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Nationalism and Minority Identities in Islamic Societies
Edited by Maya Shatzmiller

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Edited by
MAYA SHATZMILLER

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Copts: Fully Egyptian, but for a Tattoo?

PIETERNELLA VAN DOORN-HARDER

INTRODUCTION

Older generations of Muslims and Christians agree that relations between their religions used to be more relaxed before the 1960s. Some fondly remember: "We used to have a beer with Muslim friends to celebrate the beginning of Ramadan."[1] And others: "Our neighbours were Muslim; they were honest, deeply religious people. We had good relationships; we shared in happiness and misery. The misery was much stronger than the religion."[2] The younger generation – those who were born after the 1940s – observe that a different mood has penetrated Egyptian society: "Nowadays the Muslim children grow up with a big wall against Christians. Children in the street become arrogant toward Christians. It used not to be that way. They get this from the teachers who are influenced by fanatic ideas that consider Egypt to be for Muslims only."[3]

These remarks testify to a change in the Egyptian religious climate. Private beliefs have moved into the public sphere, where they shape the cultural and political climate. This process was influenced by several developments within Egyptian society and came to the fore in 1967, when the Arab armies were defeated by the Israelis. To cope with the traumatic feelings of loss and failure, Egyptians, both Muslims and Christians, turned to their respective religions. Among one segment of the Islamic circles, increased religiosity moved toward the

form of Islam born in the 1930s with the emergence of the Muslim Brotherhood, known now as "political Islam" or "Islamism."

In some circles, the newly found Muslim identity expressed itself in growing intolerance toward Christians that at times culminated in incidents of violence and religious strife. This reality forced the Copts to reconsider their position in Egyptian society. They realized the need to strengthen their church from within, not only in spiritual and liturgical spheres, but also in the social, cultural, and political areas of life. Pope Shenouda III, who has reigned since 1971, especially reshaped the church's hierarchy into what became a seemingly impenetrable bulwark of Copticism, led and guarded by clergy. In retrospect, during the past three decades, Coptic leadership, both lay and clergy, has laid the building blocks for what Anthony D. Smith calls "ethnic survival potential."[4] While fortifying the church from within, the Coptic leadership also had to reconsider its environment – that is, its relationship with the Muslim majority and its role and place in Egypt's nation-state.

This chapter focuses on the religious, cultural, and educational aspects of Coptic life that have proven crucial for the formation of a specific Coptic identity, one that shapes the Coptic attitude toward the Islamic environment and the Copts' self-definition as Egyptian nationals and that has ultimately formed the key to Coptic survival.[5] The leading Egyptian sociologist Nabil 'abd el-Fattah observed that little has been published about these elements of Coptic life and about the main influences on Coptic interaction with the Muslim environment.[6] Most studies of the Copts focus on their place in public life or on "safe" topics such as liturgy, history, and Coptic art. Aspects of Coptic life that shape its survival potentials and influence the social relations between Copts and Muslims, such as folk religion, folk stories, the role of religious authority, children's education, and the various Coptic social groups, are seldom studied.[7] True, it is the Copts themselves who resist such studies, treating them with great disdain. Ultimately, these studies do not receive the Coptic patriarch's approval – an essential seal of blessing for the work to be read by Copts.

Here I try to point out what have been the strongest forces to shape the Coptic identity. To place this development in the larger frame of Egypt's history, I provide some observations of where this history directly influenced the Coptic community. But first, I will briefly describe who and where the Copts are.

COPTIC COMMUNITY AND CULTURE

The Copts of Egypt constitute a religious minority that descends from the original, pharaonic inhabitants of Egypt. They are members of one of the oldest Christian churches, the Coptic Orthodox Church, which started sometime during the first century B.C.E. when St Mark the Evangelist arrived in Alexandria. The church's patriarch, currently Shenouda III, is the 117th successor to St Mark.

Nobody knows exactly how many Copts there are. The Egyptian census of 1986 estimated their number at 6.3 per cent of the population.[8] Copts themselves and others observing Egypt say that the state underrepresents the Copts statistically and that their number is at least 10 per cent. In 2003 Egypt's population was around 68 million, with a yearly growth rate of 2 per cent. This means that there are between 4 and 7 million Copts in Egypt. The Coptic growth rate is lower than that of the Muslim population due to lower birth rates and conversions to Islam. There are no hard figures for the number of Copts who become Muslim, but some estimate that the Coptic Church in Egypt loses over 6,000 members a year.[9] At the same time, the number of Copts outside Egypt has grown to over one million. These new communities are the result of emigration to the West, of Coptic missionary activities in various African countries, and of new members in the West, mostly women marrying Coptic men. At the time of this writing there are over 180 Coptic churches outside Egypt. Countries with substantial Coptic communities, such as Germany, the US, and Australia, have their own bishops. In the US there is a budding Coptic seminary, and elsewhere, too, Copts have built several monasteries outside Egypt.

The majority of the Copts in Egypt live in the south, while the largest concentrations of Copts live in Cairo and Alexandria. As Coptic families tend to be small, they stress the education of their children, resulting in an average educational level higher than that of Muslims. Copts are present in all social strata of society, but those with university degrees tend to occupy work in the private sector – for example, in the areas of medicine, finance, and engineering. As is the case with the rest of the Egyptian population, many Copts are poor and work in menial jobs such as garbage collection.

Coptic culture, language, and history were shaped on Egyptian soil; Copts share numerous identity markers with Muslim Egyptians, whose numbers have grown rapidly since the Arab invasion of Egypt in 642. During the Middle Ages, Islam replaced Coptic Christianity as the majority religion in Egypt, and Arabic became the dominant language. From an *ethnie* (i.e., an ethnic community that represented the dominant community of Egypt), the Copts became a vertical *ethnie* (i.e., a subject community held together by its members' exclusive bonds).[10] On the surface, the only difference between Copts and Muslims seems to be their religious affiliation. To understand how the Copts have survived since the Arab invasion, we need to look more deeply into Coptic life, including its social and cultural aspects, since religion alone does not guarantee the long-term survival of a community.

Woven through the tapestry of Coptic life are questions about the Copt's continuity and survival, about openness to the surrounding and dominant culture while preserving the boundaries erected to define their own culture. What does the Coptic "portable protective shell" consist of? How does it protect the community without smothering it into fossilization and slow decay? According to Anthony D. Smith, ethnic self-renewal is driven by four mechanisms: (1) religious reform, (2) cultural borrowing, (3) popular participation, and (4) myths of ethnic chosenness.[11] Remarkably, all four mechanisms are strongly developed in the Coptic community, starting with the religious reform that drives the others. The Coptic Church went through this reform for the greater part of the twentieth century, fashioning a new Coptic identity that, although separated from its environment by religion, claims a clear role in the Egyptian nation.

COPTS AND EGYPT

Coptic national consciousness awoke around the beginning of the nineteenth century when Muhammad Ali (1805–48), requiring skilled tax collectors, scribes, and land purveyors in order to develop Egypt's agriculture, brought many Copts into the public service.[12] Christians officially gained equal status with Muslims after the introduction of the 1856 Hamayouni Decree. Now that their *dhimmi* (minority) status had been abolished, the Copts were free to participate at all levels of Egyptian society, including in high administrative offices, albeit with a fluctuating sense of permanence. Twice, a Copt has served as prime minister: Boutros Ghali from 1908 until his assassination in 1910 and Yusuf Wahba Pasha from 1919–20. Muslims and Copts resisted British colonialism in unison, jointly staging the 1919 revolution and adopting

a concept of one nation and one people. Their main vehicle was the mostly secular Wafd Party. The majority of Copts involved in politics were from the higher classes and underestimated the sensitivities of many Muslims, especially those of the lower classes, who suspected Copts in positions of power of interfering with the Islamic goals of the state. When Egypt proclaimed independence in 1922, Copts felt so secure in their quest for national equality that they opposed a clause in the Constitution guaranteeing their protection as a religious minority, while another clause made Islam the state religion.

The First and Second World Wars caused grave economic instability, and frustration ran high among Egypt's younger generations. Liberal Nationalism had failed, creating an opportunity for greater influence by Islamic-oriented groups, such as the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood, which offered alternative solutions to the country's moral and economic woes. The brotherhood criticized the secular Wafd and questioned the legitimacy of Copts in places of authority. Their rhetoric instigated frequent harassment of Copts, who started to realize that the government was doing little to protect them.

After the Second World War, the Arab world as a whole became increasingly frustrated by the defeat of Palestine by Zionist forces. Gamal 'Abd al-Nasser came to power in this volatile climate after the 1952 revolution. His policy focused on building Arab nationalism, and he nationalized agricultural lands and businesses, creating an "Arab socialism." The Copts suffered in ethnic, political, and material ways. They did not consider themselves Arab but "true sons of the pharaohs, who are the descendants of indigenous Egyptians."[13] They lost their political representation, their seats in Parliament fell to less than 1 per cent, and no Copt ever rose to political prominence during the Nasser era. Because many Copts worked in the private sector, the massive loss of approximately 75 per cent of their wealth led to the closing of Coptic schools and to the impoverishment of churches and monasteries.

These schools had served both Christians and Muslims. Many Muslim leaders, among them President Nasser, had graduated from Coptic schools. For Muslim children, there were now fewer opportunities to become familiar with Christian models of life. In 1957 Islamic religious education became obligatory in Egyptian schools. Over time, intensified Islamic education led to a renewal of faith among Muslim youth. At the same time, Coptic children in public schools also had to memorize parts of the Qur'an. Maurice Martin

has observed that, while this education gave birth to a sense of Islamic national pride, it also created in its wake an Islamism that lacked consensus on the role of religion at the national level. The government assumed Islam to be a social force and avoided any discussion with those who had political aspirations based on Islam. Eventually, this intentional ambiguity polarized Egyptian Islam.[14] At the same time, the Nasser government kept potential religious conflicts at bay by imprisoning or executing Islamist leaders and banning the Muslim Brotherhood.

The Six Day War of 1967 with Israel exposed the level of disillusion among Egypt's population. The Liberal Nationalism of the Wafd Party, Nasser's socialism, and Pan-Arabism had all failed to spur on the masses. For the lower and middle classes, in particular, Islam became the most viable alternative. Sana Hassan describes Islam at this time as a power functioning as "a solid moral grounding for the youth" that could "infuse them with zeal in combat."[15]

This zeal became apparent during the 1970s, when members of extremist Muslim groups imprisoned under Nasser were released by President Sadat. They started to dominate the universities, the mosques, and the media, propagating an Islamic nation, preaching an Islamic nationalism, and arousing latent Muslim fears of Christian dominance. Attacks on Coptic persons and property increased.[16] Groups such as Jama'at Islamiyya felt insulted by Coptic expressions of cultural identity and interpreted church building activities as attempts to propagate the Christian faith and provoke Muslims. In their opinion, Christians could peacefully enjoy their *dhimmi* status until, inevitably, they would see the truth of Islam and convert.[17] The Copts, traumatized and fearful, rallied even more closely around their church.

Sadat saw it expedient to use the Islamic groupings as a means to legitimize his own power. He did not protect the Copts against their violence and ignited Muslim animosity by accusing Patriarch Shenouda of scheming to set up a separate Coptic state. This led to some of the most violent incidents in the Cairo district of Zawya al-Hamra (1981). While the Copts buried their dead, Sadat accused the patriarch of inciting the interreligious strife and banned him to his Monastery of Bishoi, where he stayed until President Mubarak released him in 1985.

Attacks on the Copts continued under Mubarak, who came to power in 1981, after Sadat was shot by the Islamists he had fostered

himself. His regime remained lukewarm about protecting the Coptic minority until the 1990s, when the Islamists started to target tourists and high state officials. At this time, the tide turned, the government becoming aware that allowing marginalization and vilification of the Christians could have serious repercussions for national stability. By this time the reform of Coptic church life had already resulted in the strengthening of its institutional, social, and spiritual life. As part of this process of renewal, Copts had reflected on and designed new strategies for improving communications between Muslims and Christians. In other words, the Copts were ready to participate in this climate of renewed openness.

As Copts had started to emigrate to the West in search of freedom and work, the church had also developed a new self-image, which was independent of the Egyptian boundaries and based on a newly found international role. Inside Egypt a new vitality set in among Copts that led to a virtual renaissance. Their Sunday School Movement became a leading force in recreating ethno-religious boundaries, and the ascension of a truly holy man, Patriarch Kyrillos VI (1959–71), marked the new beginning. By the time Shenouda became the patriarch, the Copts had learned to negotiate the permanent ambivalence they experienced from the state. They also realized that a similar ambivalence was present in the Islamic discourse concerning non-Muslims.

COPTS, STATE, AND ISLAM

From the state's point of view, Copts do enjoy full rights as citizens. They are not considered a minority, and they form part of the Egyptian human fabric, sharing the problems of Egyptian society with Muslims. The Egyptian state is not based on Islamic laws and calls itself secular. However, Islam is the official state religion and the primary source of some state legislation, such as the personal status laws. Egypt recognizes only the religions of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity; all others are forbidden. As there are only around 200 Jews left in Egypt, Christians form the largest minority group, which is the case not only in Egypt, but in the entire Middle East.

The state system, although fair in theory, is fraught with ambiguity for non-Muslims. For example, in 1972, in the midst of discussions to introduce the *shari'a* (Islamic law) as the country's sole source of

legislation, the National Assembly passed the law of national unity, which stipulates freedom of belief. Around the same time, Sadat called himself "a Muslim president to a Muslim country" and tried to silence Patriarch Shenouda, whom he viewed as a rebellious leader, by exiling him to a desert monastery (September 1981 to January 1985).

Apart from the question of religion, one of the most unsettling problems in Egypt is the oppressive, antidemocratic character of the state.[18] It can be violent toward groups it tries to control, such as the extremist Muslims. For most of the 1980s and 1990s, it sustained a fragile balance between maintaining peace and simultaneously pleasing both extremist Muslims and the moderate segments of society. The result is a secular state with an Islamic discourse that lacks any creativity when it comes to improving relations between Christians and Muslims. Its singular focus has been on maintaining security by locking up suspected dissidents and then suppressing public debates about the situation. The ongoing court case of Dr Saad Eddin Ibrahim, who is accused of, among other things, "defaming Egypt" with his lectures and writings on religious freedom and minority rights, is a telling example of the government's attitude. Observers of the case agree that the initial sentence of seven years given in 2001 was rather severe, as Dr Ibrahim's greatest infraction was monitoring the 2000 elections.[19]

Confusion about minorities is exacerbated when neither the state nor the Islamic establishment is willing to enhance national unity by producing clear statements or by taking firm stands concerning Christians. The state promotes public displays of "equality" and fiercely denies any problems with the Christian population. Resulting positions are often hyperbolic and counterproductive. We are told, for example, that "since the Byzantine period Copts have … continued to occupy leading posts and offices in the state."[20] In 2000, when the Egyptian government nominated Pope Shenouda III for the UNESCO-Madanjeet Singh Prize for the Promotion of Tolerance and Non-Violence, Egypt's ambassador to the UN, Mrs Tahani Omar, commented that the prize "refutes the claim that discrimination against the Copts is institutionalized."[21] Indeed, it is not institutionalized but ingrained in society. The *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices*, published by the US government, reiterate annually that in Egypt "Women and Christians faced discrimination based on

tradition and some aspects of the law." It confirms this observation with an analysis of the percentage of Copts who have positions of significance within the official state structure. In 2002:

> There were no Christians serving as governors, police commissioners, city mayors, university presidents, or deans. There were few Christians in the upper ranks of the security services and armed forces. Discrimination against Christians also continued in public sector employment, in staff appointments to public universities, in failure [with the exception of one case during the year] to admit Christians into public university training programs for Arabic language teachers that involved study of the Koran, and payment of Muslim imams through public funds [Christian clergy are paid with private church funds].[22]

Unofficially, women and Christians indeed seem to be on the same level when one considers their political representation. Of the 264 seats in the upper house of Parliament (the Shura Council), the president can appoint forty-five members. In 2001 these included eight women and four Christians. Eleven women and seven Christians were in the People's Assembly, two women and two Christians served among the thirty-two Cabinet ministers, and no women or Christians were on the Supreme Court.

Despite the state's positive statement about the Copts, the state allowed preachers such as Sheikh Sha'arawi to use their time on government sponsored television to deliver vicious criticisms of Christianity. In 1982 and 1983, Sha'arawi discussed his derogatory views on the life of Christ and the crucifixion during the primetime slot of Friday afternoon. The government failed to ban his books, which are filled with spiteful language about Christians and are available on every street corner in Cairo. Such discourse poisoned the mindset of those born after the 1960s and exacerbated negative attitudes toward the Copts. Several generations of youngsters grew up hearing and believing that Christians "are not really human," "stink," and "have secret knowledge of magic and possess hidden resources."[23]

When Christians and their property are attacked, the state is slow to provide protection.[24] The lack of a clear penal policy, in combination with oppressive and arbitrary laws, often ends in favour of the aggressors. A case in point is the outcome of a trial in January 2000. After riots had started with a private quarrel between a Muslim and a Copt, twenty-one Copts and one Muslim were murdered

during three days of sectarian violence in the village of Al-Kousheh, 250 miles south of Cairo. (The Muslim was killed by other Muslims who mistook him for a Copt.) The State Security was slow to restore order. Initially, only four of the ninety-six defendants (of whom fifty-eight were Muslims and thirty-eight Christians) received mild punishment, and all were acquitted of murder charges. A Muslim journalist summarized this state of affairs, saying "We [Muslim Egyptians] have a philosophy according to which we burn the Copts' homes and churches and then apologize to their clerics ... Be grateful to Allah that we do not annihilate you!!"[25]

Finally, the state contributes to interreligious strife – especially in the southern provinces, where 60 per cent of the Coptic population lives – by decreeing that civil servants must be employed in their areas of origin. This means that those assuming positions of local power remain embedded in age-old, traditional (some say "tribal") socio-political structures that perpetuate old rivalries and vendettas.

Muslim clerics add to the confusion surrounding their views on Christianity by preaching contradictory opinions on the position of Christians in Islamic countries. Their opinions, of course, depend on their specific interpretations of the authoritative texts of Islam, as evidenced by the disagreement between the Muslim Brotherhood and Sayyid Qutb. Whereas Qutb did not allow Christians full rights to citizenship, the majority of the Muslim Brotherhood considered Christians equal to Muslims, albeit as long as they kept a low profile.[26] Examples of this perspective can be found in the interviews with high-ranking Muslim clerics that appeared in the 24 November 2001 issue of the Egyptian magazine *Al-Musawwar*. In an article entitled "Is the West Still Home to Infidelity?" several authorities on Islam are interviewed about the definition of the term "infidelity."[27] The article has to be read in the context of the 11 September 2001 tragedy in New York.

According to the Islamist-minded Sheikh al-Qardawi, one form of infidelity is "the denial of Islam, and the message of Mohammed. All those who do not believe that Mohammed is Allah's prophet, and that the Qur'an was Allah's words revealed to him, are infidels, even if they are people of the Book, i.e. Jews, or Christians." According to al-Qardawi, their infidelity does not make these people apostates or heathens; it means only that they do not recognize the religion of Mohammed. The sheikh emphasizes that the Qur'an never calls any of its opponents "Infidels." Rather, it refers to the polytheists of

Mecca as "O people" and calls Jews and Christians "O people of the Book." Quoting the Qur'an, he points out that it teaches "infinite tolerance with its conclusion 'you have your religion and I have mine.'" Al-Qardawi's teaching leaves room for multiple interpretations, depending on which of his statements readers focus on.

Later in the interview, Sheikh al-Qardawi states: "As to the non-Muslim in an Islamic nation, they are citizens, sharing the same rights and duties as the Muslims. Their blood, their property, their honor, and sacred places are protected. No one may attack them without reason. Those who do so deserve to be punished in this life and the hereafter."

Others quoted in the article perform similar hermeneutic acrobatics, presenting contradictory opinions within the same interview. Of course, in the Islamic tradition of interpreting the holy texts, it is valid and recommendable to provide different sources and opposing opinions. But it is also customary to provide a conclusive answer. The statements made in the article leave room for multiple interpretations, a potentially dangerous road to follow.[28]

When, by the mid-1990s, the attacks by extremist Muslims began to harm the Egyptian state (with, for example, the collapse of the tourist industry), its attitude toward the Christians changed. It realized that the extremists were directly undermining the state's own systems and started to clamp down viciously on those of the Islamist mindset. The state realized that the benefits of protecting its minority community carried over to its own wellbeing. This led to an intensified campaign not only to arrest extremist elements, but also to address the pressing issue of the national discourse, which was fraught with intolerance of Christians. The state started to monitor the Friday sermons in the mosques and announced that the history books used in the state curriculum would be changed to contain more information about the Coptic community. It also encouraged increased coverage of Christian subjects in the mass media.

Not only did the Coptic Church welcome these initiatives to change the prevailing mindset, but it had been instrumental in preparing the foundations to facilitate their introduction. Through private schools and community-development projects, it had quietly prepared methods of reconciliation that directly served the government. While many Copts had opted to leave Egypt, those who stayed behind never doubted their Egyptian identity and nationality. While their first allegiance was to their church, Copts remained firmly entrenched in the Egyptian soil. Illustrations of their allegiance to

Egypt can be observed in the stands that the Coptic Church takes on issues such as international politics. For example, it supports the official Egyptian position on relations between Palestine and Jerusalem rather than the worldwide Christian allegiance to the holy places in Israel. This means that it excommunicates church members who make the pilgrimage to Israel.

Even Copts in the West see their identity as profoundly Egyptian. In the safety of Western countries, they can criticize the Egyptian government's treatment of their fellow Christians in the homeland. At the same time, they confess their allegiance to Egypt: A young Copt in the US has written, "No Copt is 'outside' Egypt no matter where he or she lives. Egypt is the entity that gives us, the Copts our identity."[29] He expresses the sentiment of many Copts: They will always be Egyptian, even when they are born and raised in the US and have rarely visited their country of ethnic origin.

While seeing themselves as fully Egyptian, Copts have been aware for centuries that there will always be elements within Egypt's society that deny them full rights. Only since the end of the 1980s have Copts started to study and classify the various Muslim attitudes toward them. Acknowledging that the majority of Egypt's Muslims want to maintain peaceful relationships with the Christians, they have more or less isolated the violent groups and focus their energies on developing stronger relations with the tolerant segments of Muslim society.

How, then, should we understand the Copts' place in the Egyptian environment, where moderate and extremist Muslim believers coexist under the governance of the same state? Some – for example, Sana Hasan – compare the Coptic community to a ghetto.[30] In the minds of Copts, this analysis is not only entirely wrong, but even potentially dangerous, as Islamists would prefer to relegate Copts to ghettos. The Coptic condition is not analogous to that of the Jews in premodern Europe, the most salient example of ghetto dwellers. While living in their protective shell, Copts can be found in all strata of Egyptian society, and some have held or now hold high positions of authority. On the surface, their language and physical appearance are similar to those of Muslim Egyptians. The state, in principle, considers them equal to Muslims, and the Constitution guarantees their basic civil rights, which Copts reiterate, promote, and claim. Egyptian state violence does not single out Copts but is also directed at other citizens, such as Muslim extremists and homosexuals.

Copts consider themselves fully Egyptian, but their first and foremost allegiance is not to the state but to their faith. A practising Copt will not convert to Islam for the sake of getting a certain job, for example. In short, it is not the Coptic attitude that changed during the twentieth century but the Muslim environment, which became more Islamist in tone and discourse after a brief period of courtship that lasted only for around three decades. In principle, Copts can negotiate their standing; after all, they have centuries of experience with *dhimmi* status. However, when they become the nation's scapegoat or mistrusted community based solely on the hate talk of Islamists, their position becomes precarious. In the current context, the main problem is that the state ignored the potential threat of Islamism for too long, disregarding incidents of religious strife and allowing Copts to suffer for the sake of maintaining an artificial state of peace. As there were few moderate Muslim Egyptians who had the tools to speak up for the Copts, from the outside there seemed to be an all-out war going on between Christians and Muslims. Copts understood that this was a misrepresentation of reality; in fact, only a segment of the population was actively persecuting them. Copts and the rest of Egypt's Muslims, whatever their thoughts about non-Muslims, lived peacefully side by side. To be left alone, then, is one of the ultimate goals, but Copts do not desire to live in isolation from the rest of society as in a ghetto. Rather, they aspire to be granted the basic human rights that allow individuals freedom of religion, speech, and thought while understanding that not even all Muslim Egyptians can claim these rights. In fact, realizing that these rights would be respected neither by the state nor by most Muslims, the Copts started to build a system that strengthened their position from within. The rest of this chapter discusses how they went about doing this.

INVISIBLE STRENGTH

Between the 1930s and 1950s, the Copts were slowly rendered all but invisible. In particular, extremist forces in the Muslim environment systematically tried to reduce the Copts to the status of nonpersons. More tolerant representatives of society lacked the solidarity needed to counter this development. Whereas, in the past, Copts had been the foremost producers of journals and newspapers, they were slowly erased as actors in the official public media. Nowadays, distribution of Coptic media, journals, newspapers, videos, and cassettes is limited to church circles. National television broadcasts the Coptic Christmas celebrations and some other holy days (especially when Muslim dignitaries visit the patriarch at the cathedral in Cairo). Bishop Mousa, bishop of youth, has calculated that this exposure amounts to five hours a year for Coptic matters in contrast to 3,000 hours of Islamic teachings. Muslim-Christian discussion on television is not allowed. As a result, "A five-year-old Muslim does not know who a Copt is."[31]

Manuel Castells has observed that "nations are constructed in the minds and in collective memory by the sharing of history and political projects."[32] According to Castells, "ethnicity, religion, language, territory *per se* do not suffice to build nations, and induce nationalism. Shared experience does."[33] This experience generates myths and memories that create a shared human experience.[34] Starting with the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1930s, Copts had to come to terms with Egyptians whose experience – memory, history, and political projects – were primarily based not on their Egyptian identity but on a specific interpretation of Islam and the desire for a worldwide *umma* (Muslim community). Copts, of course, are excluded from any of these experiences. In order to create a sense of belonging for its believers, the Coptic Church was forced to construct its own community, which, like that of Islamists, was based on a shared Coptic textual tradition rather than on shared national history and territory. Copts, like Muslims, searched for a cultural authenticity, which they naturally sought primarily in the Christian message, in stories of the saints, in holy places, and in the glorious past.

Copts turned to developing building blocks for survival and divorced their religious realm from the Muslim environment, where they had once hoped to participate at all levels of society. Copts have developed, and continue to stress, their own time and space, which now moves past the spiritual to encompass the physical as well. The Coptic calendar directs one's movement through the year from fasts to feasts. Whereas Islam refers to the universal *umma*, Copts refer to the universe of those who have shared their struggle: martyrs, saints, and other holy persons from the earliest Christian centuries. This universe, however, is firmly rooted in Egyptian space: in the soil that holds the footprints of the Holy Family, on ground that absorbed the blood of the early martyrs, and where the Virgin Mary has regularly made her appearance over the past decades. Copts have also defined their community in exclusive terms, distancing themselves from the

Muslim environment through specific traditions, rituals, and liturgies. In this process, they have also distanced themselves from non-Orthodox Christians, especially the Protestants. I will return to this shortly.

The Coptic world and history were reconstructed as a sacred space and time that have their roots in pre-Islamic Egypt and are free of Muslim influence. Egypt's symbolic geography is now divided into two realms: Muslim and Coptic. The Muslim realm refers to the world with all its trials and temptations; the Coptic realm encompasses the holy and sacred places formed in the footsteps of the Holy Family, the graves of the early Christian martyrs, the saints, and the saintly church leaders who are alive today. This vision of transcendence is congruent with an Orthodox theology that sees humans as angels in the flesh all striving to get one foot into heaven before death. In this vision, the church victorious – those in heaven who have overcome strife and temptations – and the church on earth are one body. The prime centres to initially teach this new vision of a Coptic identity were the Sunday schools, which started to flourish in the 1950s. But before considering this aspect of Coptic identity, I will first look at where it converges with its Islamic environment.

MARKERS OF IDENTITY: EGYPTIAN COPTIC

Much is said about the experiences Copts share with Muslims: They speak Arabic, eat the same food, and share work space, and many Copts are just as poor as Muslims or have the same trouble finding jobs after graduation or apartments when they want to get married. Many Egyptians like to go on pilgrimage and share folk-religion practices. Cross-visits to graves of saints happen when they are assumed to confer benefits regardless of religion. All celebrate the Shamm al-Nasim holiday the day after Easter and other national holidays. Coptic church services are held on Fridays and Sundays, and the weekend spans from Thursday to Sunday for most Egyptians. Although there are profound differences in the family laws of Muslims and Christians, views on women are similar. Muslim and Coptic boys and girls are circumcised, and seventh-day rituals are held at birth and fortieth-day commemorations at death.[35] Families of both religions prefer to select spouses for their children.

What seems similar on the surface is actually marked off by subtle boundaries in orientation and standards that accumulate into markers of Copticness.[36] Dress has become a marker of identity. Even where rural and poor Copts and Muslims still dress in similar attire, Copts display subtle markers of Christianity, such as a small cross or a pendant with a saint's picture. Copts always have the cross tattooed on one wrist, which can be hidden if necessary. They carry pictures of saints in their wallets and on their key chains. Names often point to religious identity. Most significant for Coptic identity is the move away from mixed experience to more specifically Coptic or Muslim expressions. A young Copt has exclaimed: "We do not speak the same 'Arabic,' … Muslims can tell I am a Copt after two minutes of talking with me."[37] Copts modify the Islamic greetings; for example, "*Al-Salaamu 'alaikum*" (peace be upon you) becomes "*Salaamu lakum*" (peace to you). In shock or surprise, Muslims cry out "*Bism-Allah*" (in the name of God) or "*Mashaa-Allah*" (what God wills), while Christians say "*Bism-Al-Salib*" (in the name of the cross). Copts say "*rabbina*" (our Lord) instead of "Allah," and on Christian feasts they greet each other with phrases such as the Greek Easter greeting "*Christos Anesti*" (Christ is risen).

Copts do not sing the same songs as Muslims. They might listen to them in mixed company, but most Copts sing or chant Christian songs in unmixed company. Of course, they do not watch any of the 3,000 hours per year devoted to Islamic matters on television. They have their own body of literature, movies, and videos that are circulated through church channels and are hardly available outside those closed circuits. Copts eat the same food as other Egyptians, but dishes have different meanings for them. They follow a liturgical calendar that includes around 200 days of abstinence from the consumption of animal products and certain additional types of food as well as from sexual intercourse. Copts associate beans, lentils, and other legumes with the preparations for Advent and Lent, two of the fourteen feasts celebrated by the Church. For Muslim Egyptians, these foods signify simple, local dishes that form the principal source of nourishment for the poor.

THE REVIVAL

An increased focus on church life, which started at the time of Patriarch Kyrillos VI, "christianized" Coptic cultural and social expressions. This process was not serendipitous but reflected a concerted effort – orchestrated by Coptic clergy and devoted laity, especially

youth leaders – to strengthen the Coptic Orthodox identity. They were dissatisfied with what they considered the backward and lackadaisical mindset of their church leaders. As the revival process was centred on renewing the church leadership, the ensuing process has been called "clericalization," which began with clergy becoming involved in activities outside the liturgy: clubs, summer camps, and excursions organized by various churches. A priest would organize comprehensive programs of activities intended to make his church into a spiritual and social respite. At the same time, lay workers involved in the numerous activities were consecrated and incorporated into the official church structure.[38] This development resulted in and was facilitated by a swelling number of new monks and nuns entering the monasteries. At the basis of this process was the Sunday School Movement, which, from its inception in 1918 until 1938, was conducted entirely by middle-class lay people. During the 1960s, these individuals were gradually incorporated into the official church hierarchy, many becoming bishops or prominent priests. These multilayered efforts resulted in what is now considered the revival or reformation of the Coptic Orthodox Church.

The Coptic Church's revival expressed itself in the renewal and strengthening of three main areas: the pedagogical, the pastoral, and the monastic. These areas touch upon the whole of Coptic life – at home and in church, from cradle to grave – and shape the Coptic identity. The pedagogical revival was spearheaded by the Sunday School Movement, the pastoral revival expressed itself in increased involvement in economic and social-development work, and the monastic revival resulted in an increased focus on spirituality and Coptic identity. When the Sunday schools managed to inspire young Copts to join the monasteries, the monasteries became the heart of the church revival. Monks and nuns became producers of spiritual and religious literature and served as guardians of the Coptic symbols and traditions. They were a rich well of human resources with their experience in Sunday schools, professional diplomas, and advanced university degrees.

This was not the first attempt to revive the church. Since the nineteenth century, the renewal of Coptic church-life had been attempted several times. The genius of Patriarch Kyrillos VI (1959–71) drew these scattered attempts together into a single focus. After independence from Britain in 1922, more Egyptians had access to education that, by the 1950s, had started to yield new cadres of highly

educated Copts. Kyrillos VI drew the brightest graduates into church service. This move was revolutionary since Coptic clergy tended to be poorly educated, giving prevalence to the ideal of the simple, unlettered desert monk. Kyrillos VI's brilliance lay in choosing the monk as one of the central symbols with which to revive the life of the church, infusing the notions of "simple" and "unlettered" with a spiritual meaning. The monk was simple and humble in his spiritual life; however, similar to many of the early church fathers, he had deep knowledge of the Christian texts and tradition. Thus he vested the younger generation of monks who came to the monastery, graduate degrees in hand, with the authority needed to become the leaders of the current revival. Some of the most prominent among them are Patriarch Shenouda III (formerly bishop of education); Bishop Samuel of the Bishopric for Social and Ecumenical Affairs (killed at the same time as President Sadat in 1981); Father Matta al-Meskin, abbot of the Monastery of St Macarius and a prolific writer on theology and spirituality; and Anba Athanasius (d. 2000), bishop of Beni Suef.

The lay person Habib Girgis started the Sunday School Movement in 1918 because Coptic children lacked Christian education in the general Khedive schools. He patterned the educational approach on the Protestant Sunday schools. By the 1950s, several former students from these schools, men and women, were finishing their university educations in Cairo. Their desire to apply academic knowledge for benefit of the church translated into new curricula for the Sunday schools. Such initiatives proved vital since Coptic children had to participate in lessons on Islam at school beginning in 1957. (This was also the case in Christian schools since these were under the supervision of the government). As challenges increased for Coptic youth in public high schools and universities during the 1980s, the Sunday schools appealed to them with special groups and classes.

To provide adolescents and young adults with a place of rescue and reflection, the Bishopric for Youth was set up in 1980. Its leader, Bishop Mousa, developed a holistic model for educating and entertaining Coptic youth: Via clubs, retreats, vacations, study groups, seminars, and the top priorities of marriage counselling and preventing Coptic-Muslim dating, he catered to needs that could not be met elsewhere in society.

In the bishopric, young Copts can discuss their problems and situate themselves in their Christian vocation. Copts believe that

adversity is sent by God and that preparation for martyrdom is necessitated by such adversity. In Coptic theology, Islam is a temptation that, if resisted, leads one to self-improvement. In an interview about the challenge of the Islamic environment, Patriarch Shenouda answered: "The difficulties around us create a deeper spiritual life: prayers, fasting, contact with God, dependence on God. We feel a deep need for the divine help."[39]

LITTLE ANGELS: THE CHILDREN

Children are the building blocks of every church.[40] In order to prepare and protect future generations, the Coptic Church started to develop special rituals and educational materials for them. Copts consider children to be pure and holy beings who become full church members when baptized. Before "graduating" to the status of married person, the church guides them through the rites of passage and in Christian education. During the past three decades, new rituals have been created or old ones reinvented to underscore Coptic identity. Seven days after birth, a child receives its name in a ceremony practised by Copts and Muslims, the *subu'*. At the same time, Copts hold another ritual of blessing that derives from a Jewish Temple rite and commemorates Jesus' presentation in the Temple when he was eight days old. This uniquely Christian *salawat al-tisht* ritual – the prayers over the washbasin – has gained in popularity and is considered a confirmation of the child's Christian identity. At baptism the child becomes a full member of the church. Gender segregation becomes apparent here, as the child is often baptized when the mother is no longer ritually unclean: forty days after birth for boys and eighty days for girls. The male child is circumcised during the first eight days, whereas this operation is performed on girls between the ages of seven and twelve. At a young age, the cross is tattooed on the child's right wrist. This is the honourable and most pronounced sign of Coptic identity, being both permanent and visible, unless covered by a long sleeve.

After baptism the child officially belongs to "the bosom of the church." Its mother receives instruction on raising a Christian child, and in some cases a deaconess is assigned as godmother to assist with Christian upbringing. Between ages two and eighteen, the child will attend Sunday-school classes with its peers. The goal is to raise a generation of new Sunday-school teachers, monks, priests, nuns, deacons, and believers who, if need be, are willing to die for their faith. In an aggressive program of church socialization, families whose children fail to come to church are visited by volunteers and offered rides in the church vehicles. The child participates in all church celebrations, learning how to venerate saints, hearing their stories, and learning their feast days by heart. Children are present during the long services, which can last over five hours and always end with the Sacrament of Holy Communion. Many churches now conduct children's services parallel to their official services, in which children follow the same rituals but use simpler language.

In Sunday school, teachers discuss the Islamic faith with the children, tackling difficult topics such as the Trinity, so that they can answer questions posed by an adverse society. A sense of Coptic pride is instilled in the children that can be called upon if they feel discriminated against. The martyr is held up as the ultimate model of faith, and the stories of modern martyrs killed in recent clashes point at a higher goal. The Norwegian anthropologist Nora Stene once heard a Sunday-school teacher ask a group of four-year-olds if they were afraid to die as martyrs, the answer was, in one voice, "NO!"[41] The positive aspects of life are always stressed. Dwelling on violence and unpleasant incidents is considered unproductive, so children are also encouraged to hold an optimistic and unconditional belief in the power of prayer.

The contents of the curriculum are reflected in the topics discussed in *Magalet Madaris Al-Ahad* (the Sunday-school journal). Circulating since 1947, it covers themes such as spiritual and biblical reflections, essays on dogmatics, history, liturgy, sacred music, monasticism, the saints, Coptic celebrations, the Coptic status in Egyptian society, and current events within the church.[42] Practising the Coptic faith requires a vast knowledge of ritual, dogma, sacraments, the saints, prayers, and fasting. Texts from the Bible that are used in liturgy and prayer must be learned by heart. Sunday school is the only place to receive this knowledge, and in some ways the curriculum resembles that of the *madrasah* (traditional Islamic school). The younger generation that benefited from this system is now more adept in their Christian knowledge than their parents. Consequently, parents are at times considered "slack," or "not Coptic enough."

THE PASTORAL REVIVAL

In addition to resulting in more ordained clergy, the pastoral revival led to a strong youth ministry and a more prominent role for women

in the church. The Bishopric for Youth, led by Bishop Mousa, was founded in 1980 to meet the needs of university students confronted by aggressive Islamist activities that encroached on their private existence. Coptic students created a system of groups or families *(usar)* to serve the Sunday schools and to meet on campus for Bible study and prayer. In the mid-seventies, Islamists started to hinder Christian gatherings, and they would force dorm residents to attend communal prayer five times a day. In the bishopric, students found not only a safe discussion forum, but also a platform for mobilizing people with a shared agenda.

The work of the bishopric flows through so-called "action groups," each focusing on activities ranging from Bible study and counselling to the renewal of the arts, the study of atheism, the study of citizenship, and research into societal problems such as drugs. The network of this bishopric reaches from the patriarch to priests in remote villages. It strengthens youth but also works as a catalyst in times of crisis – for example, when a Coptic woman wants to marry a Muslim man (the reverse happens less frequently due to the specific Islamic rule forbidding Muslim women to marry outside their faith). If the woman still wants to marry the Muslim man after the action group has monitored her, the group immediately finds her a Christian husband. If the woman was tempted into a relationship outside the church because of poverty, a fully furnished flat is provided. Once married, an intense period of counselling is undertaken to "build up her spirituality." If the group is too late and a mixed marriage has already taken place, the group will not sever contacts with the woman in case she ever desires to return to the church.[43]

From these action groups new movements emerged that now hold the potential to reshape the Coptic position in Egyptian society. The Coptic Centre for Social Studies, founded in 1994, is the brainchild of Samir Morqos, who started as a member of the so-called intellectual-development group. This group organized regular meetings with Muslim leaders to give a voice to moderate Muslims "who are not organized, unlike fanatic Muslims." The Coptic Centre now focuses on issues of citizenship, ecumenical relations, and contemporary social concerns, each of which will be discussed below.

The Sunday School Movement indirectly generated the restoration or renewal of powerful Coptic institutions and symbols, the most powerful being total dedication to the church. When, in the 1940s, its teachers searched for ways to convert their voluntary teachings on

Thursdays, Fridays, and Sundays into full-time occupations, the idea of dedication *(takris)* was born. Some of these teachers left their secular jobs to become the equivalent of deacons. Each received a blessing from the church and took a vow of obedience and celibacy that was not binding. Many went on to become monks, while others married, pursuing careers within the church. Combined efforts of the monastics and the "semimonastics" led to new developments in the fields of Coptic icon painting, church music, art, linguistics, archeology, and the study of patristics. These were acts of charity; all those involved had taken a vow of poverty or lived in a perpetual state of frugality.

An active role for women who opted for a career within the church was rediscovered through the introduction of *takris*. Until 1965 women who wished a life in church service rather than marriage had no other option but to become cloistered, contemplative nuns. The pastoral renewal provided Coptic Orthodox women with the opportunity to take on active ministry in the church again. The Sunday School Movement led to the consecration of deaconesses, an office that had existed in the early church but had gradually disappeared, probably due to the male hierarchy and the Muslim environment.[44] In 1965 Anba Athanasius established the first community for women devoted to active church ministry in Beni Suef. This community became a source of leadership for women and provided a model of relief work open to Christians and Muslims.

These various developments were consolidated into successful operations by a rapid increase in the number of religious and lay leaders who had solid educations, both professionally and in Coptic theology. Patriarch Shenouda, in particular, focused on building new seminaries throughout Egypt in order to strengthen the church with leaders well versed in its teachings. Today around 20 per cent of those graduating are women who work as deaconesses or Sunday-school leaders.[45] The brightest of the seminary students are encouraged to consider entering the monastery. A large pool of monks with advanced degrees in theology enabled Patriarch Shenouda to ordain more bishops than the Church had ever employed. When he became the patriarch, there were twenty-eight bishops. By the year 2000 this number exceeded eighty and was still rising. The extra bishops allow the church to divide dioceses into many subdistricts, guaranteeing more intense supervision of priests, better pastoral care, and closer monitoring of the Coptic theology and doctrine taught to parishioners. The bishops also organize activities of reconciliation between

Muslims and Copts, such as shared dinners to break the fast during the Muslim month of Ramadan.

THE MONASTIC REVIVAL: EVERY COPT A MONK

Traditionally, the Coptic leaders – bishops and the patriarch – begin their careers in one of the remote desert monasteries. Monks were and are the bearers of Coptic faith and tradition. Since the beginning of Christianity, stories have abounded of monks fighting devils in the desert. The core of a monk's identity is that of the spiritual man who keeps the tradition alive, alone if need be. Because of such monks, Egyptian monasticism never died out.

The heart of monastic life is the daily Eucharist, during which Copts confirm the core of their belief with the words "I believe, I believe, I believe and confess to the last breath, that this is the life-giving body that your only-begotten Son, our Lord, God and Savior Jesus Christ took from our lady ... St. Mary."[46] Copts believe that at the time of Communion, angels descend to hold the vessels with the bread and wine. Only baptized Copts may join in this holiest moment of the Eucharist. Communion excludes all who do not hold the Coptic theological stand (Muslims, Protestants, and Catholics, among others), cementing the bond between church and community. Allegedly, Kyrillos VI could discern when Muslims or non-Coptic Orthodox Christians tried to join Communion. Thus he preserved the holy body and blood from defilement by those not holding the proper beliefs. His discernment also reenforced the immeasurable distance between the core beliefs of Muslims and Christians and between the beliefs of Copts and Christians of other denominations.

Regular participation in the Eucharist, then, strengthened the community's spiritual and communal bonds, defining the borders between Copts and non-Copts. In order to revive the Coptic community, Kyrillos VI focused on intensifying the celebration of the Eucharist. Being a hands-on person, he travelled from village to village waking up local priests and convincing them to celebrate the lengthy liturgy, which can take up to six hours and, if necessary, be celebrated alone. The belief was that if one sanctified the environment, the parishioners would come. In 1959 the so-called rural diaconal project was launched that sent students of the Clerical College to villages that were without a church. These students provided basic education in the Christian faith and simple social services. Priests followed with portable altars to celebrate the Eucharist and to baptize children.[47]

Daily celebration of the Eucharist has always been a signpost of monastic life. Prayers of the Hours are expanded by continuous prayers and praises for the saints. These three monastic practices were introduced to regular church members through little booklets, sermons, and visits to monasteries. Bishop Athanasius compiled the stories of the saints in *Garden of the Monks*. Father Matta al-Meskin started his profuse publishing career with booklets about every aspect of Coptic life. His journal, *Morqos*, published by the Monastery of St Macarius, became one of the main vehicles of the Coptic spiritual revival. Bishops, furthermore, write spiritual reflections in the national church bulletin, *Kiraza*, while Patriarch Shenouda reiterates his teachings in a weekly public Bible study complemented by myriad publications with titles such as "The Release of the Spirit" and "Comparative Theology." Spiritual formation comprises the core of Coptic education. It is taught that strengthening one's spiritual life is a way to escape human vice and the deficiencies of the world. Renewal of the spirit is considered the only means of coping with possible hostility. Even lay people are encouraged to develop a monastic attitude in everyday life.

The ultimate examples of those who persevered in the demanding ascetic and spiritual exercises are the saints. Their presence looms large in the monasteries. Their relics grant protection and blessing. Living saints sustain believers with advice, often based on the gift of clairvoyance developed by a lifetime spent in prayer. Saints protect the monastery, the Copts, and the faith. Both dead and living saints attract large crowds who visit the monasteries for refuge from the world outside and to "stock up" on the protective power of blessing. The veneration of saints culminates in the yearly *maulids*, celebrated all over Egypt. Originally these folk celebrations were a combination of Christian rituals and an array of other events, such as fairs with merry-go-rounds, story tellers, and puppeteers. They were equally popular with Muslims, who shared in the amusement, the blessings, and the occasional miracle of healing.

In line with church renewal, *maulids* have been stripped of non-Christian elements and turned into polished Christian meetings orchestrated by church officials. Pilgrims nowadays are guided in their prayers and given booklets with the "definitive biographies" of

the saints. These contain the proper songs to praise and commemorate each saint *(tamgid)*, thus transforming myth into fact. The transformation of folk events was also influenced by reformist Islam, which attacks the veneration of saints, regarding it as un-Islamic.

Copts living in the metropolitan areas of Cairo and Alexandria are receiving more attention from the church hierarchy since many are from the countryside and have only recently settled in large cities. Although hard data are lacking, this part of the Coptic population is considered most at risk of conversion to Islam. Thus the church has initiated special services, such as counselling, relief drives, and vocational training.

During the 1990s, as part of this new focus, a new holy place came into existence on the outskirts of Cairo itself in the midst of the poorest Coptic population: the ministry of Father Samaan on the Muqattam hill. His church is situated in the middle of the *zabbalin* (garbage collectors). Every Thursday, Father Samaan holds meetings of prayer and praise that also attract thousands of middle-class Copts, who drive up from the city. For one night Copts escape the anxieties of daily life to join the extensive singing sessions. They feel spiritually uplifted, and the strong stench of garbage in their cars as they return home allows them to identify with the poor. Father Samaan has gained a reputation as an exorcist and deeply spiritual person. He started his ministry on the Muqattam hill after experiencing an inspiration based on Acts 18:9, 10.[48] The location is laden with significance. Today Copts hold emotional religious gatherings where Khalif Mu'izz challenged the Copts in the tenth century to prove the truth of the Bible verse stating that faith can move mountains. According to the tradition, the Muqattam hill moved four kilometres after several days of fervent prayer by the holy patriarch and a tanner called Samaan.[49] The earnest belief of the contemporary Father Samaan is that miracles abound, especially in times of adversity.

By means of the monasteries and holy places, old and new, a part of Egypt has been claimed and appropriated as Coptic and infused with a spirit of holiness and chosenness. Coptic believers shuttle between the desert and the inhabited world, between physical rituals and spiritual practices, from home to church. Both living and dead have a place in this universe, and these movements are protected and guided by the church hierarchy, which sustains Copts in their daily struggle, strengthens their Coptic identity, and provides meaning in times of adversity. Copts live in two worlds: the Coptic universe, where they can rejoice in their symbols, songs, and beliefs; and the Egyptian world, where a Copt covers the cross on his or her wrist. Each world has its own language and symbols, which Copts learn to keep separate from an early age. They are like aliens in their own country, which has been overtaken by a majority that fails to understand the Coptic core beliefs and rituals. It is a dual existence that some cannot tolerate. They trade it for another type of duality: living as a Copt in the West.

THE LANDS OF EMIGRATION AND THE OTHER CHURCHES

Having churches outside Egypt has added a whole new dimension to Coptic identity. Copts looking in from the outside started to question age-old rituals and to regard the forbearance of those suffering in Egypt as too meek a reaction to what in terms of universal laws could be considered acts of blatant violence and terrorism. Emboldened by freedom of expression in their new homelands, the Copts of the diaspora have become openly critical of the Egyptian government. This has not been well received by those remaining in Egypt, who often feel exposed to risk by those who have forgotten that the Egyptian political climate is not free.

The Coptic Church takes pride in the rapid development of communities outside Egypt. Since 1971 the number of Coptic churches in the West has grown from only 7 to over 180. Another source of pride is the active mission that the Coptic Church has developed in Africa, setting up churches from Sudan to South Africa.[50] Prosperity in the West flows back into Egypt, where the contributions of emigrants have become influential in promoting the cultural and academic life of the Copts. The *Coptic Encyclopedia*, for example, was the brainchild of Aziz Souriyal Atiya, a US-based Copt who dedicated most of his career as a historian to the preservation of the Coptic heritage. A group of wealthy Copts from the US funded the establishment of a program for Coptic studies at the American University of Cairo, while the Association of St Mark dedicates itself to the publication of books in Arabic and English about Coptic history, art, and culture.

Using new modes of communication, the Copts abroad have taken on a specific role in defending the Coptic community in Egypt. Through websites and pamphlets, they keep alive the memory of violence past and current, documenting in detail every incident of

anti-Coptic behaviour. They also provide information on other groups experiencing discrimination in Muslim countries, including Berbers, and on the plight of Christians in Indonesia, Pakistan, and the Philippines. In this way, the Copts have joined the global community of those suffering for faith and ethnicity.

Some perceive this new development as long-lost momentum regained. Well remembered are the days before the Council of Chalcedony in 451, when the Coptic Church was a main player in the ecumenical scene. After it split from the Imperial Church and was cut off from the rest of Christianity, it fell into a state of oblivion. Now the days when Coptic leaders were shining stars in the Ecumenical Councils are being relived. The US-based website for *Copts Digest* proudly remembers: "During the first Ecumenical Council held in the Nicea (321) with 318 bishops the Church of Alexandria had a leading role through its Pope Alexandros 'the most knowledgeable and educated,' and his deacon, Athanasius, who wrote the Creed adopted by the Council."[51]

Being Coptic means accepting the whole package. Christians of other, non-Orthodox denominations wishing to marry a Copt must accept rebaptism. As the Coptic Church strengthens its identity, voices are more often heard that disapprove of marriages between Copts and Catholics or Protestants. Recently a Coptic priest in the Cairo suburb of Ma'adi started an initiative to visit all Copts living in a mixed marriage in order to impress upon them that their marriages were "invalid and thus they were living in sin."[52] In a similar vein, a rural priest near Minya threatened his parishioners in February 2000 with excommunication if they watched the visit of Pope John Paul II on television. Unlike the *umma*, the Coptic community is self-contained and not inclined to actively link up with what could be a formidable ally: the worldwide Christian community. Although there are official ecumenical relations (the Coptic Church is a member of the World Council of Churches), Christians of other denomination are noticed mostly when, like the Copts, they suffer from Muslim violence.

With respect to Coptic nationalism, it appears that the first loyalty of the Copts is to the church, which directs not only the spiritual but also the national allegiance of the community. Coptic protest – for example, against the government – takes place under the aegis of the patriarch. Their second loyalty is to the Egyptian state and environment, not to a worldwide Christian community. Thus Copts are loyal, first and foremost, to their Muslim compatriots; others, even non-Coptic Christians, rank a distant second. A recent example of this loyalty emerged when Copts joined the rest of Egypt in protesting the US invasion of Iraq. This loyalty to Egypt is part of the Copts' success at integrating into Egyptian society on their own terms. If Copts were to become semi-Western Christians, for example, their battle for acceptance would surely be lost.

TOWARD A NEW IDENTITY

Coptic self-renewal serves as a model illustration of Anthony D. Smith's theory regarding the potential for an ethnic minority's revival. Coptic religious reform is now firmly situated within the Egyptian culture. Reforming the church did not mean withdrawal from society but allowed for a deeper participation in the life of Egypt. Rural-development projects, for example, allow Copts and Muslims to work together.

Coptic self-renewal was so successful that it created a new, proactive identity that Manuel Castells calls the "identity for resistance." He discerns three forms of identity building that contribute to the development of societies and nationalism: (1) the legitimizing identity that generates civil society and in due time takes over the state without a direct assault; (2) the identity for resistance that forms the basis for building communes or communities; and (3) the project identity that is formed when social actors build new identities that redefine their positions in society. As an example of the third identity, Castells mentions women's rights groups that have left the trenches of resistance to challenge an overwhelming patriarchal structure. Castells sees the identity based on resistance as the most important.[53] Only briefly in their history were Copts allowed to participate in building Egyptian civil society. For the longest part of their existence, they were in resistance and forced to build their own community, with the church and the sacred as safe haven.

Peaceful resistance through prayer has partially transformed the Coptic community into a nonviolent civil-rights movement similar to Mahatma Gandhi's. They have no territorial ambitions – after all, the whole of Egypt is their Motherland – and they ask only for the right to be visible as Christians. With the problems created by Islamists, Egypt knows that, in an odd way, it needs this type of peaceful community. As I noted, the state has started to use certain occasions

to introduce modest improvements to interreligious relationships. The millennium celebrations and the ensuing visit of Pope John Paul II in February 2000 were opportune moments to put the Coptic community in the limelight. The Egyptian minister of tourism produced a booklet called *The Holy Family in Egypt*, stating in bold script that "the unity of the Egyptian people, both Moslems and Copts, is the backbone of the entity of the Nation-State of Egypt." The visit of Pope John Paul II received elaborate descriptions in the media and several hours of television coverage. After this visit, state-controlled media started to allow a few more hours for Coptic news, views, festivals, and religious rituals.

Other moves by the government to improve the position of the Copts have included:

- allowing for increased Coptic participation in public life, culminating in the election to Parliament of three Copts in 2000, fifty years after the last public election of a Copt, and continued appointments by the president of an additional number of Copts to Parliament
- after four decades, the return of Church endowments confiscated under Nasser
- revision of schools' curricula to render them more sensitive to Coptic concerns, culture, and history and to improve relationships between Muslim and Christian children[54]

As with other developments described in this chapter, these were based on careful preparations. Copts realized that the key to regaining a position in Egyptian national awareness was to create a real dialogue focused on social and cultural issues. Dwelling on dogmatic questions of the differences between Islam and Christianity had never been a productive approach to dialogue between the two faiths. In 1985 Patriarch Shenouda started to hold breaking-of-the-fast *(iftar)* gatherings during the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan, reviving an old tradition of friends visiting each other to create a spirit of love as remembered by Dr Rushdi Said, whose words open this chapter. The gatherings became successful all over Egypt.

The Coptic Centre for Social Studies focused on creating solid foundations for the question of Coptic citizenship by producing three books about this topic, authored by teams of Copts and Muslims.[55] The books address in detail the Egyptian, Islamic, and constitutional bases for citizenship. A division of this project researched the disastrous results of the 1995 elections, when not one of the many Coptic candidates managed to win.

To create a new, less fanatic generation of Muslims that might serve as a buffer zone, Bishop Athanasius of Beni Suef started to build one school a year in his diocese, which was the largest in Egypt before he passed away and it was subdivided. The goal is to create a space where Muslim and Christian children can learn together and develop a spirit of friendship. The novelty of the schools is their English-only curriculum and that, even though the schools are private, children of poor families are allowed to attend, paying only a nominal fee for tuition. The long waiting lists show that the schools are a solution for many Muslim parents who realize that creating a climate of bigotry does not improve their children's condition in any way.

The bishop for youth, Anba Mousa, encouraged young Copts to meet with Muslims during interfaith discussions that started in 1985 and intensified after 1989. "There is a gap we have to cross; we should not sit and wait but move with Christian love. Push the young Copts to be among their Muslim brothers so that they do not become isolated but find their place in groups and clubs. If we close up and withdraw, we are going to lose."[56] A special subject addressed by the Bishopric for Youth is how to cope with extremism. The bishopric has prepared a model that divides Muslims into five categories: representatives of the government (i.e., the Islamic state), liberal Muslims, moderate Muslims, extremist Muslims, and terrorist Muslims. Relationships with the government take place via the Coptic hierarchy, guided by the patriarch. The dialogue with liberal and moderate Muslims is a continual process that never really stopped and finds expression in scores of official discussions and unofficial grassroots events. According to the bishopric, it is useless to waste energy on terrorists since it is part of their agenda and identity that they refuse to converse with those who are not Muslim. Muslims of extremist tendencies, however, receive the bishopric's close attention. As they do not comprise a homogenous group, it is considered useful to seek out those who are willing to engage in dialogue with Christians. Since the participants in the interfaith activities are already bound together by their youth, they have a foundation for mutual regard. Moreover, they constitute Egypt's future and thus can never be ignored.

There are, however, limits to Coptic interest in dialogue with Muslims. The Catholic priest Yuhanna Kulta, on the occasion of Ramadan,

wrote an article in which he praised the Prophet Muhammad. While receiving praise from Muslim sides, some of the Coptic comments were vicious. In Coptic eyes, Father Kulta had crossed the line that keeps the two faiths apart. In an interview I had with him shortly after this article appeared, he defended his writing as follows: "This was the first time that a Christian in Egypt spoke about the Prophet Muhammad in a positive way. After a while my article will be understood. You never have to talk with Muslims about the divinity of Christ, you talk about love. Islam can never replace Christianity since the Christian religion is based on God's love."[57]

Another youth-generated project studies how culture influences Coptic and Muslim patterns of thought concerning women. Headed by Vivian Fouad, the project members, comprising both Copts and Muslims, analyzed sermons and writings of 700 Christian and Muslim leaders, such as Patriarch Shenouda, Father Matta al-Meskin, and Sheikhs al-Azhar and Sha'arawi. The team's motivation was its dissatisfaction that "current discourse assigns women specific roles only and is limited to the middle-class level."[58]

The preliminary findings of the study are that there are fundamentally few differences in men's attitudes toward women, whether the men are Copt or Muslim. Armed with these results, a team has started to address the custom of female circumcision, or Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). The entrenchment of the traditional mindset they are battling became evident when they presented the project to Patriarch Shenouda. When Vivian revealed that it was her dream to ban the practice of FGM, he asked her "Why?"

The main aim of the project is to fill the vacuum that exists in Egyptian feminism and to contribute to the creation of a religious, feminist discourse for women. The leading Muslim feminists are mostly secular, and few are working on the development of an indigenous Muslim discourse. The Coptic Church does not have feminist theologians, although several women have graduated from the Coptic seminaries. According to Vivian and her team, a lack of fundamental knowledge on both sides about the place of women in the respective religions obstructs fruitful dialogue on the status of women.

CONCLUSION

Although outwardly impeccable citizens, in reality Copts live in a state of resistance that is peaceful but not passive: They resist being pushed from Egypt's national scene, and they resist their religion being rendered obscure by intolerant Muslims trying to enforce their claim to the truth. While outwardly accommodating the Egyptian environment, Copts hold on to their Christian identity, which is anchored in the reinvented universe of the Coptic Church and its beliefs. Their unique tradition, which goes back two millennia, provides the signposts for the Coptic map of Egypt.

In particular, the tradition of stressing the spiritual life has provided the roots for the Coptic renewal. Modelling themselves on the holy men (and women) of early Christianity, who could look beyond the visible now and here, Coptic Church leaders such as Patriarchs Kyrillos VI and Shenouda III, Bishops Samuel and Athanasius, and Father Matta al-Meskin searched for inspiration beyond the obvious to recapture the vigour their church once had. They could do this because they were no longer reduced to the state of *dhimmis* and because they had the intellectual and professional tools. Copts regard the adversities with which they must live as a blessing in disguise. Remembering that their church produced its best thinkers, theologians, and desert fathers in times of duress, they identify with its leaders of old, such as Clement of Alexandria (b. circa 150), Athanasius (patriarch, 328–73), and the famous desert father St Anthony (250–356). The names of the contemporary leaders express their desire to emulate the courage and creativity of these early fathers.

By fortifying their counteridentity with scores of spiritual, social, ritual, and educational initiatives, Copts have succeeded in giving their existence in Egypt new meaning. Just as the early fathers were unbendable concerning their doctrines but flexible concerning methods, Copts have borrowed new models of teaching and grassroots development work from Protestants and the West, they have allowed women to participate in the new projects, and they do not shy away from using the newest technologies. Nevertheless, even though tradition is reinvented, holy sites are rediscovered, and new hagiographies regularly surface, the core message of Coptic Christianity may not be tampered with. Copts are, for example, not allowed to read the popularized translation of the Bible: the Good News version.

Whether the Coptic project to find full equality in Egypt will ever succeed depends on many variables, the most important being the introduction of true democracy. For Copts to leave Egypt all together has never been an option. They belong to the Egyptian soil and need it as much as Egypt needs them. Thus, if the law of the land cannot

protect them against hate crimes and bigotry, the most powerful defence the Copts have is to regain their space in Egypt's public life, to keep the lines of communication with Muslims open, to try to change the biased public mindset, and to provide alternative models that are beneficial for both groups. It is true that Coptic children will never stop singing the words from a popular song "I am a Christian, a Christian ... [Look at] the tattoo on my hand!" but this tattoo will hinder the Copts' full integration only as long as Egypt does not have a fully democratic system that guarantees freedom of expression and belief for all.

NOTES

1 Interview with Dr Rushdi Said (born in the 1920s), Cairo, 26 February 2000.

2 Interview with Catholic bishop Yuhanna Qulta (born in the 1930s), Cairo, 15 February 1998.

3 Interview with Sister Rauth (born in the 1950s), an active Coptic Orthodox nun, Cairo, 18 February 1998.

4 Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity*, 33.

5 "Copts" here are the members of the Coptic Orthodox Church, the original, indigenous church of Egypt. There are a small number of Protestants and Catholics in Egypt who share in the fate of the Orthodox Copts. Their churches are, however, of foreign origin.

6 Nabil 'abd el-Fattah (editor-in-chief) and Diaa Rashwan (managing editor), *The State of Religion in Egypt Report 1995: Summary.*

7 An exception is the book by S.S. Hasan, *Christians versus Muslims in Modern Egypt.*

8 *General Census of Population and Housing, all Egypt.* See also E.J. Chitham, *The Coptic Community in Egypt.*

9 It is almost impossible to verify this number, as it is based on interviews with church workers, bishops, and observers of the Coptic Orthodox Church such as the Jesuit father Maurice Martin. All agree that there are conversions to Islam due to intermarriage and because poor Copts from rural areas who move to the cities are recruited by Muslim groups with promises of work and prosperity.

10 Smith, *National Identity*, 21, 62.

11 Ibid., 35–7. The term "portable, protective shell" was coined by Smith, 62.

12 See Hasan, *Christians versus Muslims*, 32–53; and R.B.L. Carter, *The Copts in Egyptian Politics, 1918–1952.*

13 Aziz Souriyal Atiya begins his life work, the *Coptic Encyclopedia*, by stressing the Coptic pharaonic roots (lxi-lxiii). Around 90 per cent of the current Egyptian population is of Coptic origin either through intermarriage between Copts and Arab occupiers or because many Egyptians' Coptic ancestors converted to Islam.

14 Maurice S.J. Martin, "The Coptic-Muslim Conflict in Egypt," 38.

15 Hasan, *Christians versus Muslims*, 105.

16 For lists of the various incidents from the 1970s to the mid-1980s, see Nadia Ramsis Farah, *Religious Strife in Egypt*. See also Hasan, *Christians versus Muslims.*

17 Gilles Kepel, *The Prophet and the Pharaoh*, 158.

18 Some of the latest information about state violence is based on the Egyptian issue of *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2002*, published by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, (Washington DC, 31 March 2003).

19 Among others, see the *New York Times*, 22 April 2001, and Dr Ibrahim's letter of 20–23 March 2001 to the US Embassy in Cairo. Dr Ibrahim was released temporarily early in the seven-year sentence but was retried several times before being exonerated.

20 Tarif Khalidi, "Religion and Citizenship in Islam," 36.

21 *Al-Ahram Weekly*, no. 506 (2–8 November 2000), http://weekly.ahram.org.eg.

22 *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Egypt*, 2002, section 2c.

23 George Eshaq, the director of a Coptic school in Cairo, heard these remarks during a meeting with members of the Gama'at Islamiyyah in 1992. See also Pieternella van Doorn-Harder, *Contemporary Coptic Nuns.*

24 A list published by the Ibn Khaldoun Centre for Development Studies shows that during the 1950s, 6 incidents of religious violence and attacks on Copts occurred, 2 during the 1960s, 49 during the 1970s, 111 during the 1980s, and 368 between 1990 and 1993. Saad Eddin Ibrahim et al., *The Copts of Egypt*, report for Minority Rights Group International, 22.

25 "Egyptian-American Writer: The Egyptian Regime Encourages Persecution of Christian Copts," The Middle East Media Research Institute, Egypt Reform Project, 3 August 2002, no. 352 (writer anonymous; first published in *Al-Quds Al-Arabi* [London], 7 March 2002, 9).

26 See Christiaan van Nispen tot Sevenaer, "Changes in Relations between Copts and Muslims," 32.

27 The three main authorities interviewed were: Sheikh Yusuf Al-Qardawi, Dr Mohammed Ra'fat Uthman (dean of Al-Azhar University's College of Shari'ah and Law), and Dr Mohammed Nur Farahat (a law professor).

28 For a summary of the foundational Muslim Arabic writings about this topic, see P.J. Vatikiotis, "Non-Muslims in Muslim Society."
29 *Copts Digest*, 13 August 2001, Coptsdigest.com.
30 Hasan, *Christians versus Muslims*, 266.
31 Interview with Bishop Mousa, bishop of youth, 18 February 1998.
32 Manuel Castells, *The Information Age*, vol. 2, *The Power of Identity*, 51.
33 Ibid., 29.
34 See Anthony D. Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation.*
35 The seventh-day ritual stems from a time when many babies died shortly after birth. By the seventh day, the child has received its name and been presented to a wider circle than that of its immediate family. It is greeted by a special procession of children holding candles and singing songs. On the fortieth day after death, family and friends gather to say special prayers in front of a picture of the deceased.
36 Among others, see Fredrik Barth, "Ethnic Groups and Boundaries," 75–82.
37 Nathan Kater, "On the Arabhood of the Copts," *Copts Digest*, 20 September 2001, Coptsdigest.com.
38 See, among others, van Doorn-Harder, *Contemporary Coptic Nuns*, 24.
39 Interview with Patriarch Shenouda III, 19 February 1998.
40 This paragraph is based on Nora Stene, "Becoming a Copt: The Integration of Coptic Children into the Church Community," on my book *Contemporary Coptic Nuns*, and on observations made during fieldwork.
41 Van Doorn-Harder, *Contemporary Coptic Nuns*, 79.
42 Wolfram Reiss, *Erneuerung in der Koptisch-Orthodoxen Kirche*, 149.
43 Interview with Bishop Mousa, 18 February 1998.
44 Van Doorn-Harder, *Contemporary Coptic Nuns*, 37–9.
45 For the seminaries and the numbers of students graduating, see *Al-Kiraza* 21 (1993), nr. 45/46.
46 Translation from Christian Cannuyer, *Coptic Egypt*, 104–5.
47 Maurice Assad, "Prägung der koptischen Identität," 114ff.
48 Acts 18:9, 10: "Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no one will lay a hand on you to harm you, for there are many in the city who are my people."
49 Iris Habib el-Masri, *The Story of the Copts*, 359–61.
50 See His Grace Bishop Antonius Markos, *Come Across … and Help Us.*
51 From the sermon of the departed Anba Youanis, *Copts Digest*, 19 March 2001, Coptsdigest.com.
52 Interview with Dr Christiaan van Nispen tot Sevenaer, February 2000.
53 Castells, *The Power of Identity*, 8–10.

54 These observations are based on: (1) Letter by Dr Saad Eddin Ibrahim on the Occasion of the Visit to Egypt by the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Copts Digest*, 20–23 March 2001, Coptsdigest.com; and (2) interviews with Dr Nabil 'abd el-Fattah and several representatives of the Coptic community.
55 Isma'il Sabri 'Abd Allah, William Sulaiman Qilada, and Muhammad Salim al-'Awa, *Al-Muwatina*; Amir Nasr, *Al-Musharika al-Wataniya lil-Aqbat fi al-'Asr al-Hadith*, vol. 1.; and William Sulaiman Qilada, *Mabda'u-l-Muwatina.*
56 Interview with Bishop Mousa, 18 February 1998.
57 Interview with Father Yuhanna Kolta, 15 February 1998; see also *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 24 February to 1 March 2000.
58 Interview with Vivian Fouad, 4 March 2000.