholars have debated whether the Copts supported and aided the Arab Muslims in their conquest over the Byzantines in Egypt because the sources do present a complicated picture. But what is clear is that the deep divide between the Copts and the Byzantines created an atmosphere conducive for the Arab Muslims to easily take control of Egypt. The Copts as non-Chalcedonians lost little sleep over the fact that the Byzantines had been defeated. The most prominent example of the official Coptic view is the well-known story of 'Amr ibn al-Ās and Patriarch Benjamin.

After the Byzantine Patriarch and general Cyrus was defeated and retreated to Constantinople 'Amr called for the Coptic Patriarch Benjamin, who had been in hiding for over ten years, and invited to take up his papal seat in Alexandria. The story as remembered in the *History of the Patriarchs* has 'Amr asking for Benjamin's blessing on the continued Arab Muslim advance through North Africa.

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[16] John of Nkiu, *The Chronicle of John, Bishop of Nikiu*, trans. by R. H. Charles (The Text and Translation Society, Oxford University Press, 1916), CXXI.2 and CXIV.1, CXXI.10, CXIII.2.

[17] Hugh Goddard, *A History of Christian-Muslim Relations* (Chicago: New Amsterdam Books, 2000), 37. For the most helpful overview of the variety of responses of Christians to the Arab conquest see Hoyland, *Seeing Islam As Others Saw It*, 20–26.

"Resume the government of all your churches and of your people, and administer their affairs. And if you will pray for me, that I may go to the West and to Pentapolis, and take possession of them, as I have of Egypt, and return to you in safety and speedily, I will do for you all that you shall ask of me." Then the holy Benjamin prayed for Amr, and pronounced an eloquent discourse, which made Amr and those present with him marvel, and which contained words of exhortation and much profit for those that heard him; and he revealed certain matters to Amr, and departed from his presence honoured and revered.[18]

Whether this record was an actual event or a later implanted memory does not matter here. Early Arab rule was content to allow the Copts to keep their established civic and religious institutions. The administration, organization, and taxation, etc., was all kept in the hands of the Copts. The Coptic Patriarch became the de-facto civil administrator for the foreign government, responsible for the internal affairs of the Egyptians while the Arabs received the taxes of the wealthy and in-kind tribute from the rich Nile Valley to be distributed throughout the Muslim Empire.[19] We find no reference to the *Pact of 'Umar* during this period, only a well-known treaty relationship between a foreign power and a vassal state. As Azīz Atiya notes, "the relationship between the Copts and the Arabs was based pre-eminently on revenue and taxation."[20] But if the early Arab-Coptic relationship was seen as no different than that experienced in other times of occupation in Egypt, the Coptic view of the Arab Muslims would begin to change at the end of the 7th and beginning of the 8th century.

Arabization and Islamization of Egypt
Around 705, the Umayyad caliph 'Abd al-Mālik began the Arabization of the Islamic Empire, declaring that all administration

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[18] B. T. A. Evetts, ed. *History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria, II, Peter to Benjamin I (661),* in *Patrologia Orientalis,* 1.4. (Paris: Frimin-Didot, 1904), 496–97.

[19] See Alfred Joshua Butler, *The Arab Conquest of Egypt and the Last Thirty Years of Roman Domination*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978).

[20] A.S. Atiya, "Ḳibṭ," *EI²*.

should now be undertaken in the Arabic language. While this did not happen immediately, it began a process. Coins were only to be minted with Arabic calligraphy from the Qur'ān. The result was increased central control of taxation by the Arab Muslims. In fact, Coptic monks who had previously been exempt from taxation were now required to pay their tax.[21] It is the burden of taxation on the Copts that prompts Coptic conversion to Islam.

While the *History of the Patriarchs* recognized the overthrow of the Umayyads by the 'Abbasids in 750 as God's bidding, to take "vengeance upon them," the Copts soon realized that 'Abbasid rule would continue the standing procedure of heavy taxation.[22] The burdens were too much to bear. In 831 Egyptians in the Delta revolted. Called the Bashmuric Revolt, this rebellion was brutally crushed. Whereas Iraqi Christians fared fairly well under the 'Abbasid reign, in Egypt the Copts suffered.[23]

It is important to remember, however, that Egyptian Muslims themselves also faced heavy burdens due to taxation and the arbitrary despotic rule of governors sent from first Damascus and then Baghdad. But for the Copts, it is during the mid-9th into the 10th centuries in which we find the majority of Copts begin converting to Islam. Conversion occurred for three reasons, primarily: 1) relief from extra tax burdens that were placed on the Copts in their role as *dhimmīs*; 2) for professionals who wanted to advance in their careers conversion to Islam was extremely beneficial; and most importantly, 3) as the dominant culture changed conversion became an opportunity to participate in dominant, or "pop" culture. It was a tidal wave that could not be stopped.

In 850 the 'Abbasid Caliph al-Mutawakil issued his infamous declaration prohibiting Copts from serving in the government. The edict reminds us that the Copts maintained sufficient control over the day-to-day administration of the government in the mid-

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[21] Hoyland, *Seeing Islam As Others Saw It,* 284.

[22] Mark N. Swanson, *The Coptic Papacy in Islamic Egypt (641–1517)* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2010), 21.

[23] See Samir Khalil Samir, "The Role of Christians in the Abbasid Renaissance in Iraq and in Syria (750–1050)," in Badr, *Christianity: A History of the Middle East*, 495–529.

9th century. While the pronouncement was never fully carried out, and as Copts continued to serve within the government, it is an important marker to denote the shift from a Christian majority culture to an Arab-Islamic one.[24]

Faṭimid Rule (969–1147)
Aside from the period of intense persecution during the reign of Caliph al-Ḥākim (996–1020), who imposed strict laws not only on the Copts, but also on Muslims, especially women, the occupation of Egypt by the Faṭimids witnessed the most beneficial period for the Copts under Islamic rule. It is true that Al-Ḥākim destroyed numerous churches in Egypt as well as the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, initiating the Crusades. The Muslim historian Maqrīzī notes that many Copts converted to Islam during al-Ḥākim's persecution. However, the Faṭimid period was a high point of Christian-Muslim relationships. As noted by Ḥanna Jerjis and Vivian Fouad, the Copts participated in the highest levels in the administration of the government.[25] In addition, the *History of the Patriarchs* notes the extensive building of churches during this period, al-Ḥakim's rule being the exception of course.[26]

The great miracle of the Muqaṭṭam is reported to have taken place during this period, under the reign of Muʿizz al-dīn Allāh (932–975). What is often overlooked in the miracle narrative is the fact that the origin of the story centers around the dialogical encounter between the Caliph Muʿizz al-dīn Allāh, his vizier Yaʿqūb ibn Killis, who had converted from Judaism, and the original author of the *History of the Patriarchs,* Sawīrus ibn al-Muqāffaʾ. The dialogue was a common feature of court life, marking the interaction among Jews, Christians, and Muslims, as well as in daily economic encounters. The important study done on the Medieval Jewish records found at the Ben Ezra Synagogue in Old Cairo by Shelomo Gotein demonstrates a resilient Jewish

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[24] David D. Grafton, *The Christians of Lebanon: Political Rights in Islamic Law* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003), 34.

[25] Ḥanna Jeryis and Vivian Fouad, "The Copts in the Faṭimid Era," in Badr, *Christianity: A History of the Middle East*, 536.

[26] Ibid., 539.

community interacting with the Muslim population of Old Cairo and Fusṭāṭ.[27]

The significant interaction between Egyptian Copts, Jews, and Muslims at all levels of society, including within the government, was the result of several factors. First, the Ismaʿīlī persuasion of Shiʿism was itself a minority sect within the predominant Sunni Islamic world. Ismaʿīlī rule created an openness that fostered pluralism. Of course, the Caliph was still a Muslim and the rule Islamic, but the *ahl al-dhimma* participated in a cosmopolitan Arab-Islamic culture. Second, because of the dominant Arab-Islamic culture, it became difficult for the Copts to maintain their own separate cultural identity. It is in this period that another large wave of Copts converted to Islam. The majority of Copts could not read or understand Coptic, and the Church had to face the reality that Arab-Islamic culture was the dominant culture in which they were living. Patriarch Gabriel ibn Turayk (1131–1145) prescribed the use of Arabic in parts of the Coptic Mass so that the Gospel could be understood in the common language. Thus, the Patriarch officially implemented the Arabization of the Copts that had originally begun by ʿAbd al-Mālik in the early 8th century. However, this change only officially recognized what had been the case for some time, that the Copts had fully adopted Arabic language and culture by the 12th century. This change is reflected in the growth of the Copto-Arabic literature, of which the *History of the Patriarchs* is the most famous example.

Ayyubids (1171–1250)

The Ayyubid period was an unsettling time for the Copts, as they were caught between their Muslim rulers and the invading Latin Catholic Crusaders. The Copts were often accused of assisting the Crusaders and faced discrimination and persecution, even though the Copts assisted in the defense of Damietta in 1218.[28] Farah Firzlī notes well the difficulties faced by the Middle Eastern

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[27] Shelomo Gotein, *A Mediterranean Society. The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967).

[28] Atiya, 92.

Christians on account of the Latin Crusaders.[29] However, Salaḥ al-Dīn faced his most pressing challenge in the cleansing of Egypt from its Shi'a expressions of Islam. He closed al-Azḥār, which at that point was the center of Ismai'lī teaching, and re-opened it as the important Sunni center of learning that it is to-day.[30] An important event in this period is the fact that Patriarch Christodoulos (1046–1077) moved the Papal seat from Alexandria to Cairo to have easier access to the Muslim ruler in overseeing the livelihood of the Coptic community. As Sunni jurists began to articulate further concepts of *al-dhimma* during this period, it was imperative that the representative of the Coptic community be able to advocate for his community.[31]

Many of the difficulties faced by the Copts during the Ayyubid reign, however, were due to internal issues. For twenty-six years (from 1216–1235 and again from 1243–1250) the Coptic Church had no Patriarch to represent it before the Sultan. When it did elect the controversial Ibn Laqlaq, his papacy was plagued by controversy from the very beginning. His election was disputed, leading to what some sources indicate was his appointment by al-Mālik al-Kāmil. The controversies during Ibn Laqlaq's papacy were known by the Muslims as a time of *fitnah* and the problems were brought directly before the Sultan's court where the Patriarch was humiliated and died shortly afterward.[32]

For all of the political difficulties of the 13th century this time was one of the Golden Ages of Coptic culture. Recent archaeological and historical research has discovered the rise of the Coptic arts and their patronage by important Coptic businessmen and leaders. This may have been the result of increased trade with the Levant due to the Ayyubid rule of Egypt and Syria. In addition, Georg Graf's monumental *Geschichte der christlichen arab-*

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[29] Farah Firzli, "Christians in the Middle East Under the Franks," in Badr, *Christianity: A History of the Middle East*, 559–79.

[30] Kurt J. Werthmuller, *Coptic Identity and Ayyubid Politics in Egypt 1218–1250* (Cairo: American University of Cairo Press, 2010), 44.

[31] Aziz S. Aitya, *A History of Eastern Christianity* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 90.

[32] Swanson, *The Coptic Papacy in Islamic Egypt (641–1517),* 92.

ischen Literatur notes the extensive number of Coptic authors during this period.[33] Included in this list is, of course, the Awlād al-'Assāl family that so distinguished itself. Also included is the one of the most prolific preachers in Coptic history, Boulos al-Būshī. We learn from this period that while texts may provide official histories from the top, realities of daily life usually reflect something completely different. The same might be said for the works of Islamic jurists: while they may articulate stringent concepts of *al-dhimma*, actual social practice may have differed depending upon the whims or views of the ruler.

Mamlūks (1250–1517)

Returning to the 15th century Arab historian al-Maqrīzī, the Mamlūk period is noted as the "fall of the Christians."[34] While the rule of independent warlords of Turkish or central Asian descent led to one of the most important building eras since the Pharaonic period, it was a low point in history for the Copts. Most of the historic monuments in and around the old districts of Cairo are attributed to this era, including the monumental aqueduct, which facilitated the growth of Cairo as a major military and economic power. However, as in most cases during such times of power, the average Egyptian felt the brunt of arbitrary despotic rule. The Copts were especially subject to oppression. The Mamlūk period is noted for the destruction of churches, numerous riots and sporadic violence against Coptic neighborhoods. While the Mamlūk rulers did not go out of their way to persecute the Copts, social conditions deteriorated to such a low level that they became the scapegoats for the frustration of the *reaya*. In addition to the despotic rule of the sultans, Egypt suffered from the fears of the

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[33] Georg Graf, *Geschichte der christlichen arabischen Literatur*, vol. 2 (Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1944–1953), 333–445. For the material history of this renaissance period see Gawdat Gabra, ed. *Christianity in Upper Egypt: Akhmim and Sohag* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2008).

[34] As cited in Werthmuller, *Coptic Identity and Ayyubid Politics in Egypt 1218–1250,* 50.

Mongol invasions in *bilād al-shām*, several droughts, earthquakes, and most importantly the bubonic plague.[35]

It is during this period that the *radd 'ala al-dhimma* literature reaches its height among Islamic jurists. Islamic scholars, including Ibn Ṭaymiyya and al-Qayyim al-Jawziyya, began articulating what they felt were the important restrictions on the *dhimmīs* that had not been kept by the previous Muslim rulers. In a time of political, social and economic uncertainty, these authors sought to bring the Sunni community back to its pure roots as they imagined it.[36]

Ottoman Rule (1517–1801)

In many ways, the Ottoman rulers of Egypt were not different from the previous Mamlūk warlords. They were foreigners occupying Egypt, having little in common with the Egyptians. However, it was the 16th and 17th centuries that saw the rise in economic conditions as the Ottomans engaged in trade with Europe. This resulted in a rise in the standard of living and further social stability. The Copts benefited from the global trade as Coptic businessmen acted as intermediaries for the Venetians and French, among others. Samīr Marqos has noted the important work of Copts as traders, merchants, landowners, and government officials in the area of taxation.[37] Much of the communication between Europe and Egypt at this time can certainly be attributed to the Latin Catholic missionary activity, especially that of the Dominicans and Capuchins.

The Modern Egyptian State of Muḥammad 'Alī (1805–1952)

When Muḥammad 'Alī wrested Egypt from direct control of the Ottoman Empire, he began the movement toward a modern state. Enamored with the culture and opportunities of the French, who had occupied Egypt from 1798–1801, Muḥammad 'Alī sent

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[35] See Stuart J. Borsch, *The Black Death in England and Egypt* (Cairo: AUC Press, 2005).

[36] Grafton, *The Christians of Lebanon,* 52–59.

[37] Samīr Marqos, "The Copts in the Second Ottoman Era," in Badr, *Christianity: A History of the Middle East*, 680–84.

young civil servants to study in Europe. They returned and began instituting reforms. These reforms pre-dated the Ottoman *tanẓmāt*, but worked hand in hand with the Ottoman imperial prescripts of 1839 and 1856, as well as the abolishment of the *jizya* in 1855. These formal declarations eradicated the *dhimmī* status and the *millet* system, and affirmed Christians and Muslims as equal before the eyes of a new civil law. Of course, such formal pronouncements did not eradicate discrimination but they did set a new standard for citizenship in a nation state.

The debate continues to this day as to who is responsible for the *al-naḥda* in Egypt during the 19th century. The Coptic Orthodox argue that Cyril IV, the "Father of Reform," preceded the Evangelicals in his work to bring the Copts out of darkness. The Coptic Orthodox also point to the formation of the *majlis al-milli* in 1874. One of the members of the *majlis* was Bouṭros Ghālī, who would become the first Prime Minister of Egypt. The importance of the *majlis* as a leading association of Coptic Orthodox lay leaders would ultimately lead toward the founding of the Sunday School Movement by Ḥabīb Girgīs in 1918. It was this movement that was vital for the continuing Coptic Orthodox Renaissance as established under Cyril VI and Shenouda III.[38]

Certainly, the Anglican and Presbyterian missionaries have held that it was the missionary school system that contributed to the enlightenment of Egypt. The introduction of Evangelicalism had as its goal the resurrection of a decaying Coptic Orthodox Church. As mentioned above, the Evangelical missionaries focused on the development of a school system throughout the country. The importance of the schools in Assiut, Alexandria, Cairo, and Tanta, among others cannot be underestimated in terms of their effect on raising the standard of living of Egyptians, especially young women. Adīb Naguib Salamā also notes the important work in health care and development undertaken by

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[38] See Metropolitan Bishoy, "Revival of the Egyptian Church Since the Middle of the Nineteenth Century," in Badr, *Christianity: A History of the Middle East*, 775–96.

the Evangelicals. Of note certainly would be the remarkable vision of Dr. Samuel Ḥabīb in the founding of CEOSS.[39]

And of course, Muḥammad ʿAlī should certainly be credited for his part in the renaissance of Egypt through his government reforms. He opened up the first printing press in Būlāq to publish the new ideas with which his young civil servants had returned from Europe.[40] Regardless of "who was first," in helping to develop a modern nation state based on a constitution and the equality of citizenship, what can be clearly noted is that Egyptians from different communities all contributed.

One cannot speak of the modern nation of Egypt without mentioning the British Occupation from 1882–1956, of course. In many ways, the British occupation was a step backward for Coptic-Muslim relations. While the British worked hard at implementing a modern secular state that did not view Egyptian subjects as Muslim or Christian, but rather as individual citizens, its policies did exacerbate religious identities. The Coptic and Muslim Congresses of 1911 are clear examples of the modern expression of communal identity in response to the pressures of the occupation and the "veiled protectorate." Ultimately, however, both Copts and Muslims came together during the famous 1919 revolution and continued to work together to form national political parties. It should not be overlooked that the rise of the *Ikhwān al-Muslimūn* took place during this period of British occupation, and was a response to the changing cultural and political atmosphere of Egypt.

The Modern Nationalist State (1953–?)

Since 1952, a strong central Arab Nationalist government has ruled Egypt. With its harsh security structure, this Egyptian regime offered stability at a cost. As the standard of living has

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[39] Adīb Naguib Salamā, "Evangelical Missions and the Churches in the Middle East: Egypt and Sudan," in Badr, *Christianity: A History of the Middle East*, 736.

[40] Geoffrey Roper, "The History of the Book in the Muslim World," in Michael F. Suarez, S.J. and H.R. Woudhuysen, eds., *The Oxford Companion to the Book*, vol. 1 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 334.

dropped due to the role of *infitah,* as the gap between the rich and the poor has increased, and as illiteracy has continued to rise at an alarming rate since the mid-1970s, each religious community, Sunni Muslim, Coptic Orthodox, Coptic Catholic, and Coptic Evangelical, have begun to provide social, economic, and educational resources for their own communities. Where they saw the government as failing in its role, they stepped in to provide services for their own community at the expense of a larger national identity. This has exacerbated the divide between communities.

Throughout this article, we have seen how the Coptic community suffered from the vicissitudes of local and foreign domination, as well as benefited from local and foreign rule. Throughout its long history, Copts have suffered persecution from pagan and foreign Christian empires, as well as Muslim and local nationalist regimes. It is important to remember that while Islamic culture is predominant in Egyptian society today, its history and development was not direct and automatic. The Coptic majority did live under Muslim rule but predominated culturally for nearly three hundred years after the coming of the Arabs. It was not until the mid-10th century that Copts began converting to Islam for financial as well as for cultural reasons. But, the harshest period for the Copts occurred not under pietistic Islamic law but under a Machiavellian rule of foreign warlords. During the Mamlūk period, the Church suffered under arbitrary despotic rule. And yet, so did the local Muslim populace. It would be helpful to remember that while the current *salafī* conversations tend to focus on how to implement *sharī'a*, Muslim political rule was implemented by rulers who sought out *muftīs* to support their own decisions. During the classical medieval Islamic period, the jurists served as independent consultants to the sultans. But it was always the ruler who decided just what, if any, laws to implement.

The coming of Muḥammad 'Alī at the beginning of the 19th century prompted the slow and steady movement toward the modern ideas of citizenship and statehood. The development of these modern ideas under Muḥammad 'Alī, which have been incorporated into modern Egyptian society, have been seen as "foreign" ideas or solutions (*al-halul al-mustawrada*) by some. Of

course, the history of Islam underlines that much of Islamic rule has itself been un-Egyptian, and in some cases anti-Egyptian. While public pronouncements of both Islamic rulers and jurists have often clarified their understanding of the place and role of the *al-dhimma*, the reality on the ground was often much different. The simple fact that the Muslim Caliphs and Sultans continued to prohibit the service of Copts within the government is an indication that the prohibitions were never carried out systematically or in a uniform manner.[41] On the contrary, Copts have always been an indispensable part of the Egyptian government, even in the military.

Looking Forward . . .

Evangelical views of Church-State relations have varied greatly over time since the Reformation in Europe in the 16th century. The primary response of Coptic Evangelicals, however, has been to encourage and support communal spirituality that would have a positive impact on the well-being of an individual and stand as a witness to the benefits of an enlightened spirituality and life. Being the smallest and newest of religious communities in Egypt, there has been no other choice. Upon reflection, this means that regardless of the type and form of rule of Egypt, Coptic Evangelicals must always reconcile themselves to their minority status and their role as a leaven for positive social and ethical renewal: educationally, economically, socially, and perhaps even politically.

This brief review should remind us that as monumental as the January Revolution is, regardless of the ultimate incarnation of a new Egyptian system, it is another historical experience of Coptic participation in Egypt's history. It may be tempting to view the current political movements as cataclysmic, but Coptic Evangelicals may rest assured that the Church triumphant as recorded in Scripture is larger than the historical vicissitudes of human political organizations and states. Current events do not point to a culmination of history, nor an apocalyptic Armageddon. Copts and

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[41] Grafton, *The Christians of Lebanon*, 39–42.

Muslims have always lived, worked, and supported Egypt together. While those relationships have often been unequal, strained, and even crushed, the relationships have never been broken. What is clear is that the future of Coptic-Muslim relationships must come from Egyptians and Egyptian ideas themselves and not Christian, Muslim, or even secular ideologies from abroad. And, while there will be difficulties, history reminds us that the Church has survived and has always contributed to Egyptian society in a wide variety of ways and that it will continue to do so. For Coptic Evangelicals the question is: in what way and by whom?