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BETWIXT AND BETWEEN

The Copts of Egypt[1]

Introduction

On Sunday, April 7, 2013, an angry mob of Muslims threw firebombs and rocks at the Coptic cathedral in Cairo. This was the first time in modern history that the spiritual, cultural, and social center of the Coptic Orthodox Church had been openly attacked (see, among others, Maqbool 2013). Over eighty people were wounded and two died. The violence erupted after a funeral service held for four Christians killed on Friday, April 5, during sectarian clashes in the town of Khosous north of Cairo. (A fifth person, a Muslim, was also killed.) The fighting started as the mourners left the cathedral. According to one of several explanations, an angry mob pelted the mourners with stones that were hurled back at the attackers.

The police arrived too late and did little to prevent the violence. In fact, instead of controlling the situation, policemen sided with those attacking the cathedral. Ten individuals were arrested, four of whom were Copts.[2] The Coptic pope, Tawadros II, severely criticized President Morsi for the way the latter had handled the occurrences of sectarian violence that had increased since Morsi's nine months in office.[3]

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[1] Editor's note: This article was written in the last period of Mohammed Morsi's presidency. As is well known, he was deposed by the military on July 3, 2013 and, with a view to new elections, replaced the president of the Supreme Constitutional Court of Egypt, Adly Mansour. In fact, this article clearly shows that the democratically elected Mohammed Morsi and his government have not found an appropriate response to the problems of religious diversity, rights and minorities, and the relations between the religions and the state—not to mention the government's dismal record regarding the economy and personal safety.

[2] *Al-Arabiya* (April 14, 2013), http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2013/04/14/Suspects-detained-over-deadly-Egypt-cathedral-clashes.html.

[3] Egypt: "Pope Tawadros rebukes Morsi over cathedral clash," BBC World News (April 9, 2013), http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-22083168.

This episode of violence, while unprecedented, illustrated several layers of social crisis and interreligious tension in Egypt today. Although since the Revolution of January 25, 2011, Egyptian society as a whole is in a state of chaos, the general public's reaction to the attack and the actions of the police followed a pattern that started during the time of President Sadat (1970-1981) and became disturbingly familiar under the regime of President Mubarak (1981-2011).

In many instances of sectarian violence, there are recurring themes that can be summarized as follows. First, what sets off the violence is unclear but falls within a certain range of incidents or realities that condone violence or "punishment"; second, the police arrive too late or do not intervene. Third, Copts are accused of instigating the violence and are often among those arrested. Fourth, the government issues official statements and promises of reconciliation but without introducing notable changes in policies, rules, or other means that could protect the Coptic community. Finally, via official condolences, greetings, and other sorts of window dressing, the government attempts to pacify and domesticate the Christian community, mostly by holding official and highly visible meetings with its leaders.

I will elaborate on these themes below since they are indicative of the relations between Egypt's Muslims and Christians during the past 40 years. Before returning to the specifics of sectarian strife, however, I will discuss some of the pressing problems Egypt has been facing since the Revolution of January 25.

For those who are not familiar with the Coptic Christian communities of Egypt, there are three denominations called "Coptic:" the Coptic Orthodox Church, which is the indigenous and largest church in Egypt (with a membership estimated at around ten percent of the entire population of nearly 85 million between seven and nine million), the Coptic Catholic Church (around 165,000 members), and the Coptic Protestant Church (around 200,000 members). The Coptic Orthodox Church (or Coptic Church) is headed by a pope who traditionally represents his community in official interactions with the government.[4]

[4] We often see the title of pope and that of patriarch being used for the prime leader of the Orthodox Copts. His official title is dual: Pope of Alexandria and Patriarch of all Africa in the Holy See of St. Mark the Apostle. The Coptic popes have used this title since the time of Pope Dyonisios (247-264 CE), which was 50 years before the same title was assigned to the Bishop of Rome. See Davis 2005: 27. Most of the materials in this article concern the Coptic Orthodox Church, also called the Coptic Church.

Post-Revolution Notes

While the entire country is going through dramatic changes after the revolution of January 25, 2011 that brought down President Mubarak, the Coptic Orthodox community has also had to deal with the death of its long-reigning pope, Shenouda III (1971-2012), on March 17, 2012. The challenges awaiting his successor, Pope Tawadros II (elected November 4), are daunting as he faces manifold internal and external struggles. As for the external challenges, economic and political upheaval affects the Copts as it does the rest of society. On top of these problems, Copts face a society that is increasingly controlled by Islamist agendas, a newly designed Islamist-inspired constitution with several articles that hold numerous potentialities for infringements of their rights as equal citizens, and ongoing incidents of sectarian violence against Coptic lives and property. "The vision for the future is not so clear," Anba Pachomius, Metropolitan of Bohaira, Matrouh, and North Africa, (and formerly the interim pope) said, expressing the reality that Copts cannot predict what Islamist groups will do and how their actions will affect the Copts. The Metropolitan added, "Changing and more strained relations with Muslims have been imposed on us. The working vision of the Islamic movement today is not clear" (interview on January 22, 2013).

Egyptian society is clearly in transition. After 60 years of autocratic rule, the change to democracy is complicated—especially, as liberal politician Shahira Mehrez pointed out, because the state educational system is not only dismal (the World Economic Forum's Global Competitiveness Report 2012-201 ranked Egypt 139 on a list of 144 countries[5]) but has fed several generations with narrow-minded material focused on rote learning (interview on January 20, 2013). In the context of Christian-Muslim relations, it is important to add that, since the time of Sadat, Muslim children have been indoctrinated with negative ideas about non-Muslims. Although the Mubarak government tried to correct this situation at a later stage with its so-called "national unity" projects, the reality remains that many Muslims grew up with negative impressions about Christians (Makari 2007: 69-81).

In spite of the dismal state of education, the younger generation that represents more than 50 percent of the population desires to be free and speak out. Bishop Pachomius expressed this sentiment as follows: "The desire for democracy is real; after the Revolution you can't tell anybody what to do" (interview on January 22, 2013). This reality currently colors the relations between the Egyptian people and the political establishment and has resulted in recurring incidences of violence between pro- and anti-government groups. Yet, the new government that is dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood continues to fall

[5] http://www.weforum.org/reports/global-competitiveness-report-2012-2013.

back on the same methods of repression and suppression that led to Mubarak's downfall. Although it always played an important role, with the Islamists in power, religion has become a more pronounced force in Egyptian politics.

The political analyst Ziad Akl, accusing the Islamists of being on a "subtle power trip," has described the new political and religious climate as one in which "ideology became identity, difference became blasphemy, and tolerance became treachery" (Akl 2013). In the eyes of the Islamist government and its backers, those who disagree with the government and express their opinions via demonstrations, the media, and other channels are all seen as one monolithic block. Liberal Muslims, secularists, Christians, socialists, members of the opposition parties, and TV personalities like comedian Bassem Youssouf are all believed to be part of the same group of people who want to thwart the realization of the true Islamic state and undermine the president.

Mubarak Era Tactics

The general condition of Egypt is deteriorating; the economy has not recovered since the Revolution, while civil unrest continues.[6] Copts, being part of the fabric of society, equally suffer from the dismal economic situation. Although there are several ultra-rich Coptic tycoons like the Sawiris and the Bassili families, many Copts belong to the lower strata of society. Some of the poor, such as the *zabbaleen* or garbage collectors who used pigs to recycle and process garbage saw their source of income wiped out when the Egyptian government killed all the pigs in 2009 out of an unfounded fear of "swine flu." In the midst of the current chaos, religious ultraconservatives, the Salafis, keep insisting that only the strictest form of Islamic law can save Egypt. They claim that this strict set of laws, symbolized by a ban on alcohol, the segregation of the sexes and the imposition of Islamic dress, will uphold the purest ethics and ideologies.

The level of state and police violence has increased and demonstrators are reported to have died from torture. As a reason for the violence, the political scientist Dina al-Khawaga points to a strong alliance between the Brotherhood, the police, and the army, each of which reckon that this troika can ensure their survival. This loose alliance that, in her opinion, "rules without governing" tries to justify repression and intimidation by turning protesters against one

[6] Another problem that led to much upheaval was connected to the so-called soccer riots. Thousands of young soccer fans rioted in Port Said and Cairo after court verdicts were rendered against fans charged in the February 1, 2012 stadium riots that left 74 dead. The death sentences of 21 soccer fans were considered a great injustice since most of the police officers contributing to the killings were acquitted or received lighter sentences. See Hendawi and Batrawy 2013.

another and infiltrates protests to raise the level of violence (El-Khawaga 2013). A recent report by the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies confirms the observations that the new government is relying on the excessive use of force and alleged torture and abuse to control those opposing it (cf. Lindsey 2013).

Throughout the country, President Morsi's approval ratings dropped from 78 percent in September of 2012 to less than 50 percent in early 2013.[7] Both the president and his colleagues in the Muslim Brotherhood are becoming increasingly unpopular as they have failed to produce a clear policy that can lift the country out of the current economic and social crisis. According to the Protestant politician Ehab el-Kharrat, the Brotherhood has been losing popular support and will lose future elections unless economic conditions improve (interview on January 24, 2013).[8] Unfortunately, opposition leaders have been unable to come up with a clear agenda that counters the current failures of the Morsi government and fail to take on a strong role since it is unclear what they stand for.[9] According to opposition leader Samir Morqos, it is vital that they explain their plans to the Egyptian public (cf. Al-Gamal 2013).

History of Communal Living: The Pope and the President

Muslims and Copts have a long history of sharing the Egyptian communal space. Until 1856 Christians lived under a system based on segregation and were classified according to the legal category of *ahl al-dhimma, dhimmis* or "protected people," non-Muslims living under Islamic law. They paid *jizya* or a special poll tax, could not join the army, were denied access to the highest administrative posts, and their testimony was not accepted in the Islamic courts of law. When that status was removed by the Ottoman sultan, the religious minorities throughout the empire were granted cultural and political rights in exchange for loyalty to the ruling powers (Masters 2001: 140). The new status came at a time when Muslims as well as Christians were becoming emancipated: they had gained access to new forms of education and information and were constructing a new Egypt, an independent nation no longer part of the Ottoman Empire. Copts played important roles in the nationalization process: they opened schools, studied abroad, and contributed to the flow of knowledge through their work as journalists and educators. They fought against British

[7] The Egyptian Center for Public Opinion Research, Baseera, according to its periodic poll to track the President's approval ratings. See: www.baseera.com.eg.

[8] Dr. Ehab el-Kharrat is the co-founder of the Egyptian Socialist Democratic Party (Al-Hizb al-Masri Demoqrati el-Ijtima`i, founded July 4, 2011) and one of the three Christians elected to the Shura Council. Of the 180 members, the Council has 15 Christians, 12 of whom are appointed.

[9] "On the Egyptian Opposition," *The Arabist Blog* (February 27, 2013).

occupation with the Muslims, but their role in the new nation remained precarious in the midst of Muslim attempts to unify the Middle Eastern countries into one pan-Islamic civilization (Guirguis and Van Doorn-Harder 2011: 98-99). In spite of these experiences, Copts have always rejected minority status, upholding the claim that they are Egyptian citizens.

After several decades of the waning and waxing of communal solidarity and communal discord, social realities changed when, in the 1970s, Sadat (1970-1981) granted radical Muslim groups freedom of expression and movement and turned to Islam as a tool of political mobilization. Over time, militant voices started to dominate the mass media and mosques. Christians were vilified in sermons. Conspiracy theories depicted Copts as stashing weapons in churches. In certain areas of the country, anti-Christian campaigns resulted in recurring waves of sectarian violence. When, on the eve of Coptic Christmas, January 6, 1980, bombs exploded in several churches in Alexandria and the government did nothing to punish the perpetrators, there was a head-on collision between Pope Shenouda III and Sadat. Shenouda canceled the Easter celebrations that year and withdrew to a monastery with his bishops. In May that year Sadat proposed a constitutional amendment that made the principles of *shari'a* the basic source of legislation, rather than one of several sources, and relations between the pope and Sadat reached a breaking point. When Shenouda protested the amendment, Sadat accused him of acting like a politician and uttered the by now famous words "But the pope must understand that I am the Muslim president of a Muslim country" (Guirguis and Van Doorn-Harder 2011: 162-16). These lofty words did not win over the radical Muslim groups (who ended up assassinating Sadat) and when tensions increased, Sadat arrested 1,536 of his opponents. Shenouda was one of them, and he was exiled to the Monastery of St. Bishoy where he stayed for 1,213 days until 1985.

After the pope returned from exile, he refrained from openly defying the government, choosing the more pragmatic approach characterized by mutual support between the pope and the state (see McCallum 2007). Relations with the regime (1981-2011) improved somewhat under President Mubarak, but, in spite of initiatives to promote "national unity," incidents of violence continued and at times flared up. For example, between January 2008 and January 2010 there were 53 incidents of sectarian violence or tension in 17 of Egypt's 29 governorates (Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights [EIPR] 2010). The state approached such incidents purely as security problems and failed to address the underlying social and political issues involved (Iskander 2012: 82). This context allows us to understand one of the main conclusions researchers for EIPR made when investigating communal violence: "Imposing quiet is the goal of the Ministry of Interior in all incidents of sectarian violence, and this is often done against the will of the parties involved in the clashes" (EIPR 2010: 19). By organizing reconciliation meetings between religious leaders repre-

senting the communities involved, further investigations were aborted, with the result that victims of the violence were deprived of opportunities to seek justice. According to EIPR, the state's interventions were invariably "inadequate, violent, shortsighted and, in most cases, illegal. Its actions are always intended to impose calm by force: it is either reconciliation or quiet or arrest and at times the collective punishment of the victims themselves" (2010: 18). The police were often unable or unwilling to intervene. There was an important difference as far as sectarian sentiments were concerned during the time of Sadat; this time the inflammatory sermons and teachings had settled into the national mindset and intolerance had become internalized. During the time of Sadat most attacks were organized by militant Islamist groups, whereas now average citizens were either involved in or tacitly condoned attacking Christians (Tadros 2010).

The government relied on Pope Shenouda to contain Coptic sentiment. Until 2010, he would stress national unity and express his trust in the authorities to deal with the violence. At times he protested and demanded justice for the victims. On behalf of the church, Shenouda asserted the right and authority to represent the Copts in the media and in relation to the state. He preferred to speak on behalf of the community rather than have the community members speak for themselves. The pope's stance of unfailing support for the government and his strategy of speaking on behalf of the community aggravated large sectors of the Coptic community, especially after episodes of grave sectarian incidents. Towards the end of his reign, this policy had become problematic as many Copts, in particular the youth, felt they had been rendered voiceless and started to organize mass protests demanding their rights. Furthermore, in their view, the pope had failed to demand better protection for the community and justice for the victims.

In many ways, during the Mubarak era, Pope Shenouda attempted to construct a discourse that was in agreement with that of the state. For example, in 2006/2007 when amendments to the constitution were being discussed, Shenouda supported the inclusion of Article 2 on the use of *shari'a* law and opposed Muslims and Christians who proposed it be removed. Having fought bitterly with Sadat about the same article, he now maintained that the church should "not get involved in this debate because it [was] not beneficial for social stability" (Iskander 2012: 80). A younger generation of Copts believes that, as a minority, they should have the right to have their own opinions and values (Iskander 2012: 185).

There is a third party within the relationship between Copts and Muslims influencing sentiments and mindsets: the media and the Copts in diaspora. Coptic activists, especially from Australia and North America, have ensured that the situation of the Copts in the homeland is not forgotten. When Sadat visited the USA in 1980, their open demonstration infuriated the embattled president even

more (McCallum 2012). These advocates for Coptic rights frame their arguments within human rights discourse, using terminology reflecting freedom of religion and the rights of minorities. Their websites and other media consistently highlight each episode of violence, circulating news, pictures, and videos at the speed of light. A video of the attack on the cathedral, shot by a bystander on his or her phone was posted on Youtube, and within days the entire world could see that the police had not just been passive and stood by but also had protected some of the perpetrators. Fox News in the USA posted the feature with the damning title: "New video shows Egyptian police allowing deadly attack on Coptic cathedral."[10]

Pope Shenouda's attempt to toe the government line was under pressure from two sides: the West and youth, all bundled up in new media. It is hard to know exactly about who influenced whom most. Pope Tawadros (2012-), Shenouda's successor, understood that this was a force that could not be contained and immediately after his accession showed a very different approach. In his view, the church should follow a process of "modernization in a democratic way" (interview on January 24, 2013). Before entering the monastery, Pope Tawadros, a pharmacist and the first Coptic pope educated outside Egypt (in Great Britain) had managed a pharmaceutical company. After rising through the monastic ranks, he worked as auxiliary bishop for the well-respected Metropolitan Pachomius in the northern province of Damanhour, focusing on programs for children and youth. He has signaled that he is stepping away from Shenouda's practice of solving incidents of communal violence in direct communication with the President. It is in this context that we should read Pope Tawadros' refusal to accept President Morsi's invitation to join a series of national dialogues. Tawadros had said he preferred actions over words and was not interested in ceremonial meetings that were mere window dressing and would not be in Egypt's national interest.[11]

An Invisible and Abused Spouse

Often, the reasons for the eruption of violence are not clear. At least three reasons emerged for the clashes on April 5 this year in Khosous: 1) a Muslim man had harassed a Christian woman and violence erupted when her husband retaliated; 2) Coptic children had drawn swastikas thought to be crosses on a Muslim institution; and, finally, 3) a local imam had given an inflammatory speech against Christians. In the end, the drawing of the swastikas was presented as the main reason. Other reasons are connected with local vendettas, a

[10] http://www.foxnews.com/world/2013/04/28/new-video-shows-egyptian-police-allowing-attack-on-coptic-cathedral/.

[11] "Coptic Pope Tawadros II Criticizes Egypt's Islamist Leadership, New Constitution," (February 5, 2013), http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/64135.aspx.

business transaction between a Christian and a Muslim gone sour, accusations of constructing churches with or without the required permits, or illicit relationships between Coptic men and Muslim women. A variation of the latter is a romantic relationship between a Muslim man and a Coptic woman in which the Christian family intervenes to prevent her from converting to Islam. Especially rumors that a Christian woman was being held against her will and not allowed to convert to Islam led to virulent conflicts.[12] Once the violence starts, the police remain mostly inactive until the situation somehow calms down and the time comes to arrest the culprits. Often, several Copts are accused of inciting the violence.

Furthermore, the state security apparatus imposes various forms of punishment on the Copts such as, for example, preventing further construction of a new church, even though all the required permits (that can take more than fifteen years to acquire) might be in place. As described above, under the Mubarak regime official statements would follow the events, often denying that the violence had been sectarian.

Many forms of injustice that Copts experienced under the Mubarak regime have remained unchanged after the Revolution. If nothing else, they have increased. According to Ishak Ibrahim at the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR), it is a fact that even if the Constitution guarantees minorities basic rights, these rights are often ignored. With Islamists in power and Salafi Muslims feeling emboldened, the number of egregious cases continues to grow. *Al-Ahram Weekly* regularly features reports of such incidents. For example, we read concerning the area of Shubra Al-Kheima, which has a high number of Coptic inhabitants:

> Anxiety among the Coptic community has grown following an attack by Salafis earlier this week on Abu Makkar Church in Shubra Al-Kheima. The complex has been besieged after Salafi sheikhs objected to construction work and to the holding of prayers in the complex's offices. (Adel 2013b)

On the national scene, Coptic needs and demands remain more or less invisible; they have the status of an abused spouse who is not allowed to speak up or react and, when beaten, is accused of deserving this treatment. Official reactions to the attack on the cathedral were illustrative of this reality. For example, Mohamed Soudan, an official spokesperson of the political party connected to the Muslim Brotherhood, provided a telling example of the prevailing mindset

[12] For example, in March, 2013, *Al-Ahram Weekly* reported the case of a Muslim teacher who was allegedly being held against her will in a church in Kom Ombo. This rumor triggered daily clashes between security forces and young Muslim rioters who attacked the church. In April a similar incident happened in the town of Wasta, about 95 kilometers south of Cairo. See Maggie 2013.

among Islamists. According to Soudan, Copts had "provoked police officers and neighbors, vandalizing vehicles in the immediate area," and after taking "their arsenal … started the violence." Echoing the familiar theme of a Coptic conspiracy and Coptic militia and weapons, he ominously ended with: "Do you think Christians are preparing for something?" (El-Dabh 2013). President Morsi's National Security Advisor, Essam Haddad, outright claimed on Facebook that Christians had instigated the clashes, using firearms and petrol bombs from inside the cathedral compound (Saleh and Taylor 2013). Soudan, speaking from Alexandria, seemed to be more informed about the riots in the capital than those who had been present and to whom it remained unclear how and why the riots began. Some said that the mourners had attacked passing cars; others stated that an angry mob emerged when Copts and Muslims attending the funeral had shouted anti-government slogans (Adel 2013a).

Although President Morsi reacted with hyperbolic statements such as "Any attack on Egypt's Christians is an attack on me personally," he did not take any substantial measures to increase Coptic safety. While the bare minimum of Muslim-Christian relations used to be mutual visits and greetings during holidays and special celebrations, President Morsi did not attend Pope Tawadros inauguration ceremony and has shunned Coptic celebrations like Christmas. Many interpret his reluctance to engage with the Copts as a move to pacify the hard-line Salafi Muslims who take offense at any non-Muslim presence (see, among others, Saleh and Taylor 2013).

That some radical Muslims wish to segregate Egypt's communities came even more into focus when, around Orthodox Easter (May 5, 2013), Salafi and Muslim Brotherhood leaders issued *fatwas* that forbade Egyptian Muslims from extending holiday greetings. The reasoning was that Easter celebrates an event that, according to the Muslim creed, did not happen; Christ had been neither crucified nor resurrected (see, for example, Trager 2013 and Van Doorn-Harder 2013).

The possibility of Copts and Muslims joining hands in anti-government protests has further strengthened the deep conviction Islamists hold that protests against the government are fueled by liberal Muslims, secularists, foreign/Western influences, and Christians who want to thwart the revolution and prevent the realization of a true Islamic nation.

In summary, based on Egypt's Constitution, Christians enjoy full citizenship. While enjoying equal rights on paper, in reality Christians remain marginalized and, although tightly woven into the fabric of society, with Islamist voices dominating the government they are becoming more socially isolated. While President Morsi's rhetoric indicates a desire to be more inclusive, his actions fail to protect the Christian communities by, for example, curtailing hateful speech and unfounded allegations about them. On the national scene, however,

it is not only the President's rhetoric that contains a double message; the 2012 Constitution holds similarly ambiguous statements concerning the status of non-Muslim minorities.

The Constitution

On December 15 and 22, 2012, the state held a referendum on the draft of the Constitution, which had been controversial from the beginning. The document contains unclear articles and does not guarantee protection of the right to freedom of religion, does not allow for freedom of speech, and ignores the rights of women, children, and religious minorities. Furthermore, it remained unclear how fair the voting process went since, especially in rural areas, groups related to the Brotherhood openly intimidated those who wanted to vote against it to the point that many stayed away from the ballot box.

Official church representatives were part of the drafting committee, as well as Coptic politicians like Samir Morqos, who at that time held the position of Presidential Assistant with the portfolio of Democratic Transition. On behalf of the Coptic Church, in his capacity as Interim Pope, Anba Pachomius removed Bishop Paula of Tanta, who represented the Coptic hierarchy, from the drafting committee. The Catholic and Protestant churches, as well as the lay Coptic representatives, followed suit. Copts consider articles 2 and 219 especially to be problematic. The second article, which states that the "principles of Islamic Sharia are the principal source of legislation," has created intense debate among Egyptians since it remains unclear whose interpretation of *sharia* will be followed.[13]

Article 219 compounds the confusion by stating: "The principles of Islamic Sharia include general evidence, foundational rules, rules of jurisprudence, and credible sources accepted in Sunni doctrines and by the large community."[14] This article is premised on the fiction that there is a consensus on the principles of *sharia*. When considering the logical consequences of this article, it could mean that, for example, Wahhabi sources could be applied or that anyone could be given the power to criminalize a certain act. In fact, the article conflates the judiciary, executive, and legislative powers and leads to a danger-

[13] Article 2: Al-Islam din ad-dawla, wa al-lughat ul-`Arabiyya lughatuha al-resmiyya wa mabadi' al-Shari'a al-Islamiyya al masdar al-ra'isi lil tashri (**الإسلام دين لدولة، واللغة العربية لغتها الرسمية، ومبادئ الشريعة الإسلامية المصدر الرئيسى للتشري**).

[14] Article 219: Mabadi al-Shari`a al-Islamiyya tashmalu adilataha al-kulliya wa qawa`idha al-usuliyya wa al-fiqhiyya wa masadiruha al mu`tabira fi madhahib ahl as-Sunna wa al-Jama`a (**مبادئ الشريعة الإسلامية تشمل أدلتها الكلية وقواعدها الأصولية والفقهية ومصادرها المعتبرة فى مذاهب أهل السنة والجماعة**).

ous breach of the separation of powers that in theory guarantee a citizen's rights.

Articles 3 and 33 contradict each other. The former states that "The canon principles of Egyptian Christians and Jews are the main source of legislation for their personal status laws, religious affairs, and the selection of their spiritual leader." This article constitutionalizes the church's authority, allowing it prime authority in matters of personal status. Article 4 ascribes similar high powers to the Islamic Al-Azhar University and explicitly mentions the Sunni tradition. Article 3 is considered problematic by Copts who do not want the church to have the final word in their personal affairs, among which the issue of divorce especially is very controversial.

Article 3 reflects the way Christian communities were traditionally allowed to govern their own personal rights issues. In the current Islamist context, however, the article contains hidden dangers of increased discrimination. Legal scholar Mina Khalil explained that "While bestowing much internal power on the church, Article 3 could become an overture to the reintroduction of the *dhimmi* status that was abolished in 1856" (interview on January 16, 2013). Although this status was abolished as a legal concept, it remains symbolically present in Egyptian society where the majority of Muslims do not consider Christians to be equal. As a result, Article 33, which claims that all citizens are equal before the law is contradicted by other articles.[15] Even if not discriminated against openly, Copts know that forms of inequality are unavoidable in Egyptian society. Yet they do not quite know how they could fit into a state ruled by Islamic law. They fear a return to the time of segregation where Christians and Jews living in the Muslim empires could enjoy freedom in their own quarters as long as they remained separate (the so-called *millet* system).

Although no reference is made to Article 219, a disturbing feature article in *Al-Ahram Weekly* of March 11, 2013 seemed to indicate that it allowed for unwarranted forms of justice affecting Muslims as well as non-Muslims. On Sunday, March 10, 2013, the prosecutor-general issued a decision that allowed for "citizen's arrests": the right to arrest anyone suspected of breaking the law. According to *Al-Ahram Weekly*, "Only Islamist political powers, represented by the Freedom and Justice Party and Al-Gamaa Al-Islamiya, welcomed the decision as an attempt to curb the security deterioration in the country" (Farouk, 2013). One of the first cases of citizen's arrests that made international headlines concerned the Dutch journalist Rena Netjes who was arrested on suspi-

[15] Article 33: Al muwatinun lada al-Qanun siwa' wa hum mutasawaun fi al-huquq wa al-wajibat al-`ama la tamyiz bainahum fi dhalika (المواطنون لدى القانون سواء، وهم متساوون فى الحقوق والواجبات العامة، لا تمييز بينهم فى ذلك.).

cion of "foreign meddling" when asking some shopkeepers in her neighborhood for an interview (El Deeb 2013).

Apostasy and Divorce: Internal Communal Matters Meet Islamic Law

One of the most urgent issues in Christian-Muslim relations is divorce. During the time of Pope Shenouda, the issue of divorce became a national debate played out in the media. On March 8, 2008, the Egyptian Supreme Administrative Court ruled that Atef Kyrillos, who had obtained a divorce through civil court, should be allowed to remarry in church (Malak 2008). The ruling was based on the constitutional stipulation that every Egyptian citizen has the right to marry and form a family. It was a direct attack on Pope Shenouda's authority to speak and act on behalf of the Copts and raised questions about the boundaries of Coptic identity and national identity. In the pope's view, the state should not interfere with the church's laws on marriage and divorce, and most Copts agreed with him. In 2010, the Holy Synod, which consists of the pope and all the bishops, officially rejected the court ruling, appealing to the church's religious freedom as guaranteed by the Constitution.

Marriage and divorce are Coptic Personal Rights issues. A marriage contracted in the church is considered a sacrament that cannot be dissolved without pressing reasons. Copts do have the option of seeking a divorce via the Egyptian civil courts, but the church will not recognize it and only allows remarriage in a church ceremony if the divorce is based on adultery or one of the spouses converts to another religion. Opinions run along two lines: a majority of the church hierarchy and many devout Copts believe that, based on the biblical injunctions (such as those in Matthew 5:31-32 and 19:6), only adultery or conversion can be grounds for a divorce. Other Copts, however, including members of the clergy believe that the rules are too stringent and consider having access to the option of ending a dysfunctional or unhappy marriage a basic human right. Furthermore, according to several members of the clergy, a reconsideration of the strict rules based on new theological and legal interpretations has become necessary since the current situation causes Copts to leave the church or convert to Islam (see, for example, Khalil 2011).

The divorce debate is complicated and goes back to 1938, when the Coptic Orthodox Communal Council (Majlis al-Milli) designed a personal status code that contained nine legitimate reasons for the dissolution of a marriage: adultery, conversion, the unexplained five-year absence of one of the spouses, a minimum of seven years' imprisonment, a husband's impotence, mental illness, incorrigible behavior, incompatibility, and taking monastic vows ("Personal Status Law, Marriage," in: Atiya 1991: 1942-43). The code, which was based on medieval documents, infuriated the pope (John XIX) at the time and

successive popes who only accepted adultery as a reason for divorce.[16] Upon becoming pope in 1971, Shenouda issued a papal decree confirming that the Orthodox Church only granted a divorce in cases of adultery and conversion.

To avoid the Coptic Orthodox personal status rules, some Orthodox Copts became Protestant or Greek Orthodox, which allowed them to file for divorce in civil court. But Pope Shenouda convinced the other denominations in Egypt to unify the personal status affairs of all Christians, which resulted in 1989 in a Family Law that was presented to the Egyptian Parliament several times but has not yet been ratified. When the loophole of joining a different denomination closed, Copts converted to Islam to have their marriage dissolved. This solution has become problematic since many regret that step and cannot return to Christianity since that would force them to commit apostasy.

The debate on what to accept as valid reasons for a divorce is far from solved and features prominently on the pope's agenda.[17] Currently, Bishop Paula of Tanta is in charge of the divorce files. Much confusion is created by the lack of clarity about who is granted the right to remarry in church and who is not. From the outside, the system seems opaque, with success depending on which cleric one knows in the hierarchy. Local circumstances also play a role; EIPR found that in villages with few Copts the church is more inclined to grant a divorce since the conversion of one of the spouses to Islam would upset the social balance in the Coptic community.

Thus the divorce issue, while seemingly an internal Christian affair, reveals that the Muslim and Christian communities in Egypt are deeply intertwined at certain levels. Christians will use the outlet offered by Islam if it serves their personal interest.

Coptic Responses

In the current chaos, it is easy to forget that during the 1960s, the Nasser Revolution caused similar social, economic, and political upheaval within Egyptian society. The church not only survived the ensuing chaos but also used the situation to strengthen its internal structures and to create new ways of interaction with its Muslim surroundings. Then, as today, not all Copts left Egypt but many stayed and considered it part of their civic duty to contribute to national development and well-being.

[16] In 1962 Pope Kyrillos VI (1959-1971) added the second reason of conversion and instructed then Bishop Shenouda to draft a new code based on the biblical teachings. See Guirguis and Van Doorn-Harder 2011: 113, 184-85.

[17] He called it "a headache" (interview on January 24, 2013).

The pope at that time was the charismatic Kyrillos VI (1959-1971) who looked inside the community to find human resources and strategies that would help cope with the new situation. The structure he created in a relatively short period of time served as the foundation for the Coptic Church as it is today. A locally confined, fragile institution that tended to be oriented to the past became a forward looking, vibrant organization with an ever-expanding international presence.

This transformation, which was based on the strengthening of the church's leadership and improved religious education was not just an inward-looking enterprise. It translated into a stronger Coptic position within civil society and resulted in numerous initiatives to entertain strong relations with the Muslim environment. During the time of Pope Shenouda, several new projects were launched aimed at strengthening and improving local and national relationships between Christians and Muslims. Across Egypt, clinics, and preventive health programs serve the entire population. Coptic schools, centers for vocational training, social development projects, and courses aimed at specific groups such as adolescents and young mothers have become venues for training and empowerment for Copts to become active members of society.

It is a decisive era for the Copts, and their leaders agree that it is vital they link up with other groups that oppose the government. In order to have a stronger voice, history was made on February 18, 2013 when the heads of Egypt's five main denominations—Coptic Orthodox, Protestant, Catholic, Greek Orthodox and Anglican—all mainstream churches in Egypt, took the historic step to launch an Egyptian Council of Churches.

All churches, Orthodox, Catholic, Anglican, and Protestant, have been firm in their stance against the government's policies that harm their communities—for example, jointly critiquing the Constitution. They reject violence while urging their members to participate in the democratic process. Christians should express their opinions and air their grievances to the authorities and demand equal status with Muslims based on the reality that all are Egyptian nationals. The church advises, but Copts are encouraged to participate in the political and civil process as individuals. This attitude is one of several indications that the leadership has started to step away from Pope Shenouda's approach of wielding power inside the church and in dealing with the state on the church's behalf.

Whatever the situation in society may be, the churches continue to provide their members and the rest of society with social, educational, and medical assistance. According to Metropolitan Pachomius, the Coptic Orthodox Church wants to take its position in society now more than ever by building more clinics, hospitals, and schools to help improve Egypt's deplorable education system. To stop the tide of unemployment, plans are in the making to open

more vocational training centers that will strengthen the chances of young unemployed Copts and Muslims in finding jobs.

The Coptic Orthodox Church has a long history of creating civil education projects that aim at keeping communication channels with the rest of society open. During the past 20 years, the Bishopric of Youth has been at the forefront of such activities. Bishop Musa explained that he

> started the Youth Movement in order to create an interaction between Christians and Muslims—in schools, at the universities and in political parties. We still rely on this foundation. Now we need new strategies for our work with young people, and pope Tawadros has given this work a priority. (interview on, January 23, 2013)

Bishop Thomas, Bishop of El-Qusiyeh and Deputy Secretary of the Holy Synod, explained that the goal of this type of effort was to create peacebuilding efforts and an atmosphere of sharing responsibility for the good of the nation. Where Muslim and Christian leaders work closely together, it is easier to prevent or solve incidences of communal violence. To prepare leaders who can intervene, local Coptic parishes organize leadership training in conflict resolution. Christians and Muslims who oppose the current government collaborate in training leaders who can deal with issues of citizenship and human rights. Furthermore, political activists travel in small groups to rural areas where they provide voters in the villages with information about the political parties, the Constitution, and the like (Adel 2013b).

Building a civic society together needs more than one partner. Copts set up social development systems that benefit the entire society while similar Muslim venues remain closed to them. True integration will remain a distant dream as long as non-Christian children are raised without any real knowledge of Coptic history or culture. If, the media continue instead to show religious authorities who espouse derogatory language concerning members of a community most Muslim children hardly know, their minds will be laced with prejudice for generations to come. As a result, in spite of ardent Coptic efforts to integrate into society, symbolically and spatially they have become more isolated.

Conclusion

There never was any doubt that Egypt is a Muslim society with a prevalent discourse that is highly religious. The Coptic Orthodox Church under the leadership of its pope traditionally managed to find a balance between being an invisible minority and a vital part of Egyptian society. This fragile equilibrium has come under attack more than ever now a majority Islamist government has been elected that rests on the mindset of excluding those who do not fit its religious frame of reference.

Sectarian violence evolves according to a recurring ritual of rumors about Coptic transgressions being spread, matters being raised to communal anger, collective blame thrown on the Copts, all of which ends in an explosion of violence. Local or national government officials will not protect this part of their subjects and all Islamist Muslims try to toe the line between pleasing hard-line Salafis and implementing their dreams of an Egypt governed by *shari'a* law. The tension between the demands of universal human rights and the application of Islamic law remains unsolved since everybody involved knows that enforcing a Coptic return to *dhimmi* status would have immediate repercussions. The world is watching closely to see how the new government will solve this quandary that requires different solutions according to the group it concerns. The main problem facing all Egyptians is that a strong foundation for the development of true dialogue and national reconciliation is lacking. It has never been instilled in children or taught to the youth, and Islamists who used to operate in defense mode from the opposition, holding on to their ideals of Islamic law, never felt they had any need or use for such activities. It is not too late, however, since in all corners of society people, human rights activists, Muslims who are not of the Islamist mindset, liberal politicians, and Coptic Christians have not given up on Egypt and continue to strengthen society in various ways.

Relying on the internal strength of their spiritual, social, and economic institutions, Christians in Egypt are coping with and adapting to the rapidly changing political and economic conditions around them. Lacking the foreign networks Catholic, Protestant, Greek Orthodox, and other denominations can rely on, the Coptic Orthodox Church mines its inner strength and institutions to stay focused on guiding believers in times of internal and external change. The challenges are not only manifold but in many cases unclear as nobody can predict what the impact of some of the articles in the new Constitution paired with the heavy Islamist rhetoric will be on the position of the community as a religious minority. Pope Tawadros has encouraged the community to trust that this storm will pass as many have over the centuries. In one of his tweets he stated: "The night is short. The sun will rise again. Remain hopeful. The light will break through for Egypt."

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