The Copts: ‘Modern Sons of the Pharaohs’?

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Abstract

This essay briefly reviews the Coptic identity constructions that can be subsumed as ‘Pharaonism’, and tries to assess them with reference to both ancient sources and modern developments. Broadly speaking, Pharaonism is a way of claiming a deeply rooted national identity that transcends the religious opposition between Egypt’s Muslim majority and its indigenous Christian minority, the Copts. As a political ideology it was most successful in the period of the nationwide Egyptian struggle for independence in the early twentieth century, but its impact in particular among Coptic intellectuals is still great. In this essay, it is argued that Pharaonism is shaped in a remarkable degree by western Orientalism, and that its main historical tenets, such as the Copts’ indebtedness to pre-Christian, Pharaonic culture or their anti-Greek nationalism, can no longer be maintained.

Keywords

Egypt; Copts; Christian-Muslim relations; Egyptian nationalism; Pharaonism; Orientalism.

Introduction

Typical Coptic identity discourse is a by-product of the Orientalism so forcefully denounced by Edward Said and unthinkable without Egyptology. To a quite astonishing degree the cultural and racial prejudices of European
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scholars of the nineteenth and early twentieth century have shaped the way in which still today highly respectable Coptic intellectuals think and write about their own history and identity.

Before I will try to substantiate this statement, it may be useful to provide some basic information. The English word ‘Copt’, like French ‘copte’, derives through the Arabic Qibt from Greek Αἰγύπτιος, ‘Egyptian’. Etymologically, therefore, it refers to nationality, but its primary connotation in present-day use both inside and outside of Egypt is religious: a Copt is first of all an Egyptian Christian. As Christians, the Copts represent an indigenous tradition that is now basically Egyptian, even though in the past the jurisdiction of the Alexandrian Patriarchate comprised neighbouring parts of north-eastern Africa where eventually Christianity vanished (Lybia, Nubia) or went its own way (Ethiopia). This traditional Egyptian Christianity, as distinct from Roman Catholicism or Greek Orthodoxy, traces its roots back to the rejection of the Council of Chalcedon (451) and its definition of the nature of Christ. The resistance against ‘Chalcedon’ initiated a period of often violent conflict and local schisms in the entire east. In Egypt, this resulted, from the middle of the sixth century onwards, in the creation of separate hierarchies and, eventually, a permanent split within the Alexandrian Patriarchate. A considerable part of the population came to adhere to the anti-Chalcedonian church, traditionally (and wrongly) labelled ‘Monophysite’ (nowadays the non-term ‘Miaphysite’ is often preferred). In the centuries after the Arab conquest of Egypt (641), which signalled the separation of Egypt from the Eastern Roman Empire, this church consolidated its majority position and developed into a truly national church, the ancestor of the present-day Coptic Orthodox Church. Most Egyptian Christians now are members of this Church. Much smaller groups of Catholic and Protestant Copts result from conversion in the last few centuries.

According to widely varying estimates, the Copts make up between 5 per cent and 15 per cent of the population of Egypt, the remainder of which is Muslim. Linguistically, they are totally Arabicized. The ancient indigenous language, Coptic, died in medieval times, although it is still used as a liturgical language with a purely symbolic function, exactly like Latin in the Roman Catholic Church. Copts can be found in all layers of society, ranging from outcasts, like the well-known garbage collectors of Cairo, to cosmopolitan mag-

3) For a generally informative and reliable though somewhat biased overview of Coptic history, see Theodore Hall Partrick, *Traditional Egyptian Christianity: A History of the Coptic Orthodox Church* (Greensboro, NC, 1996); like many similar books it leans heavily on the so-called *History of the Patriarchs* (see below).