

COPTIC CHRISTIANITY *in* OTTOMAN EGYPT



FEBE ARMANIOS

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*In memory of Teta Linda,
for her love of learning.*

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Acknowledgments

Growing up in Heliopolis, I used to sit in my grandparents' living room next to Giddo Hilmy and listen to his spirited stories about the saints. As soon as I learned to read, I devoured all of the books he had authored about the lives of Coptic martyrs and about the saints' miraculous apparitions in Egypt. To us, the saints were real; we talked about them and to them, and their stories and iconography pervaded most aspects of our lives. This book celebrates, in part, my personal heritage but also that of a community whose full history merits greater investigation.

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A Note on Transliteration

I have adopted a modified version of the transliteration system used by the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. All names of individual authors, historical figures, and places, such as Yu'annis, Salib, and al-'Arish, were rendered with 'ayns and hamzas but no other diacritics. Technical terms, book titles, publisher names, and direct quotations were transliterated with full diacritical marks. I have provided the English form of places, terms, and personal names that are commonly used, such as Macarius, Antony, Damietta, and Alexandria. However, the names of Coptic patriarchs, bishops, and laity are given in their Arabic form (e.g., Patriarch Yu'annis XVI rather than Patriarch John XVI).

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Coptic Locales in Ottoman Egypt

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Coptic Christianity in Ottoman Egypt

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Introduction

In a rare mention of Coptic Christians, the Egyptian chronicler Ahmad al-Damurdashi inserts a short but telling story about public religious expression in eighteenth-century Egypt. On an otherwise ordinary day in the spring of 1748, the Coptic procession gathering outside the Church of the Virgin Mary seemed particularly loud and boisterous. Clergymen and laypeople, women and children, congregated in one of the narrow alleys of Harat al-Rum. In readying for their pilgrimage to Jerusalem, they loaded camels with specially decorated wooden carriages. Al-Damurdashi notes that once provisions were packed, Patriarch Murqus VII (1745–1769) mounted his mule and was taken to the head of the lineup by a troop of young boys. Behind him rode the Coptic lay dignitaries, or *archons*,¹ dressed in their finest robes, followed by their wives, whose colorful Kashmiri shawls were wrapped neatly over their heads. The archons' wives insisted on traveling by land and were glad to accompany the patriarch on this journey. Coptic leaders had acquired the necessary permissions for the pilgrimage, and everyone sensed that this procession was off to a good start.

The Copts had spared no expense in their planning. Much like the *hajj* caravan, their convoy was heralded by a troop of dancers and musicians, while boys guided the pilgrims with their torches. After a short time, however, the hubbub began to disturb the Cairenes, who had gathered to watch the spectacle moving north toward al-Ghawriyya, the old Mamluk neighborhood near the al-Azhar mosque-school complex. As the pilgrims came closer to one of Islam's most revered institutions,

all festivities halted. Suddenly the voices of Muslim religious leaders, the *'ulamā'*, were heard from amid the crowds: "How dare they emulate the Muslims?" said one. Others inflamed the crowds by shouting that the procession was an "innovation" (*bid'a*) and demanded that military officers stop the pilgrimage and seize the Copts' possessions. The pilgrims panicked and scrambled to guard their lives and properties. Coptic leaders sought protection from a high-ranking grandee, who advised them to return to their homes and promised to safeguard their belongings. As the pilgrims fled, they heard news that the Ottoman governor had forbidden all Christians from traveling by land. In this case, the Copts were moderately fortunate. During previous years, they had sometimes been able to make their way out of the city and successfully pay homage to their holiest sites; but on other occasions, they were attacked by angry mobs who looted their provisions and forced them into a humbling retreat. On the scale of successes and failures, as al-Damurdashi reports, 1748 was simply an "ill-omened year" for Egypt's Coptic Christians.²

One might conclude that al-Damurdashi's account reveals the occasional act of discrimination against Christians or that it showed acceptance of non-Muslim customs by certain segments of the society but not others. The history of non-Muslim communities in the Islamic world, particularly of Copts, has been often understood within this framework, through the lens of persecution or tolerance.³ Inevitably, these categories encourage an examination of minorities from the perspective of the dominant culture, and in this context, non-Muslims frequently appear as docile and victimized. However, while the experience and recollection of suffering deserves serious attention, the pilgrimage story indicates that other issues too warrant inquiry, ones that reveal the complex nature of non-Muslim religious practices. For example, in analyzing the above narrative, the historian is left to wonder how Coptic leaders acquired the necessary permits. Why did Copts find it important to hold this procession, knowing that open display of non-Muslim religiosity was forbidden? How and why were religious practices so crucial to Coptic life that they merited such risk-taking? These questions are central to my project, and in seeking to answer them, I will eschew an essentialist representation of a singular voice, of one Coptic identity, and attempt instead to capture snapshots of the religious rituals, writings, and practices that informed a sense of Coptic communality in Ottoman Egypt.

Recently, scholars have begun to examine the political circumstances that shaped Coptic existence under Ottoman rule, but I will maintain that this type of narrative alone tells us little about how Copts experienced their religion. I am interested here in the range of worldviews that emerged within the Coptic community, from high to low, as evidenced by their own writings. Carlo Ginzburg argues in the context of sixteenth-century Friuli that popular religious culture was neither completely isolated from nor totally dependent on the high culture of elites and

distinguished clergymen and that in the performative exchange between them one can catch a glimpse of this reciprocal relationship.⁴ Similarly, even though most Coptic documents were reproduced under the orders of elite laymen or clergy, “non-elite” actors, peasants, artisans, and lower clergy all actively participated in religious life. Since the majority of sources studied in this book were intended to be read out loud to those audiences, I also view them as a record of the interaction that took place between the church hierarchy and its congregations. By asking what tropes, narratives, and rituals characterized expressions of piety and spirituality among the Copts, I read my sources critically to uncover not only institutional perspectives shared by lay and clerical elders but also clues about the lived reality of the masses.

Issues of acculturation and assimilation will factor into any discussion of Coptic religious life. It has been sometimes argued that in their religious and cultural practices, Copts are indistinguishable from other Egyptians.⁵ In the Ottoman period, Copts did share a number of practices with their Muslim neighbors. For example, they circumcised their boys around the age of ten and, following ancient and biblical traditions, abstained from eating “strangled” meat.⁶ Likewise, a number of secular and religious festivals in early Islamic, Mamluk, and Ottoman Egypt were attended by all faiths. However, Ottoman Copts also carved out their own social space and occasionally shirked participation in specifically Islamic celebrations.⁷ Thus while Egypt’s various communities—Copts, Jews, Melkites (Greek Orthodox), Armenians, Syrian Catholics, and Muslims—shared a number of folk practices, Copts generally existed as a separate group with its own devotional rites and spiritual culture. Their distinctiveness is partially tied to an Islamic legal structure that separated religious groups into Muslim believers and *dhimmīs*,⁸ and Copts formed the biggest group of *dhimmīs* in Ottoman Egypt. Ultimately, when it came to holding specific worldviews and to the life experiences that shaped individual attitudes, my research asks what beliefs and practices Coptic Christianity fostered among its adherents.

I have chosen the early and middle centuries of Ottoman rule in Egypt, the “early modern” era (1517–1798),⁹ as my primary focus. When it comes to the study of Copts, the early Islamic, Fatimid, Ayyubid, and Mamluk periods, as well as the modern centuries, have received some scholarly attention, but this intermediary and formative period has scarcely been studied. I do not argue, as some have, that the French Occupation (1798–1801) was a moment of liberation and revival for the Christian Copts.¹⁰ In fact, this study will show that revitalization movements arose throughout Ottoman rule, one of the most prominent dating to the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Still, the French invasion noticeably altered the Copts’ status and elevated some to new heights: at least temporarily, one Copt served as a leader of a military battalion and another as a magistrate (*qāḍī*).¹¹ These

developments, as well as the rise of the semi-autonomous Muhammad ‘Ali dynasty (1805–1952) and new waves of Catholic and Protestant missionaries to Egypt, so starkly distinguish the Coptic experience at the turn of the nineteenth century from earlier periods that they merit a separate investigation.¹²

The Coptic Church begins its calendar from the rule of the Roman Emperor Diocletian (284–305), when thousands of Egyptian Christians were killed for their beliefs. Their stories were passed down through generations, and today most are recorded in the Coptic *Synaxarium*. Hagiographies of martyrs (or martyrologies) exist as a familiar and living reality within the Coptic collective memory. Historically, the church has also taken pride in having established the institution of monasticism, which is still practiced among the majority of its clerical leaders, including patriarchs and bishops.¹³ The ancient monasteries in Wadi al-Natrun, along the Red Sea, and throughout Upper Egypt have served as major pilgrimage destinations since the fourth century. Their remoteness drew those who were seeking the miraculous, the holy, or simply an escape from the mundane. One can argue that the foundations of Coptic faith and practice have been closely tied to traditions of sainthood, martyrdom, and monasticism.

At its height, the church was also an evangelical institution, with particularly successful missions in Sudan and Ethiopia.¹⁴ Its distinctive brand of Christianity, shared with the Armenian, Syrian, and Ethiopian Churches, is worth explaining here. These churches dissented from Rome and Constantinople at the Council of Chalcedon (451) in a dispute over the nature of Christ. Adherents of the Council of Chalcedon argued that two natures (divinity and humanity) united in the person of Jesus Christ, whereas the Copts and other opponents of the council favored defining the person of Jesus as of two natures. The theological dissent had wide ramifications, as each side erroneously understood and consequently condemned the other.¹⁵ In time, Copts separated from Byzantine domination, and after the Islamic conquest of Egypt in 641, they would become doubly marginalized—ostracized by fellow Christians for their anti-Chalcedonian beliefs and estranged as a subordinate religious community. Ensuing historical developments and church policies led to the rise of a relatively insular community that has had, as one scholar writes, a troublesome history of relations “with every other Church in the world, whether Orthodox, Catholic, or Protestant.”¹⁶

The Coptic faith is profoundly ritualistic. At its core are seven sacraments, a rich liturgical heritage, and the strict, nearly vegan fasts that believers are obligated to follow.¹⁷ Official and popular dimensions of the Coptic faith have commonly intersected in the traditions of pilgrimage and the veneration of saints, both of which were nurtured by clerical leaders and patronized by the laity. Veneration preserved the memory of saints and strengthened the church’s historical assertion that

it was founded on the blood of martyrs. Pilgrimage fostered closer ties between believers and their local churches, shrines, and sanctuaries. Pilgrims were drawn to a shrine not only because they might receive remedies, miracles, or fatherly guidance, but also because of its lively festival, usually celebrated on a saint's feast day (*mawlid*, *mūlid*) or martyrdom date. These festivities were a time when boundaries of prevailing social norms could be overstepped or redefined.

In the decades following the Ottoman conquest of 1517, Egyptians engaged in a kind of spiritual introspection, as seen by the noticeable popularity of Sufism and interest in commemorating *mawlid*s.¹⁸ Some historians have implied that the melancholic atmosphere (or "malaise," as Michael Winter calls it) following the violent conquest triggered an outpouring of religious piety in both urban and rural centers, a feeling that intensified with the rampant plague outbreaks.¹⁹ No doubt these afflictions reinforced Egyptians' sense of misfortune and increased their desire for closer bonds with the spiritual realm; people turned to the supernatural simply to cope with ongoing hardships.²⁰ Historically, plagues and disease often led people, rich and poor, to make public expressions of penitence and piety, as the afflicted believed themselves to be cursed by God. Life in Ottoman Egypt seems to have precipitated similar sentiments. In addition to disease, however, civil strife dominated Egyptian politics and society: Ottoman governors were regularly deposed or murdered, and violence in urban and rural areas persisted for decades. Thus early modern Egypt also saw the spread of mystical practices as one way of dealing with the bloody outcomes of local political struggles. Among Egyptian Muslims, the attention to popular religion seemed to be part of a desire to find spiritual meaning in an uncertain world and to search, as one scholar writes, for a "compromise between general conformity to performance of prayer, ritual, and formal modes of life prescribed by orthodoxy, and [Sufi] embellishments, interpretations, and beliefs."²¹ Egypt's downgrade from an imperial center to a mere province appears to have further encouraged "an apolitical and even other-worldly orientation" among its people.²²

So how did Copts cope with these circumstances, and in what ways did they use religion to articulate their own concerns? While most Muslim chroniclers and Coptic Church documents avoid this subject, the Ottoman conquest undoubtedly created new challenges for the community. Under Mamluk rule, Copts had faced waves of conversions and attacks against church, property, and life from which they were still recovering in the early sixteenth century. Coptic anxieties intensified in the decades after the conquest because they were forced to contend with the prospect of new rulers. How strictly would the Ottoman sultans and their proxies govern their non-Muslim subjects? How would they enforce existing laws and provisions? No doubt Coptic leaders considered the future of their diminished community as they developed ways to deal with impending challenges. Their impulse for self-protection grew more acute following Catholic attempts at unification in

the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and during direct encounters with Catholic missionaries in the eighteenth century.

In response to these concerns, lay and clerical leaders collaborated, at least intermittently, in preserving communal traditions and supporting forms of religious expression that captured the needs of fellow believers. Martyr cults, for instance, drew on age-old rituals, allayed fears of conversion, and fulfilled the community's needs for local heroes. Other traditions, such as the pilgrimage to Jerusalem, were clearly influenced by the surrounding culture, even to the point where, as al-Damurdashi's story reveals, they provoked the ire of Muslim traditionalists. Still, in coping with these stressful events, Copts generally turned toward rituals that satisfied their own individual desires. On a practical level, differences in how Muslims and non-Muslims expressed their faiths existed not least because the latter were burdened by restrictive rules and laws.²³

As it fostered an active religious life during the Ottoman period, the Coptic clerical and lay leadership accomplished three tasks that would promote a modest resurgence. First, communal leaders helped write, create, finance, and disseminate texts that represent the collective religious output. Second, clergymen preached homilies and sermons to a lay community (elites and masses) that demanded both traditional and innovative contextually specific stories. Third, lay and clerical leaders organized and supported popular religious traditions, such as pilgrimages and festivals, while engaging in diplomacy with local Muslim leaders. The role of lay elites as well as clergymen in these processes will become central to our discussion. Generally, both were committed to ensuring communal cohesiveness, and both understood that a strong and vibrant community, with defined boundaries, could reinforce their own authority and empower them to act as communal representatives in broader Egyptian society.

Within this framework, my work seeks to fill a void within the scholarly literature on Ottoman Egypt. To date, a few historians have explored non-Muslim involvement in Ottoman Egyptian bureaucracy and society, but most have excluded a detailed discussion of the Copts. The literature on the military organization, trade, literary culture, judiciary, and non-Muslim communities of Ottoman Egypt contains only passing mention of the Copts. Moreover, while we are learning more about Christians in the Balkans and the Levant and about Jews in Palestine and Istanbul—a rich literature that offers important comparisons to the present study—most of this scholarship tends to overlook the Coptic perspective.

Admittedly, archival challenges face anyone who conducts research into non-Muslim communities of Egypt, particularly when it concerns the Copts. On the one hand, there are few available or known documents on Coptic life or religious practices from the Ottoman era. Aside from scattered mentions by chroniclers such

as Ibn Iyas, al-Damurdashi, and al-Jabarti, there are almost no references to Copts in Muslim literary sources. At times, and in contrast to their visibility in Mamluk-era sources, one wonders if Copts had simply disappeared from the historical consciousness of Muslim Egyptian writers.²⁴ An analysis of *sijills*, or court records, which constitute an important source on non-Muslim life in other parts of the Ottoman Empire, could potentially illuminate certain legal and economic aspects of Coptic life. However, *sijill*-based research is currently at its nascent stages for early modern Egypt, and from what we can gather so far, these records make few references to the Copts' religious worldviews, the topic of the present study.²⁵ Copts are also mostly absent in Ottoman imperial archives.²⁶ Unlike their Armenian and Greek correlates, who had active patriarchates in Istanbul, they were primarily governed by local power-holders in Egypt—Ottoman governors, 'ulamā', military households, or their own communal leaders. As such, they scarcely provoked the interest of sultans or their deputies. Finally, most original sources produced by Copts have been deemed either immaterial or inaccessible because they have been safeguarded in closely held archives. Inasmuch as possible, my project focuses prominently on this Coptic-Arabic literature.²⁷

Recent studies of early Egyptian Christianity—by David Frankfurter, Stephen J. Davis, and Rebecca Krawiec, among others—have painted a sophisticated picture of Christian life during a formative historical period. They provide a good model for understanding how religious expression was negotiated to meet societal changes and local communal needs. It is remarkable, given the expansion of that field in recent years, that we know comparably little about how Christianity was practiced in the centuries following the Islamic conquest of Egypt. Still, the history of Coptic life—political, social, and religious—during the medieval and Ottoman periods has gradually earned more attention in large part due to historians like Aziz Atiya, Otto Meinardus, and Samir Khalil Samir, as well as to the pioneering, if imperfect, writings of Iris Habib al-Masri, Kamil Salih Nakhla, and Ya'qub Nakhla Rufayla. Among the most recent scholarly endeavors, my book complements Maged Mikhail's research on Coptic identity in the early Islamic and Fatimid periods, as well Tamer el-Leithy's examination of Coptic conversion to Islam under Mamluk rule.

Scholarship on Coptic social and political existence in the Ottoman era has also sprung up in recent years. Muhammad 'Afifi's *Al-Aqbāṭ fī Miṣr fi'l 'Aṣr al-'Uthmānī* (1992) was one of the first to exclusively tackle this subject. His monograph provides an important overview of political and economic life relying, in part, on Egyptian archival sources, and less so on Coptic ones. Alastair Hamilton, moreover, has perhaps written the most important work to date on Western interaction with the Coptic Church. Accessing documents in Arabic and a variety of Western languages, Hamilton elaborates on the struggles of Christian missionaries and European Orientalists in late Mamluk and Ottoman Egypt, revealing their motivations to study

the Copts and to convert them to Catholicism or Protestantism. I have used his work extensively, as it divulges documents from European archives that have been heretofore untapped. A growing cadre of Egyptian historians also seeks to expand our familiarity with Coptic culture. Magdi Guirguis, for instance, has explored Coptic legal and communal organization between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, relating both, most recently, to iconography in the eighteenth century. His access to a handful of *waqf* (charitable endowment) documents housed in the Coptic patriarchate in Egypt also offers a tantalizing glimpse of potential research in Coptic *waqfiyyāt*, even as the church has placed strict limitations on these valuable sources.²⁸ Looking to this collective output, one anticipates more research, particularly regarding legal, economic, and art history.

The present study benefits from these important contributions but also steers away from a strict emphasis on political, legal, or ecclesiastical history or the history of Coptic-Western relations. Instead, I focus on a varied understanding of Coptic spirituality and religious practice in relation to processes of identity-formation. Given that, as Bruce Masters notes, religion in the Ottoman Arab world served “as an internalized anchor to each individual’s sense of broader community and as the primary signifier of his or her identity to those outside it,” I look to faith, piety, and practice to gauge how Copts interpreted their religion and, in the process, how they defined the boundaries of their community.²⁹

The Ottoman period has been commonly dismissed as culturally unproductive for all Egyptians, but on closer investigation, we can see that there was a resurgent interest, particularly among Copts, in patronizing manuscript production.³⁰ Perusing the catalogs of various European and North American libraries, in addition to monastic and church holdings in Egypt, provides only a small glimpse of this prolific output. Original written treatises may have been few in number, but the sheer abundance of documents indicates that there was an enduring literature, supported by a strong belief in preserving a communal heritage and an increase in funds for such conservation projects.

These trends are partially related to the character of Coptic leadership during this period. In the Ottoman world, where dhimmīs frequently visited Muslim legal courts to resolve their social and economic disputes, non-Muslim religious leaders became increasingly trusted with exercising moral authority over their communities.³¹ For Coptic clergy, their role was relegated to defining “orthodox” behavior and policing religious rituals. Coptic lay leaders, who were often challenging clergymen over communal authority, recognized that they too could enhance their positions by funding the copying of manuscripts, renovating churches, commissioning icons, and patronizing pilgrimages and festivals. All of these efforts showcased their generosity and could endear them to fellow believers. As such, Coptic religious life and the material culture that preserved it were responsive to the changing nature of

communal leadership, to larger political surroundings, and to broader Coptic concerns in Ottoman Egypt.

My research has identified three groups of Coptic-Arabic manuscripts that will be closely considered in this book. The first are chronicles that record communal events, noting momentous occasions such as pilgrimages; even these sparse annals provide evidence of various occasions that brought laity and clergy together in common acts of piety. The second, hagiographies, reveal how copyists reproduced stories of particular saints because they were demanded by and indeed touched the lives of their audiences. Hagiographies were recited to mixed groups of clergy and laity, thus they point to devotional trends among the community at large. The third, sermons, were written with the clear intention of effecting change in communal behavior and therefore serve as a good example of expected moral codes. While focusing mostly on the clerical hierarchy's concerns, they also provide clues to general social and religious practices in this era. Sensitivity toward issues of text-writing, copying, and performance will make for an enriched reading of these sources, which, on initial examination, may appear dull and formulaic. The scarcity of documents might inhibit an analysis of local variations in religious life, but inasmuch as possible, this study attempts to glimpse the worldviews of Egyptian Copts at large.

It is difficult, as will later emerge, to furnish the historical context behind these Coptic narratives, as they rarely make references to their milieu.³² Moreover, and as has been well established in the scholarly literature, the expression of faith and piety can be tough to gauge with precision, and at times historians are forced to speculate or infer. Realizing these restrictions, I supplement this study whenever possible by turning to the *History of the Patriarchs of the Egyptian Church*,³³ a rich record particularly for the medieval and Mamluk eras. A few choice references to Coptic life in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries offer important background information on internal communal dynamics. I also rely on Muslim chroniclers, who seldom mention Copts but still help to furnish some of the broader sociopolitical context. When pertinent, and to help fill the gaps, I closely evaluate and discuss European traveler and missionary accounts, many of which provide detailed, if overly biased, records of Coptic religious life and traditions.

A final note on sources: anyone writing Coptic history from internal community documents must contend not only with the shifting political climate in today's Egypt but also with a reserved church leadership. Untapped and mostly uncatalogued manuscripts are strictly guarded in ancient churches and monasteries. Fortunately, a few of these are exceptionally well organized and more open to critical scholarship. Nevertheless, gaining access to this material still depends, to a great extent, on internal connections, personal relations, and sensitive dealings. Should recent hopes of creating a digital manuscript archive in Cairo be realized, they will surely transform the study of Coptic history.