

INTRODUCTION

Relations between the Coptic and Muslim communities in Egypt have become increasingly strained in recent decades. This is not a new phenomenon; periods of sectarian tension have alternated with peaceful coexistence ever since Islam's arrival in the seventh century. In order to understand the present, it is helpful to know the past. But where is the general reader to turn? Popular media coverage—in both the West and the Middle East—often focuses on recent events and looks at surface issues, without penetrating to the historical roots of the problem. Westerners with no connection to the Middle East may know little about either the Coptic or the Muslim communities. Copts, as a minority group, are generally more familiar with the dominant Islamic culture than vice versa; Egyptians are taught selective aspects of Islamic history as part of the regular school curriculum, but they are taught little or nothing about the Coptic culture that prevailed before the Arabs arrived. The average Egyptian would be astonished to learn that Egypt had ever been a Coptic Christian country. To complicate matters, each sectarian community often views its own history in a highly selective way. This book is an attempt to provide some historical background. It, too, is inevitably selective and has its own points of view. Despite the authors' efforts to be evenhanded, some readers will strongly disagree with some of the views presented here. No doubt everyone can find something to be offended by. References are provided for those who wish to explore in greater depth.

This work surveys the flow of historical events that have influenced the relationship between Egyptian Muslims and Copts over some fourteen centuries. It makes no claims to be comprehensive, scholarly, or original. Rather, it draws on work done by others, both ancient and modern, presented in a way we hope will be informative and occasionally even entertaining. Its main objective is to offer the general reader a rough chronological framework within which Coptic–Muslim relations can be understood in the context of what was happening in Egypt at the time.

Much has been written on the history of Islam; somewhat less is available on the history of the Coptic (Egyptian Orthodox) Church. There are three important scholarly books dealing with Copts written in the modern era: *Christians versus Muslims in Modern Egypt* by S.S. Hassan;¹ *The Copts of Egypt: The Challenges of Modernization and Identity* by Vivian Ibrahim;² and *The Coptic Question in the Mubarak Era* by Sebastian Elsässer.³ But few writers have focused specifically on the relationship between the two communities as it has fluctuated in response to changes in the broader political climate. A single outstanding book on this subject, by Jacques Tagher, was published in Arabic in 1951. It covers the period from AD 640 to 1922. The only English translation was by Ragai N. Makar in 1998.⁴ The story behind Tagher's book is worth mentioning as an example of the difficulties of publishing scholarly work in Egypt on the subject of Christian–Muslim relations.

When Tagher's book appeared in 1951, it was strongly opposed by the Islamists of the time, especially the Muslim Brotherhood and al-Azhar. Muhammad al-Hudaybi, the head of the Muslim Brotherhood, did not want to oppose the book directly because any attention it received might boost its distribution. So, as a countermeasure, he asked the well-known Azharite shaykh Muhammad al-Ghazali to author a book presenting the Islamic point of view on the subject of tolerance and intolerance between Christianity and Islam.⁵ Al-Ghazali's book selectively showed that Islamic views and policies dealing with minorities were more tolerant than those of Christianity. It disputed some of what Tagher described with regard to discrimination against Copts. Despite the fact that it did not rise to the level of Tagher's scholarly work, it was popular among Islamists and caused Tagher's book to remain controversial. The first printing of Tagher's book quickly disappeared from the shelves; it was not printed again until sixty years later (2010), when it was reissued by one of the government publishing houses. At that time, the government felt threatened by the rise in political Islam, and was motivated to reprint Tagher's book which exposed facts Islamists found unflattering.

The teaching of history in Egypt, especially when related to religious matters, is often selective, biased, and used for political purposes. Muhammad 'Afifi, a modern Muslim historian, has expressed the view that Egyptians need to have a more comprehensive and objective view of their history so they are not held hostage by biased views from the past.⁶ The Arabic edition of this book, published in 2010 and now in its fifth printing, was an attempt to address this need.⁷

The present English edition has been revised to address a wider English-speaking readership, and updated to cover recent events in Egypt. As in the Arabic edition, the earlier chapters draw heavily on a number of references by ancient historians, both Muslims and Copts. This was done for two reasons. First, some of these are eyewitness accounts that convey the sentiment of the time and events they describe. Second, using Arabic sources may give the text greater credibility in the eyes of those readers who tend to mistrust modern Western writers. Since much of this early history is available only in Arabic or Coptic, we provide English translations of paragraphs from some of the older Coptic and Arabic references, many of which have never been translated into English.

We begin by looking at how Christianity and Islam each came to Egypt, and then follow the historical developments in Coptic–Muslim relations until the present time. The first chapter covers the period from the first to the seventh century AD, tracing the development of the Coptic Church from the time Christianity arrived in Egypt until the coming of Islam. It describes the Roman persecution of Christians; the famous Christian theology school of Alexandria; Origen, the father of the allegorical interpretation of the Bible; the beginnings of monasticism in Egypt and its spread to the rest of the Christian world; the end of Roman persecution; the emergence of a national church in Egypt; the theological differences over the nature of Jesus, which led to the separation of the Coptic Church from the Western church in the fifth century; and a second wave of Coptic persecution by the Byzantines, bringing us to the time of the Arabs' arrival in the seventh century.

The second chapter covers the state of Egypt when the Arabs arrived; the success of the Arab invasion; the nature of the occupation and what has been said about it by Copts and Muslims; and how Egyptians were treated by early Muslim rulers. Special attention is given to tax collection, a field that was dominated by Copts until the nineteenth century. This fact at times had a devastating effect on Coptic–Muslim relations.

Chapter three deals with the Umayyad and the Abbasid dynasties. These two dynasties were quite similar. Their representatives ruled Egypt for short periods, two to three years on average, and their major objective was to collect excessive taxes, while neglecting the needs of the country. This was a time of precipitous decline in the economy, persecution of Copts, and several popular revolts. The transformation of Egypt from a Coptic-speaking Christian country to an Arabic-speaking Islamic one began during this period.

Chapter four covers the independent Muslim rulers of Egypt. They comprise the Tulunid, Ikhshidi, Fatimid, and Ayyubid dynasties. During this period, general conditions in Egypt improved significantly. During the Fatimid dynasty, Copts experienced some of the best and also some of the worst treatment at the hands of Muslim rulers. At times, they were treated almost as equal to Muslims, but under the third Fatimid caliph, al-Hakim, they experienced terrible persecution and the destruction of almost every church in the country. This period saw a significant reduction in the Coptic population.

Chapter five deals with the period of the Mamluks, white slave warriors who seized control of Egypt and ruled for 274 years. The chapter explores the role played by Muslim religious leaders in legitimizing the Mamluk dynasty. This period witnessed conflicts between warring factions of the Mamluk ruling class, which weakened the country and opened the door once again for conflict between Copts and Muslims. Relations reached a low point, during which many churches from Alexandria to Aswan were destroyed in a single day. The Copts retaliated by burning mosques and Muslim homes. We also discuss the presence of European Crusaders in Egypt and Palestine, their effect on Coptic–Muslim relations, and the eventual defeat of the Crusaders at the hands of the Mamluks.

Chapter six deals with the Islamization of Egypt—its language, religion, and culture. The thirteenth and fourteenth centuries witnessed a devastating deterioration in Coptic–Muslim relations. During this period, Islam was under attack by Mongols from the east, European Crusaders in Syria and Palestine, and Catholics in Spain. In Egypt, Copts became a scapegoat for the anger Muslims felt due to their suffering at the hands of Christians in general.

Chapter seven covers Egypt under the Ottoman Empire, a period that lasted from the middle of the sixteenth until the end of the eighteenth century. During this period, the real power was still in the hands of the Mamluks, who owed formal allegiance to the Ottomans. Religious practice among both Christians and Muslims declined, as did their economic status.

Chapter eight covers the Napoleonic expedition in Egypt, which lasted for only three years but ushered in the beginnings of modern Egypt. Napoleon's occupation set the foundation for a political and legal system that was influenced by the French Revolution. We discuss the episode surrounding Mu'allim Ya'qub, an influential Copt who allied himself with the French occupiers. He became a general and led Coptic troops against the Muslims, who were supported by the Mamluks. When the

French finally returned to Europe, he accompanied them in the hope of finding Europeans who would help rid Egypt of Ottoman and Mamluk rule and bring modernity to Egypt. Ya‘qub remains a controversial figure to this day. He is seen as a patriot or a traitor, perspectives that tend to reflect the viewer’s religious affiliation.

Chapter nine describes the rise of the Muhammad ‘Ali dynasty, which lasted from 1805 until 1952. The high and low points of Muhammad ‘Ali’s reign are described, including his military adventures to expand his empire, and his eventual downfall at the hands of Western European powers. The Muhammad ‘Ali dynasty was a time of great change. There were two popular revolts, foreign experts and modern ideas flooded into Egypt, and the government provided scholarships for Egyptians to study abroad as part of a drive toward modernity. Restraints on Copts were loosened, the *jizya* (poll tax on non-Muslims) was abolished, Copts were drafted into the army for the first time, and some Copts began to enter mainstream political life. One consequence of greater contact with Europe was the attempt of Western missionaries to win converts among both Copts and Muslims in Egypt. This effort met with little success among Muslims, but made inroads among Copts, leading the government to support the Coptic Church in its efforts to stop the intrusion of Western influence. The Egyptian governments of this period were strong, and the historical records make no mention of significant problems between Copts and Muslims. The Suez Canal was built during this period.

Chapter ten deals with the Urabi revolt. This revolt began as an attempt by native Egyptian officers to gain greater influence within an army led primarily by Turkish and Circassian officers. It gradually expanded into a movement, supported by both Christian and Muslim Egyptians, expressing their opposition to Turkish domination and European interference. This attempt to bring greater independence and democratization ultimately failed. Urabi was exiled and the British colonized Egypt for nearly seventy years.

Chapter eleven covers the British imperial ambitions in Egypt. These increased after the opening of the Suez Canal, eventually leading to the military invasion and occupation of Egypt. This chapter discusses British attempts to cause a rift between Copts and Muslims aimed at facilitating British control. The role of the Copts during the British occupation is discussed, as well as the rise and decline of tension between Copts and Muslims. Some Coptic aristocrats attempted to modernize the Coptic Church, but faced resistance from the church.

Chapter twelve covers the first half of the twentieth century with emphasis on the period between the 1919 revolution and the 1952 revolution. These three decades witnessed the beginning and end of the democratic nationalistic movement in Egypt. It was a time of great ferment that saw the rise of political parties, the adoption of a national constitution, and the representation of Copts within the political system. In a push for greater self-determination, most Egyptians, Copts and Muslims alike, resisted both the British and the monarchy. In this context, we discuss the role of Muslim religious leaders and their influence in politics. Conservative Islamic forces, such as al-Azhar University, supported the monarchy against secularism. We also discuss the emergence of the Muslim Brotherhood, the beginning of the modern revival of the Coptic Church, the appearance of prominent Coptic politicians, and the effect of growing Islamic influence in the educational system.

Chapter thirteen begins with the 1952 officers' revolt and covers the Nasser period, an era rich in successes and failures as Nasser attempted to implement a new social agenda, expand education, and encourage industrialization. This period witnessed a war against the British, French, and Israelis in 1956, and another war with Israel in 1967. Under Nasser, independent democratic institutions were weakened, Coptic and Muslim elites were marginalized or disappeared, and a new military class dominated the administration. Although the Coptic role in politics was much reduced from what it had been in the first half of the century, the Copts experienced little direct discrimination, except in the upper levels of government. During this time, educated Copts rose to the highest ranks of church leadership and started a popular revival of Coptic traditions. The church started to assume a greater role in representing Copts in the political arena. The 1950s and 1960s saw persecution of leftists, intellectuals, and the Muslim Brotherhood.

Chapter fourteen covers Egypt under President Sadat, who courted the Muslim Brotherhood and other jihadists to help neutralize the influence of the leftists and Nasserites. Ironically, this policy strengthened political Islam and eventually resulted in Sadat's assassination. During this period, conflict between the president and the Coptic patriarch reached a level of hostility not seen in centuries. This period also witnessed the Arab-Israeli war of 1973 which ended with the Camp David Accords between Egypt and Israel. Corruption within Egypt started to increase significantly and dissent was stifled. The period ended with widespread jailing of anyone who objected to Sadat's policy, followed by Sadat's assassination by Muslim radicals.

Chapter fifteen covers the Mubarak era, which lasted for thirty years. This period witnessed increasing corruption, weakening of civil institutions, and strengthening of the government security apparatus, bureaucracy, and the army. Political Islam increased in power and popularity, and violence against Copts reached a high point. Under Mubarak, a declared state of emergency allowed the government to suspend due process in order to control any opposition. This period ended with the popular revolt of 25 January 2011, which resulted in Mubarak stepping down from power.

Chapter sixteen brings us up to the time of this writing. The chapter begins with the Revolution of 25 January 2011, which removed Mubarak from power and installed the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) as temporary head of the government. A brief period of hope and enthusiasm gave way to political unrest as various factions, including the Muslim Brotherhood, competed to fill the power vacuum. In the absence of law enforcement and security, attacks on Copts and churches increased. The year 2012–13 saw the election of President Muhammad Morsi; installation of a government dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood; moves by Morsi to subvert democratic safeguards; and widespread demonstrations by the people, calling for his removal. The army forcibly removed Morsi, setting off a wave of violence and counter-demonstrations by his supporters, which were ruthlessly suppressed. Former general ‘Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi was elected president, and sectarian tensions have declined somewhat as of this writing. What the future holds remains to be seen.