



Writing the History of the Modern Copts: From Victims and Symbols to Actors

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Abstract

Scholars of Egyptian history and politics face a dearth of analytical studies of the modern Coptic Church and community. This state of affairs is due to various factors of a methodological, theoretical, and practical nature. In practical terms, both the Egyptian state and the Coptic Orthodox Church have discouraged exploration of Coptic identity given the political taboo of sectarianism. In theoretical terms, Edward Said's *Orientalism* led to concerns among scholars about overemphasizing faith in their analyses of Middle Eastern history and politics. In methodological terms, modern Coptic historiography remains hobbled by an 'enlightenment paradigm' which discounts the political potential and action of subaltern and clerical forces within the community. This article urges a concern with the ways in which these subaltern and clerical forces shaped the Coptic 'discursive tradition' in the course of the twentieth century, as a means by which to restore Copts to modern Egyptian historiography, not as victims or symbols, but as actors in their own right.

References to Coptic studies far more commonly evoke images of the fifth-century Council of Chalcedon than of Gamal Abdel Nasser's Revolutionary Command Council. Indeed, so slight is the field of modern Coptic studies that fewer than five percent of the papers given at the 2008 International Congress of Coptic Studies touched on developments in the modern Church and community. The area of modern Coptic studies that attracts by far the greatest journalistic attention – sectarian violence and, broadly, Christian-Muslim relations in Egypt – seems perhaps the least attractive area of the field to scholars of the modern Church and community. Such are the paradoxes that this article will explore, with reference to the existing historiography of both Christian-Muslim relations in modern Egypt, and the internal dynamics of the Coptic Church and community.

Christian-Muslim Relations in Modern Egypt

In a series of books and articles published since 1971, Bat Ye'or has vigorously endorsed a uniformly grim view of the status of Christians and

Jews, or *dhimmi*, under Muslim rule since the time of the Prophet. Most succinctly stated, her view is that, in Islamic history, ‘the dhimmi peoples bore the role of victim, vanquished by force’.¹ The structure of *The Dhimmi*, her foremost work, betrays the intent of the author – namely, to indict Islam as an ubiquitous system not merely of belief, but of life, in the lands Muslims have conquered through the ages. The text begins with a ‘Historical Outline’ focusing upon the Prophet’s treatment of *dhimmi*. In the subsequent chapter, ‘Aspects of the Dhimmi Condition’, Ye’or aims to demonstrate that, in seeking to emulate the practice of the Prophet, Muslims through the ages have enacted and reenacted, time after time after time, the patterns of violence against *dhimmi* the Prophet purportedly pioneered. The Muslims are thus mired in a cycle of violence against Christians and Jews from which they cannot hope to escape, unless they repudiate the practice of the Prophet.

So ahistorical an argument has long begged a thoroughly historicized account of Arab Christians as actors in the social life of the modern Middle East. Nevertheless, scholars of Egyptian history and politics still face a dearth of analytical studies of the modern Coptic Church and community.² Indeed, the subject receives little attention from Egypt specialists themselves, who have, for various reasons – methodological, theoretical, and practical – avoided a focus on the Copts. From a practical standpoint, the scholar’s choice to identify a Coptic Christian community in contemporary Egypt is an intensely political one, not least given debates between state officials and their Islamist opponents over faith as a source of political legitimacy. The absence of reliable statistics on the Coptic community is emblematic of these political sensitivities surrounding the topic. Under such circumstances, neither the Egyptian state nor the Coptic Orthodox Church are keen to encourage researchers to explore the trajectory of notions of Coptic identity or, more generally, the contemporary resonance of faith among Egyptians.

Perhaps curiously, regardless of the state or Church standpoint on the issue, historians of modern Egypt themselves have, until recently, demonstrated a reluctance to broach the resonance of faith. This reluctance was likely an unintended byproduct of Edward Said’s *Orientalism*.³ In the quest to discredit the notion that Muslims acted solely upon the basis of faith, *Orientalism* nearly vitiated faith as an analytical concept. For years and, indeed, to this day in particular scholarly circles, ‘Islam’ could not appear beyond the confines of quotation marks. References to ‘Islam’ were rendered suspect by the genealogy of monolithic notions of ‘Islam’ that Said had brought to light. The sense of ‘Islam’ as a sort of discursive conspiracy to disparage individual Muslims retains power in Middle Eastern studies, despite anthropological efforts to demonstrate how local articulations of ‘Islam’, if not ‘Islam’ writ large, indeed matter to vast numbers of Muslims. Can one resolve the problem of misrepresenting Islam, or Christianity for that matter, by refusing representations of faith

altogether – by casting aside all representations of faith as immaterial to analyses of Egyptian society?

When scholars of Egypt have confronted issues of faith, they have largely insisted upon discerning ‘palpable’ motivations ‘behind’ the faith. For instance, the contemporary ‘resurgence of faith’ in Egypt is typically associated by social analysts, political scientists in particular, with deteriorating socio-economic conditions. Policies of economic liberalization implemented during the 1970s are specified as the cause of a widening breach between the wealthy and the poor. Lower middle class Muslims, the argument runs, chose to employ Islamic symbols to articulate political grievances – themselves rooted in distinctly material concerns – given the long-standing structural weakness of the left in the country.

Anthropologist Gregory Starrett has questioned both the practicability and the usefulness of efforts to attribute Islamism to underlying socio-economic conditions. Rather, Starrett insists upon taking Islamists’ participants at their word, focusing upon Islamists’ particular perceptions of their circumstances. His *Putting Islam to Work* describes the process whereby Egyptian elites have, since the nineteenth century, both ‘objectified’ and ‘functionalized’ Islam – ‘objectified’, by casting Islam as a coherent and unified moral code sanctioning specific practices, and ‘functionalized’, by mobilizing that moral code to accomplish specific political aims.⁴ Verses of the Qur’an or declarations of the Prophet are invoked by such elites not ‘merely’ for the sake of worship. In Starrett’s account, the school emerges as a venue for the inculcation of particular values, and sacred texts – whether the Qur’an or the Bible – are cast therein as codes of morality available for interpretation not only to properly educated and accredited scholars of Islam and Christianity, but further, to state functionaries with a range of educational backgrounds.

Like Starrett, Dina el Khawaga has eschewed the relative deprivation thesis as to the resurgence of faith, and insisted upon a long-term perspective in analyzing this resurgence within the Coptic community.⁵ Rather than pointing to the oft cited milestones of 1967 or 1974 – the decimation of Egypt by Israel in battle, and the inauguration of the *infatih* era, respectively – she steps back to the years 1893 and 1918. In the former, the Coptic Seminary was established; and in the latter, the Coptic Sunday school movement began to emerge, in earnest. Both developments are cited as milestones in a clerical effort to render the Church the focal point of Coptic communal life, in the face of acculturative threats from the Coptic elite and Egyptian political institutions.

The Internal Dynamics of Church and Community

Unfortunately, the existing historiography of the Coptic Church and community furnishes little insight as to this struggle between the clergy and the Coptic lay elite. Nearly all this historiography, whether in English

or in Arabic, is framed through the classifications and concepts of what one might label the ‘awakening’ narrative or the ‘enlightenment’ paradigm. The ‘awakening’ narrative’s central principle is that, in the mid-nineteenth century, the Coptic Church and community ‘awoke’ from a long-standing intellectual ‘slumber’. Specifically, the tenure of Patriarch Cyril IV is depicted as pivotal to the Copts’ ‘awakening’ or ‘enlightenment’ as a community. Great emphasis is given to the notion that Cyril, who occupied the Patriarchal seat from 1854 to 1861, was ‘ahead of his time’, particularly in so far as his educational experiments were concerned: children of all faiths were admitted to his ‘modern’ schools; no tuition fees were charged; and he championed female education.

This ‘enlightenment’ paradigm is extremely problematic, given an attendant disdain for the ‘lower orders’ of the Coptic community, afflicted with purportedly ‘backward’ and ‘offensive’ customs. Indeed, the narrative has tended to forestall research agendas focused upon questions of power, and marginalized the ‘superstitious’ practitioners of popular forms of Coptic Christianity. The paradigm is crystallized as nowhere else in an article entitled ‘The Awakening of the Coptic Church’, published in 1897 in London’s *Contemporary Review*.⁶ ‘The Awakening’ was penned by Murqus Simaika, among the most influential and widely known Coptic public figures of his time. According to Donald Malcolm Reid, ‘By 1900 Simaika had established himself as a main liaison between the Patriarch and occupation authorities and visiting clergymen’.⁷ Beyond his extensive involvement in Coptic communal affairs, particularly through the communal council, Simaika served in the Egyptian Legislative Council from 1906 to 1913, and in the Legislative Assembly in 1914. However, he derives the bulk of his renown from his involvement in the 1908 establishment of the Coptic Museum in Old Cairo. His contributions of artifacts and funds were vital to the project.

In the article, Simaika casts the Coptic Church as having remained ‘asleep’ for centuries, a ‘slumber’ interrupted only ‘by the persecutions directed against her by the inveterate enemies of her faith – the Muslims, the great mass of whom, alas! are the descendants of her own children’.⁸ The Copts were quiescent in the face of such persecutions, acceding to their plight. Only through obscurity, through concealing their identity, could they enjoy a degree of security from the hostile Muslim monolith. Yet, such quiescence and concealment left the once proud Coptic community profoundly weak and irresolute. With the rise of Mehmed Ali Pasha, argues Simaika, ‘light’ penetrated the prevailing ‘darkness’. At last, Christians could realize their aspirations, both for their community and their country. In contrast to the sectarian leaders of the past, Mehmed Ali was concerned only with ‘progress’ – and if that demanded the advice of Christians, he was prepared to admit them into the service of the state. The sanction the state afforded Christian mission permitted an unprecedented infusion of ‘knowledge’ into Egypt, the Coptic community in particular.⁹

According to Simaika, Patriarch Cyril IV was a pioneer among the Copts in seizing upon that knowledge – in seeking to marshal that knowledge in the service of his people. He commends the intentions Cyril held, but laments his failure to institutionalize reform. Scriptural study was fostered, icons were forsaken – but the problem of clerical ignorance remained. As Simaika recounts,

while the laymen were slowly but steadily advancing in knowledge, the clergy, especially the bishops and the religious orders from which these dignitaries are now recruited, remained in an almost stationary condition and were soon left far behind.¹⁰

To remedy the problem of ignorance, one had to reform procedures of recruitment into the Church hierarchy. The Church hierarchy was, in 1897, still selected from among the monks, and as the monks

generally come from the lower classes of society, and are in most cases driven to the monasteries by abhorrence of work, the majority, when they come into power, make up for past privations by exerting themselves in amassing wealth by every conceivable means, and spend it on themselves and their relations.¹¹

Simaika memorably remarks in a footnote, ‘It is a shameful confession, but we must acknowledge that very few of the existing bishops belong to respectable families’.¹²

Echoes of Simaika’s ‘Awakening’ resound through the historiography of the modern Copts to this day. The monumental work of Irīs Habīb al-Masri is a case in point. Her nine-volume history of the Coptic Church, *Qissat al-Kanīsa al-Qibtiyya*, remains by far the most detailed study of Coptic history to have emerged in print.¹³ After studying psychology in London, al-Masri began her career as a teacher in Zamalek. However, she soon became heavily involved in the service of the Coptic Orthodox Church, acting as secretary to Patriarch Yūsāb II. Her access to the libraries and archives of the Church, both at the Patriarchate and in individual churches and monasteries, permitted her to pursue an interest in Coptic history in unprecedented fashion. The celebration of nineteen centuries of Egyptian Christianity in 1968 drove this research forward, prompting her to survey libraries and archives not only in Egypt, but in England, France, and the United States as well. Ultimately, she came to teach Church history both at the Institute for Coptic Studies in Cairo and at the Coptic clerical college, until her death in 1994.

Al-Masri depicts the tenure of Patriarch Cyril IV as nothing less than pivotal in the modern history of the Church. Great emphasis is given to the notion that Cyril was ‘ahead of his time’, particularly in so far as his educational experiments were concerned. Further, according to al-Masri, Cyril was entirely committed to the notion of Copts as equal citizens rather than protected persons of the Book. She ventures to claim that, when Cyril read of the Sultan’s February 1856 decree mandating equality for non-Muslims in the Ottoman Empire, he insisted that Sa‘īd Pasha

permit the unfettered admission of Copts to government higher education. In response to the allegation leveled at Cyril by English sources, that he opposed the conscription of Copts, she proffers a quotation from the man himself:

God forbid that I should be such a coward, one who does not know the value of citizenship, or who would deny the sons of this country the opportunity to express their love of country by serving and defending it. That is not why I am here. I am here to ask for equal rights and equal responsibilities for the Copts.¹⁴

The pioneering work in this historiography, Y‘aqūb Nakhla Rūfīla’s book *Tārīkh al-Umma al-Qibtiyya* established the pattern nearly all subsequent works on modern Coptic history would emulate.¹⁵ *Tārīkh al-Umma al-Qibtiyya* was the inaugural one-volume, comprehensive, indexed, ‘scientific’ study of the Coptic community to appear in the Arabic language. As a result, the work remains, to this day, a fundamental reference work for historians of the Copts. However, such historians have uncritically accepted the work’s purportedly ‘scientific’ methodology without questioning the link between that methodology and the circumstances of the late nineteenth-century Coptic community.

In the original introduction to the work, Rūfīla ventures to label the history of the Copts virtually unknown, and casts his task as an urgent one: A community must know its history as it looks to the future. Indeed, he describes the principal motivation behind the work as love for the Copts as a ‘race’ (*jins*), and dedicates the book to the children of that ‘race’. The history of the Copts is traced from the Tower of Babel and the heyday of the ‘Pharaonic state’, through the Persian, Greek, Roman, and Muslim invasions and ‘occupations’ of Egypt, all the way to the visionary leadership of Cyril IV and the nineteenth-century ‘return to existence’ of the ‘Coptic nation’.¹⁶

Rūfīla’s exploration of the Ottoman period of ‘Coptic history’ merits particular attention, particularly in so far as it mirrors the distinctly gloomy Egyptian nationalist analyses of the Ottomans so usefully explored by Gabriel Piterberg.¹⁷ Indeed, *Tārīkh al-Umma*’s chapter on the Ottomans opens in distinctly inauspicious fashion:

The condition of Egypt in Ottoman times was no better than it had been under the two Mamluk regimes, because the only concern of the rulers was siphoning money from the people in any way possible, without exception and without discrimination between Muslim and Christian.¹⁸

The instability arising from this situation led, Rūfīla claims, to a situation in which Copts were vulnerable to the predations of Arab tribesmen, and he cites an incident of pillage in the heavily Christian town of Akhmīm to substantiate his point.¹⁹

Rūfīla emphasizes that particular Copts enjoyed the confidence of Muslim notables, due to their talents as administrators of property. Further, Coptic

knowledge of astrology and soothsaying frequently made Christians influential within communities of the Nile Valley. Rūfīla notes, 'The wise Muslims knew the importance of the Copts and their need for them, and thus appreciated and protected them'.²⁰ A rise in the number of Catholic missionaries in Egypt during the eighteenth century led to initial stirrings of moral reform. Conversions divided families and ruined long-standing inheritance arrangements. Under such circumstances, strengthening the unity of the community and eliminating Muslim resentment required, on the part of privileged Copts, a renunciation of ostentation and pretension.²¹ Rūfīla proceeds to devote attention to the 'faithful' Coptic servants of Egypt's Mamluk rulers in the late eighteenth century – among such servants, Mu'allim Rizq and Mu'allim Ibrāhm al-Gaūhari. The former is depicted as a close confidant of 'Ali Bey, while the latter would become chief scribe under 'Ali's successor, Murad Bey.

Ibrahim's brother, Girgis, captures Rūfīla's imagination much as Cyril IV will in subsequent passages – and this is due, above all, to the association of Girgis with the French Occupation. Indeed, Girgis had prepared a house for Napoleon's use upon the latter's arrival in Cairo – a service for which he was rewarded with a uniform and decorations. Rūfīla makes a point of explaining that the French dealt with Copts and Muslims on the basis of equality. Emblematic of this attitude was the *diwān* the French established to handle the administration of commerce, half of whose twelve members were Christian.²² When the French faced attack from British and Ottoman forces, Rūfīla alleges that the Ottomans engaged in persecution of the Christians of Cairo. The Christians of Azbakiyya were protected by the Copt Y'aqūb who, with a corps of Coptic soldiers he had recruited, saved the Patriarchate from destruction. Y'aqūb was subsequently entrusted by General Kleber with the task of collecting the fine the French imposed upon those Muslims who had collaborated with the Ottoman forces.²³

The ultimate expulsion of the French from Egypt, although lamented by Rūfīla, would not prove a catastrophe for the Copts, given the rise of Mehmed Ali Pasha. In Rūfīla's words, when the Pasha 'cleansed the country of corruption and rid Egypt of the rebellious Mamluks, he inaugurated a program of improvement'.²⁴ One Mu'allim Ghali would play an instrumental role in assisting the Pasha to realize his ambitious program. Rūfīla credits Ghali with the idea of surveying the countryside for the purpose of enhancing revenue collection. Mehmed Ali and his successors would, generally speaking, enable all inhabitants of the Nile Valley, regardless of faith, 'to contribute their efforts to the state according to their abilities'.²⁵

Far and away the most scrutinized and lauded personality of the modern period in Rūfīla's account is Patriarch Cyril IV. Rūfīla emphasizes that Cyril could not achieve all that he had wished to achieve, particularly in the realm of modern education – but that he viewed the schools he

managed to establish as ‘stairs on which the Coptic nation would climb in the future to a position of greater stature among nations, and thus regain its ancient glory’.²⁶ Indeed, he ventures to quote two remarks he claims to have heard the Patriarch make: ‘I am waiting with bated breath for the preparation of students in our schools to receive scientific knowledge, such as logic, which will expand the mind and enrich its matter’ and ‘The transition from where we are, to where we should be, requires much work and pain, enough for a lifetime, the longevity of Noah and the patience of Job’.²⁷

For all the Patriarch’s humility, he had, according to Rūfila, provided the means for Copts to achieve lofty aspirations. To underscore the point, he suggests that,

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Coptic nation had reached the greatest depths of degradation. Ignorance and poverty had taken hold as a result of corruption in governance, as well as a succession of disasters and crises which, if they had afflicted a different nation, would have destroyed it completely. If we consider the community’s current situation, and compare this with its situation as it existed at the beginning of the century, we find a huge difference, not only in terms of education (*tarbiya*), but further, in customs, manners, dress, and housing. The credit for all this is due to the fairness of the government, to education, and to witnessing and assimilating foreign ways.²⁸

In short, according to Rūfila, the Copts have at last achieved a sort of equality of opportunity. While, in the past, they had found themselves confined to particular professions – like those of scribe, farmer, or craftsman – now Copts ranked among Egypt’s greatest merchants, poets, physicians, pharmacists, judges, lawyers, and government administrators.

The problem here is that Rūfila himself was a product of the ‘awakening’ which he would chronicle in his 1897 history, having begun his work life as a teacher in one of the schools Cyril IV had founded. Fluent in Arabic, Coptic, English, and Italian, he had taught in Cyril’s Azbakiyya school. He followed his tenure as teacher with a commitment to printing as a profession, and served as an editor at the state’s Būlāq Press. In 1877, he was instrumental in the establishment of the newspaper *Al-Watan*.

The Coptic ‘awakening’, of which both Cyril and Rūfila are emblematic, involved marginalizing the ‘superstitious’ practitioners of popular forms of faith, the faith of the common people. What Cyril and Rūfila urged, largely by means of ‘modern’ education, was an understanding of the text of the Bible in the place of a blind reverence for the dictates of men claiming holiness. Indeed, the faith of Cyril and Rūfila is the faith of the textbook – a faith of inwardness, a faith concerned with individual examination of conscience, a faith authorized from above rather than below.

Why not accept this narrative of modern Coptic history? Subalterns were not mere passive receptacles for the modern values Cyril and Rūfila sought to transmit. Just as scholars cannot continue to view Coptic

Christians as passive victims of state discrimination or Islamist violence, they must shift their focus within the community away from upper-class Copts, whose reform efforts have garnered extensive attention in past works, to lower- and middle-class Copts who have developed strategies of political maneuver all their own in modern Egypt.

Scholars of Egyptian and, more broadly, Middle Eastern history have come upon a windfall of sorts in recent years with the advent of research in *sijill* volumes – that is, Islamic law court registers – spread throughout the former domains of the Ottoman Empire. Despite diversity in time frames and confessional balances, a common thread appears to run through the fabrics of the societies these sources describe – namely, their flexibility in Muslim-*dhimmi* relations, as lived from day to day. The cases they present appear to contradict in the starkest terms possible the grim image of relations between Christians or Jews and their purported Muslim ‘conquerors’, advanced by such scholars as Bat Ye’or in recent years. *Dhimmi*s were apparently cunning manipulators of that most Muslim of Muslim institutions, the *shari‘a* or Islamic law court, the foremost symbol of Muslim sovereignty in Muslim lands. Jews and Christians not only confronted Muslims before the *qadi*, the judge of that court, but Jews confronted Jews, and Christians confronted Christians, when recourse to the *shari‘a* court served the respective purposes of the litigants.

These sources ultimately raise important questions about the import of communal identity among non-Muslim subalterns under Ottoman rule. To grasp the role of Coptic subalterns in modern Egypt, scholars must carry this line of inquiry forward, drawing upon the voluminous judicial records housed at the Dar al-Watha’iq al-Qawmiyya, or Egyptian National Archives. In his *All the Pasha’s Men* and a series of recent articles, Khaled Fahmy has seized upon such records to trace the rise of the Egyptian army, police, and hospital, with an eye to exploring how subalterns came not only to resist the Egyptian state’s efforts at surveillance, but further, to exploit the state’s institutions in distinctly savvy fashion. Further research among such records at the Egyptian National Archives may well afford a furtive glimpse of how the modernizing project of the Coptic elite affected the lives of Coptic and Muslim peasants and laborers throughout the Nile Valley – how constructions of political subjecthood developed by elites were received, interpreted, and manipulated by subalterns to their advantage.

The Clerical Discourse on Communal Morality

Scholars of twentieth-century Coptic history, with a far greater range of sources upon which to draw in developing their narratives of the Church and community, have emphasized one principal theme in their work, intimately bound up with the elite-subaltern divide discussed above. In the course of the century, members of the Coptic elite, once at the forefront of national affairs, found themselves gradually replaced as leaders of the

community by the Church hierarchy. The monks who constituted this Church hierarchy were, from a social standpoint, of distinctly 'humble roots' in the eyes of this elite. Despite their subaltern social origins, they managed to supplant the Coptic elite as stewards of Coptic communal morality.

In 1948, Yusuf Iskandar abandoned two pharmacies, two houses, and two cars in the Delta town of Damanhur and entered the Saint Samuel Monastery. There, Yusuf adopted the name Matta al-Miskin. He spent years at a time in the caves of Upper Egypt, in the desert of Wadi al-Rayan. In 1958, he encouraged the laymen of Helwan to commit themselves to the Church. The movement led to the development of religious texts and the expansion of charitable activities. By 1976, Matta had transformed the Monastery of Saint Makariyus into a thriving agricultural enterprise. The fifty monks of the monastery, among whom were five pharmacists, six physicians, and twelve engineers, enjoyed much success in land reclamation.

Matta was emblematic of a generation of young monks struggling, as they explained, to reinvigorate the spiritual life of the Church. Researchers at the postgraduate Institute of Coptic Studies, which the Church had created in 1954, studied Coptic language, history, art, archaeology, theology, and canon law. Further, they sought to microfilm all the antiquities of Egypt's churches and monasteries. By 1963, the Coptic Sunday School Movement had reached one million students between the ages of five and sixteen through 4000 branches and 5000 teachers.²⁹ Such measures served to reinforce the notion of a distinctive Coptic identity.

The new generation of Church leaders drawn from the monasteries was, however, split on how far beyond the strictly spiritual realm the Church's activities should extend. Matta al-Miskin backed spiritual revival, but opposed Church participation in public affairs. Religion, he insisted, was a matter for the conscience of the individual. Two monks, born Saad Aziz and Nazir Gayyad, disagreed, and advocated for Church activity in the social and political realms. In 1962, Nazir was appointed Bishop of Education, and took on the name Shenouda. The post stood in stark contrast to most episcopal appointments, rooted as they were in the administration of particular geographical areas. Shenouda was well suited to the atypical post, given his atypical background. Journalism was among the careers the young man had contemplated prior to devoting himself to the Church.

The polemics that Bishop Shenouda constructed and delivered each Friday in the Cathedral betrayed his concern with 'practical' issues facing Coptic youth, such as dating and studying. Analysis of such polemics yields insight into a marked shift in the deployment of sacred texts among Coptic Christians. Just as the Muslims Starrett describes select and interpret Qur'anic passages to serve particular political aims, in the broadest sense of that term, Coptic Christians deploy Biblical passages in comparable ways.

Through the 1970s, Shenouda, who had risen to become Patriarch in October 1971, vigorously defended Copts against threats to their equality before the law, particularly in light of President Anwar Sadat's strategy to deploy Islam as an idiom of rule. Perhaps the greatest such threat was the 1971 declaration that the principles of Islamic law would constitute a source for legislation – a constitutional maneuver that prompted Shenouda to organize a series of conferences in protest. Never before in the history of the Republic had the Coptic Orthodox Patriarch defied the Egyptian President in such unabashed terms. Shenouda was placed under house arrest at a monastery shortly before Sadat's assassination in 1981, and remained there until January 1985. However, just after Sadat's death, Church observers detected a profound shift in the Patriarch's attitude towards the state. Specifically, as early as January 1982, his rhetoric developed a conciliatory tone, and Shenouda proceeded to discourage the protests he had once organized – not least among diaspora Copts who were thought to 'damage' Egypt's reputation abroad.

In *Calmness*, a compendium of lectures delivered in August and September 1983, Shenouda explains how Copts must conduct themselves if they are to adhere to the letter of the Scriptures.³⁰ Here the Scriptures are explicitly invoked as a moral code, sanctioning particular modes of individual behavior. The lectures of *Calmness* constituted an effort to 'calm' the Copts the Patriarch had once explicitly aimed to stir with the rhetoric of citizenship.

The lectures swiftly develop into a meditation as to how humans are to control the will God granted them, but which has wrought such havoc from time immemorial. There is little question that, beyond order, calmness is a heavenly requisite, as per the admonitions in Thessalonians (4.11) and Ecclesiastes (10.4), 'Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life' and 'Calmness can lay great errors to rest', respectively. The Patriarch concludes,

The world needs love and peace in order for its problems to be solved. They can be solved by reconciliation, not strife, and in peace with calmness. In the calmness of a discussion that is suffused with love, people can come together in order to solve their problems however much their views differ.³¹

Shenouda casts people lacking such calmness as unworthy of respect: 'The shallow, superficial person is restless, he goes around trying to "find" himself, or trying to fulfil himself, this way or that'.³² Quite apart from shallowness and superficiality, intelligence presents a range of potential problems, 'if it is not accompanied by meekness and humility'.³³

A range of distinctly practical examples are proffered to demonstrate the point. The Patriarch begins in the schoolroom:

The teacher who is calm and firm is respected by his pupils, but the one who rants angrily against his pupils with threats or reprimands and harsh words loses their respect for him and becomes a plaything in their hands.³⁴

Shenouda then moves from the schoolroom to the home:

There is also the mother who shouts loudly, scolds, yells, smacks and threatens her children, imagining that by doing this she is bringing them up properly, but instead her life with them becomes a constant row and struggle.³⁵

Parents who beat their children, like the teacher who threatens his students, ultimately lose not only their children's, but their neighbors' respect, according to the Patriarch.

Calmness is evidenced, above all, in control of one's speech, and Shenouda cites James (1.26) to this effect: 'If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless'. Apparently, if Copts are unable to maintain that tight rein, they are to invoke Psalm 140: 'Place, Oh Lord, a guard on my mouth and a strong gate on my lips'.

Conclusion

To combat the enlightenment paradigm and its elision of subaltern Coptic histories, scholars must elaborate upon this 'objectification' and 'functionalization' of Coptic Christianity in Egypt. They must identify the shifting contours of a Coptic 'discursive tradition', comparable to the Islamic discursive tradition Talal Asad describes in *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam*.³⁶ Such a sense of Coptic Christianity as a tradition, rather than a pathological response to unfulfilled social needs, will yield a history of the modern Copts in which they play the role not simply of victims or symbols, but actors. Indeed, this focus upon the unceasing negotiation of Coptic tradition between elites and subalterns in their lived experiences will nurture a nuanced grasp of the roots, contours, and appeal of sectarianism in modern Egypt.

Short Biography

Paul Sedra is Assistant Professor of History at Simon Fraser University. The principal focus of his research is the social and cultural history of the modern Middle East. Most recently, Sedra has examined the connections between education and the rise of the modern state in nineteenth-century Egypt. After graduating Phi Beta Kappa in international affairs at Princeton University, he was awarded the Commonwealth Scholarship for study towards a Master's degree at Oxford University. In 1999, he returned to the United States to pursue New York University's pioneering joint program in History and Middle Eastern studies, developed by Michael Gilsean and Zachary Lockman. Sedra received his doctorate from NYU in January 2006. His dissertation examined how ideas about monitorial schooling were developed in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England, how monitorial methods filtered into Egypt in the mid-nineteenth

century and, most importantly, how such methods were appropriated and shaped by Egyptians. He has taught at Dalhousie University and the University of Toronto, and has published articles in *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, *Comparative Studies in South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East*, the *Journal of Religious History*, as well as the Middle East working paper series of Yale and Columbia Universities.

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¹ Bat Ye'or, *The Dhimmi: Jews and Christians Under Islam*, trans. David Maisel (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1985), 35.

² The most important exceptions to the rule are: B. L. Carter, *The Copts in Egyptian Politics 1918–1952* (London: Croom Helm, 1986); F. McCallum, 'The Political Role of the Patriarch in the Contemporary Middle East', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 43/6 (2007), 923–40; H. Ansari, 'Sectarian Conflict in Egypt and the Political Expediency of Religion', *Middle East Journal*, 38/3 (1984), 397–418; J. D. Pennington, 'The Copts in Modern Egypt', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 18/2 (1982), 158–79; P. Sedra, 'Class Cleavages and Ethnic Conflict: Coptic Christian Communities in Modern Egyptian Politics', *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 10/2 (1999), 219–35; Peter E. Makari, *Conflict and Cooperation: Christian-Muslim Relations in Contemporary Egypt* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2007); Thomas Philipp, 'Copts and Other Minorities in the Development of the Egyptian Nation-State', in S. Shamir (ed.), *Egypt from Monarchy to Republic* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995). Beyond these published sources, there are the unpublished doctoral dissertations of Dina el Khawaga (Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Paris, 1993) and Elizabeth Oram (Department of Anthropology, Princeton University, 2004) – both of which are essential sources in a subject area with a relatively small scholarly literature.

³ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London: Penguin, 1995).

⁴ Gregory Starrett, *Putting Islam to Work: Education, Politics, and Religious Transformation in Egypt* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998).

⁵ Dina el Khawaga, 'The Political Dynamics of the Copts: Giving the Community an Active Role', in Andrea Pacini (ed.), *Christian Communities in the Arab Middle East* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 172–90.

⁶ Murqus Simaika, 'The Awakening of the Coptic Church', *Contemporary Review*, 71 (1897), 734–47.

⁷ Donald Malcolm Reid, 'Archaeology, Social Reform, and Modern Identity Among the Copts, 1854–1952', in Alain Roussillon (ed.), *Entre Reforme Sociale et Mouvement National: Identité et modernisation en Egypte, 1882–1962* (Cairo: CEDEJ, 1995), 322. This chapter constitutes the only intervention in the historiography of the nineteenth-century Coptic community, of which I am aware, that aims at contextualizing and criticizing the dominant 'Awakening' narrative I will proceed to describe.

⁸ Simaika, 'Awakening', 734.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 735–6.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 737.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Irīs Habīb al-Masri, *Qissat al-Kanīsa al-Qibṭiyya* (Alexandria: Maktabat Kanīsat Mari Girgis, 1975). All translations from this text are my own.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 4:335.

¹⁵ Y'aqūb Nakhla Rūfīla, *Tārīkh al-Umma al-Qibṭiyya* (Cairo, 1897). The text was reissued in 2000 by Metropole Publishing in Cairo with a new preface by Gawdat Gabra, the Director of the Coptic Museum. All translations from this text are my own.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 303.

- ¹⁷ Gabriel Piterberg, 'The Tropes of Stagnation and Awakening in Nationalist Historical Consciousness: The Egyptian Case', in James Jankowski and Israel Gershoni (eds), *Rethinking Nationalism in the Arab Middle East* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1997), 42–61. Piterberg mounts a fascinating exploration of 'adherence to Orientalist discourse' among such Egyptian historians as Shafiq Ghurbal, Jamāl al-Dīn al-Shayyāl, and Ahmad Izzat 'Abd al-Karīm.
- ¹⁸ Rūfīla, *Tārīkh al-Ummah*, 261.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 262.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 265.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 265–6.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 288–9.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 294–5.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 296–7.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 303–4.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 320.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 320–1.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 324–6.
- ²⁹ The most recent intervention on the Sunday School Movement is S. S. Hasan's book *Christians versus Muslims in Modern Egypt* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2003). Regrettably, this is a work whose scholarship is put in serious doubt by recent reviews (Ralph Coury's in the April 2005 *American Historical Review* and my own in the Summer 2004 *Middle East Journal*). Far and away the most detailed analysis of the Movement is Wolfram Reiss, *Erneuerung in der Koptisch-Orthodoxen Kirche: Die Geschichte der koptisch-orthodoxen Sonntagsschulbewegung und die Aufnahme ihrer Reformansätze in den Erneuerungsbewegungen der Koptisch-Orthodoxen Kirche der Gegenwart* (Hamburg: Lit, 1998), based on the author's 1996 Heidelberg dissertation.
- ³⁰ H. H. Pope Shenouda III, *Calmness*, trans. Glynis Younan (Cairo: Coptic Orthodox Patriarchate, 1990).
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 20–1.
- ³² *Ibid.*, 23.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 24.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 27–8.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.
- ³⁶ Talal Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, 1986).

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