

Finding a Platform: Studying the Copts in the 19th and 20th Centuries

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Research on the Copts of Egypt has developed especially rapidly in new directions during the past twenty years. Having started as a corollary of Egyptology, it is advancing from the study of the early Christian centuries to include medieval, early modern, and contemporary Coptic Studies. Concurrently, Coptic issues are being inserted into studies of Egypt in general. Publications on the 19th century mostly ignored Copts, but they were given stereotypical cameo appearances in the prolific research on the profound transformations in 20th-century Egyptian society.

Copts hold a unique position in scholarship of the Middle East as well as in Christianity studies. Although speaking Arabic, a language seen as inherent to Islam, they are Christian. This combination makes them what Ghada Botros has called “a puzzling enigma” in Western countries.¹ Being the “Christian other” has had serious consequences for Copts as an object of study. For example, the newly emerging field of the study of non-Western Christianity, which mostly concentrates on churches resulting from colonial efforts, has little space for the Copts. Fenella Cannell has observed a similar form of myopia in anthropological and sociological studies, whose gaze tends to be directed at how churches established by Protestant and Catholic missions incorporated themes such as kinship, mediation of divine power, syncretistic beliefs, and ancestor worship.² This focus has little room for Orthodox forms of Christianity that have tradition, language, art, and community as core values. The Coptic Orthodox Church has fallen especially between the cracks because it was neither tribal nor a product of colonial missionary activities.

For studies on the 19th century, Paul Sedra’s work on Coptic interactions with Western missions is a first step toward correcting this gaze, while Magdi Guirguis’ mining of local archives reveals the strategies and proactive measures taken by local and national Church prelates to cope with foreign and local challenges.³ As for the 20th century, Vivian Ibrahim has been rereading Coptic agency up to the 1950s; among other topics, she assesses relations with the Egyptian state and intracommunal tensions.⁴ Some incidental accounts of contemporary Coptic issues such as the book by Edward Wakin aside,⁵ it was not until the last decade of the 20th century that the production of multidisciplinary studies started taking contemporary Coptic studies out of the purview of church-oriented periodicals such as *Parole D’Orient* and *Proche Orient Chrétien*, which mostly focused on the Church hierarchy and clerical affairs.

Important developments changing the map of Coptic studies have emerged from Coptic immigration. Communities now residing in North America, Europe, and Australia are becoming topics of study in themselves while Coptic scholars residing in those places are starting to study Coptic communities both in Egypt and the West. This situation is leading to myriad new questions concerning the maintenance of religious identity, intermarriage, and the role of youth and children. Nora Stene has researched

the position and role of children in the Coptic community in London,⁶ while the core chapters of Ghada Botros's dissertation pay much attention to Coptic youth in North America.⁷ As bearers of the Coptic heritage, the new generations born in the West have to retell the stories to keep them alive and relevant in an environment that is mystified by them. They carry the task of producing and constructing the memories of their parents, choosing themes from the past that inscribe the needs of the present.

Although past work tended to be based on secondary literature, now a growing number of in-depth ethnographic, anthropological, and sociological studies based on fieldwork and primary sources is in steady production. Through my own work among the Coptic nuns, I became an accidental anthropologist; except for two short articles from 1956 and 1959, there were no published sources with which to work. For this enterprise, knowledge of Arabic proved far more important than knowledge of Coptic. Since then, S. S. Hasan's work mapping out Coptic communal reforms and internal politics in the 20th century has appeared.⁸ Elizabeth Oram's ethnography traces Coptic identity formation in reaction to the colonial processes that cast Copts as dangerous "others" and the national discourse that underscores their Pharaonic roots.⁹ Her work also points at new group identities being shaped by pilgrimages to the monasteries and other places sacred to the Copts, which simultaneously allow the church to impose new types of discipline and unification of the community.¹⁰

A new generation of scholars, including Mariz Tadros and Laure Guirguis, question the suppressive roles of clergy and state alike. Guirguis' research considers the repercussions of the contemporary transformations of Egyptian authoritarianism, while Tadros looks at Coptic engagement with the church and state and at Coptic civic resistance to both.¹¹ In this context we are still lacking intensive studies on the genealogies of the diverse forces of change such as the Sunday School Movement that until now has been described in great detail only in German by Wolfram Reiss.¹² Resistance against clerical and state domination also looms large in studies focusing on gender. Norwegian anthropologist Berit Thorbjørnsrud has deconstructed both positive and negative stereotypes of Coptic women, while Febe Armanios has elaborated on the dual ideals of Coptic women as long-suffering wife and mother and as eternal virgin.¹³ Questions about women's agency are becoming more pertinent as a conservative part of the Coptic clergy attempts, via DVD and other forms of popular culture, to enforce a mindset limiting women's agency to long-suffering silence.

In studies connected to those on gender, Coptic spirituality in all its forms from the miraculous to the theological is receiving more attention. Yet, solid theoretical frameworks that take these experiences seriously in their own right are still under construction. Angie Heo has researched the prevalent models of intercession while Birgit Voile frames the many miracles happening during the time of Pope Kyrillos VI (1959–71) within struggles of identity and politics.¹⁴ I have started to explain the production of women's visual culture in relation to their spirituality and place in the Church hierarchy.¹⁵

In summary, the study of Copts during the 19th and 20th centuries is being covered by more disciplines than ever before, while the Coptic Church is transitioning from a local to an international presence. Yet a clear audience is still missing: the Copts have not really entered Middle Eastern or Christianity studies, among others. Part of the challenge ahead lies in the need to develop rigorous sets of theoretical frameworks

that can grapple with the many aspects that baffle outside observers. Otherwise, while escaping the trap of simplistic paradigms and long-held prejudices, we will create new ones.

NOTES

¹Ghada Botros, "Religious Identity as an Historical Narrative: Coptic Orthodox Immigrant Churches and the Representation of History," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 19, June (2006): 180.

²Fenella Cannell, ed., *The Anthropology of Christianity* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006), 17.

³Paul Sedra, "Textbook Maneuvers: Evangelicals and Educational Reform in Nineteenth-Century Egypt" (PhD diss., New York University, 2006); idem, "Class Cleavages and Ethnic Conflict: Coptic Christian Communities in Modern Egyptian Politics," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 10 (1999): 219–35; idem, "Ecclesiastical Warfare: Patriarch, Presbyterian, and Peasant in Nineteenth-Century Asyut," <http://128.36.236.77/workpaper/pdfs/MESV5-10.pdf> (accessed 30 March 2010); idem, "John Lieder and His Mission in Egypt: The Evangelical Ethos at Work among the Nineteenth-Century Copts," *Journal of Religious History* 28, October (2004): 219–39. While much of Magdi Guirguis' work is in Arabic, some of his articles have appeared in English; for example, see "The Financial Resources of Coptic Priests in Nineteenth-Century Egypt," in *Money, Land and Trade. An Economic History of the Muslim Mediterranean*, ed. Nelly Hannah (London/New York: I. B. Tauris, 2002), 223–43.

⁴Vivian Ibrahim, *The Copts of Egypt: The Challenges of Modernisation and Identity* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010).

⁵Wakin, *A Lonely Minority: The Modern Story of Egypt's Copts* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1963), republished in 2000 by Backinprint.com.

⁶Nora Stene, "'Engler i platåsko.' Religiøs sosialisering av koptisk-ortodokse barn i London" ("Angels in Platform Shoes": Religious Socialization of Coptic Orthodox Children in London) (PhD diss., Institute for Cultural Studies, Faculty of Humanities, University of Oslo, 2005); idem, "The Challenge of the Diaspora as Reflected in a Coptic Sunday School," *Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 54 (2002): 77–90; idem, "Into the Land of Immigration," in *Between Desert and City, The Coptic Orthodox Church Today*, ed. Kari Vogt and Nelly van Doorn-Harder (Oslo: Novus Vorlag & Portland, Ore.: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1997).

⁷Ghada Botros, "Competing for the Future: Adaptation and the Accommodation of Difference in Coptic Immigrant Churches" (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2005).

⁸S. S. Hasan, *Christians versus Muslims in Modern Egypt: The Century-Long Struggle for Coptic Equality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

⁹Elizabeth Edwards Oram, "Constructing Modern Copts: The Production of Coptic Christian Identity in Contemporary Egypt" (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2004).

¹⁰Idem, "In the Footsteps of the Saints: The Monastery of St. Antony, Pilgrimage, and Modern Coptic Identity," in *Monastic Visions: Wall Paintings in the Monastery of St. Antony at the Red Sea*, ed. Elizabeth S. Bolman (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2002), 203–16. Catherine Mayeur-Jaouen's "The Coptic Moulds: Evolution of the Traditional Pilgrimages," in *Between Desert and City*, ed. Vogt and van Doorn-Harder, 212–29, presents similar arguments to those of Oram.

¹¹Mariz Tadros, "Vicissitudes in the Entente between the Coptic Orthodox Church and the State in Egypt (1952–2007)," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 41 (2009): 269–87. Noteworthy in this context is Dina el Khawaga's work based on her unpublished dissertation, "Le Renouveau Copte: La Communauté comme Acteur Politique" (PhD diss., Institut D'Etude Politique de Paris, 1993).

¹²Wolfram Reiss, *Erneuerung in der Koptisch-Orthodoxen Kirche. Die Geschichte der koptisch-orthodoxen Sonntagsschulbewegung und die Aufnahme ihere Reformsätze in den Erneuerungsbewegungen der Koptisch-Orthodoxen Kirche der Gegenwart* (Hamburg, Germany: Lit Verlag, 1998).

¹³Berit Thorbjørnsrud, *Controlling the Body to Liberate the Soul: Towards an Analysis of the Coptic Orthodox Concept of the Body* (Oslo: Unipub forlag/Akademika AS, 1999); idem, "Born in the Wrong Age: Coptic Women in a Changing Society," in *Between Desert and City*, ed. Vogt and van Doorn-Harder, 167–89. Febe Armanios, "The 'Virtuous Woman': Images of Gender in Modern Coptic Society," *Middle Eastern Studies* 38 (2002): 110–30.

¹⁴Angie Deborah Heo, "Technologies of Intercessory Power: Images and Movement among the Coptic Orthodox of Contemporary Egypt" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2008). Brigitte Voile, *Les Coptes d'Égypte sous Nasser. Sainteté, miracles, apparitions* (Paris: CNRS Editions, 2004).

¹⁵Nelly van Doorn-Harder, "Coptic Women Re-Shaping the Visual Culture," in *O Ye Gentlemen: Arabic Studies on Science and Literary Culture, Festschrift in Honor of Remke Kruk*, ed. Arnoud Vrolijk and Jan P. Hogendijk (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2007), 511–26; idem, "Re-Creating Saintly Women: Gender and Coptic Spirituality," in *Proceedings of the International Conference on Coptic Studies*, ed. Mariam Ayad (Stevenage, U.K.: n.p., forthcoming).