history as such, but of questioning the psychology and politics behind its construction.

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Sebastian Elsässer. *The Coptic Question in the Mubarak Era: Debating National Identity, Religion, and Citizenship*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. xviii + 319 pages, illustrations, references. Cloth US$74.00 ISBN 978-0-1993-6839-6.

As academics try to interpret the recent tumultuous events in Egypt, the role of Coptic–Muslim relations will likely play a significant part. Such investigations would do well to consult Sebastian Elsässer's book, which focuses on the formation of discourses in particular historical junctures and discusses how such discourse is used and to what effect. Arguing that "a discourse is a symbolic struggle between social actors over definitions of reality and normativity" (3), Elsässer sees "contemporary debates about the Coptic question as a struggle between different discourses, each of which builds on a certain set of preconceptions and conceptual choices" (2). Elsässer is to be commended for highlighting such conceptual choices and for emphasizing that any discussion of the Copts must take into account the broader social and political movements in Mubarak's Egypt, since as the author says, "a minority question is also a majority question" (1).

Part one of the book (chapters 1–3) provides a survey of the historical, social, political, and religious dimensions of relations between Muslims and Christians in Mubarak's Egypt. The author emphasizes that the Coptic question emerged in the context of modernity and the modern state and questions some dominant narratives of Egyptian history. For example, although the 1919 revolution led to the establishment of a state based on a secularly defined Egyptian nation, Elsässer argues that "religious symbols, references, and networks remained highly significant," and that "most contemporaries regarded national and a religious belonging as perfectly compatible" (33).

In chapter 2, the author questions the assumed cause-and-effect relationship between Islamization and sectarian strife and asks if there are other, "perhaps more important ingredients to sectarian violence than the machinations of Islamist groups" (68). In chapter 3, Elsässer argues that "it is crucial to notice that there existed both *random* discrimination caused

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by official arbitrariness and *systematic* discrimination based on rules and practices of the authorities that were inspired either by a security logic, or by considerations of religious difference, or both at the same time" (88). Regarding the sensitive subject of church building, Elsässer argues that some priests and bishops had better relationships with the local administration than others, so that the actual experiences of Christians trying to build and renovate churches varied.

Part two (chapters 4–7) analyzes the three dominant types of discourse that have dominated Christian–Muslim relations in Egypt: the discourses of national unity, religious patriotism, and liberalism and human rights. The author is particularly good at illustrating the historical selectivity of such discourses (here the Arab conquest of Egypt becomes a crucial historical moment) and highlighting the conceptual choices that undergird the narratives and perceptions of events. The author is adept at illustrating how discourse is formed, how that discourse in turn shapes subsequent discourses, and how discourses can function as double-edged swords. For example, while embracing the national unity discourse has enabled the Coptic Orthodox Church to improve its bargaining position, the "fact that the national unity discourse is so eager to prove the loyalty of the Copts has the effect of singling them out for particular scrutiny as a group" (111).

The author also shows that such discourses frequently cut across Christian–Muslim lines. For example, in chapter 5, Elsässer looks at the discourse of the most prominent advocates of religious patriotism, such as the Shaykh of al-Azhar and the Coptic Orthodox Pope. He points out the conservative tendencies of this religious patriotism, so that within the Coptic Orthodox Church, "there was a broad consensus against the freedom to form new religious communities, and conversely, in favor of compulsory membership in the established religious communities on account of consideration of social cohesion and national unity" (144). Elsässer argues that the church has successfully used the discourse of religious nationalism "to defend its interests not just against rebellious laypeople, but also against the Egyptian judiciary, the state, and a suspicious and partly hostile conservative Muslim public" (146).

In any book about Muslim–Christian relations in Egypt there is always a danger of giving too much weight to religious identity. Any book must eschew the problem of religious determinism. However, Elsässer on the whole manages to avoid this problem and successfully illustrates the complexity of the motivations of political actors. While the author seems less willing to break with established wisdom when it comes to his skepticism of liberal Islamist discourse, the book's status as an important

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and original contribution to the literature on Coptic–Muslim relations is unquestionable.

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Sulaiman H. Al-Farsi. *Democracy and Youth in the Middle East: Islam, Tribalism and the Rentier State in Oman*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2013. xii + 228 pages, notes, appendixes, bibliography, index. Cloth US$100.49 ISBN 978-1-7807-6090-2.

Since the Arab Spring, questions about the likelihood of democratic movements or political openings in the ruling systems of the Arab Gulf have become commonplace. In *Democracy and Youth in the Middle East*, Sulaiman Al-Farsi argues that the Omani *Ibāḍī* model of leadership selection through *shura* (consultation) and *ijtihad* (diligence) positions Oman as a possible example of an Islamic country in which Islam and political participation have historically been harmonious.

The book is an effort to assess the extent to which the Omani tradition of shura can spawn a more democratic political system in the post-oil/post-rentier state era. Al-Farsi identifies three types of democratization processes in Oman that could support a moderate transitional period: a traditional model of following shura through adherence to Ibadism led by religious institutions, a top-down model that the Omani government has continuously put forth before and after 1970 when Sultan Qaboos came to the throne, and a possible bottom-up democratic movement led by Omani youth. A chapter is dedicated to each of these processes, in which Al-Farsi analyzes qualitative research gathered through in-person interviews. The result is considerable insight into the Omani government's ethos and its view of politics and people.

Al-Farsi justifiably emphasizes the uniqueness that characterizes Oman, especially in comparison with other Gulf countries. He highlights the willingness of Omanis to work at all job levels, their dedication to the preservation of their culture and heritage in the face of globalization and modernization, and most importantly, the tradition of Ibadism, which has given Oman a religious character and historical participatory system through shura unlike those of any other Islamic country. The practice of shura at the highest political levels has enabled the country's leadership to maintain both political and religious legitimacy while also playing a large role, in the eyes of Al-Farsi's respondents, in a gradualist approach to changing the political system.

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