

# The Coptic Church: From a Spiritual Space to a Catalyst of Identity

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The Coptic Church is considered one of the oldest entities in the history of the Mediterranean, and the oldest in Egypt. Saint Mark established the Coptic Church in Egypt, so when the country was under the pagan Roman Empire, Copts converted to Christianity. Since then, they have fought to keep on existing, to maintain their presence, their interactions and their identity, which has a very strong narrative. The Coptic Church plays a crucial role in this process, especially since the Coptic migration waves from Egypt in the 20th-century, creating an international diaspora. In 1962, Pope Cyril VI established the first General Bishoprpic for Public, Ecumenical and Social Services in the history of the Coptic Church. This network had two main goals: supporting the Coptic migrants abroad and raising funds for development projects in Egypt for youths and limited-income families. Thus, the different dioceses in the diaspora became a place to gather and find support. Today, the Coptic Church has a historic opportunity not only to survive the challenge but to flourish and experience a universal expansion.

## Introduction

Churches play an important role in different societies, and the primordial one is spreading and preserving the Christian faith and tradition. However, there are other connotations that the word church bring to one's mind, which differ according to the socio-political context. When we get closer to the Mediterranean, religion is a different reality, playing a bigger role, especially in areas like social mobilisation, state-building, and identity construction. The Orthodox Church was a major player in the Greek revolution of 1821 against the Ottomans; hence, it is considered a symbol of national independence. The Ma-

ronite Church had a pivotal role in founding the state of Greater Lebanon in 1920, and until today the Lebanese constitution states that the president should be Maronite.

The Coptic Church is another prominent Mediterranean example. It is considered one of the oldest entities in the history of the Mediterranean and the oldest in Egypt. The strength of this Church dwells in the loyalty of its people to the institution and its Pope. From a sociological point of view, it is a phenomenon worthy of study. Copts from different social and economic classes maintain strong links with the Church, which has always tried to perceive people's needs and to offer a Coptic alternative to whatever

the society at large reluctantly gives them. This dynamic between the Church and the Copts is an ancient one going back to 64 AD. When Saint Mark came to Alexandria, he found a dichotomy of power: the king in the palace and the priest in the temple, two poles interconnected and supporting each other. Mark established the Coptic Church far from these two poles: among the people. Copts were destined to be an eternal minority and never adhered to the state faith. When Egypt was under the pagan Roman Empire, Copts converted to Christianity; when the Empire converted to Christianity, Copts disagreed on theology; and when Arabs conquered Egypt, it became a Muslim state. Nevertheless, the Copts continued fighting to exist. Never having won but also not having lost, they maintained their presence, their interaction, and above all their identity.

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This struggle did not prevent Copts from excelling, and we could say that it gave them the impetus to prove themselves in different fields. Apart from Boutros Boutros-Ghali, the sixth Secretary-General of the United Nations, the rich and diverse Coptic contributions are fascinating. Ester Fanous (1895-1990) was a prominent Coptic lady who had a major role in founding the New Woman Society, the first Egyptian feminist movement, while being strongly involved in the 1919 national revolution against the British occupation. The Sawiris Coptic family continues to have an important in-

fluence on the economy: Nassef Sawiris is Egypt's richest man, and Forbes regularly features him in its Real-Time Billionaires List. The Coptic elite go beyond politics and economy: in cardiology, few names can compete with Magdi Yacoub, the fellow of the Royal Society who was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II and later awarded the Order of Merit. More names could be cited in other fields such as sports, theatre or the visual arts. However, the goal is not to present an exhaustive list of Coptic achievers but to highlight how Coptic identity in many cases was a stimulus to make greater efforts and greater contributions.

This article argues that the Coptic identity survived because the Coptic Church provided a strong identity narrative. By adapting its discourse and tools, over centuries the Church became a platform to construct a strong Coptic identity, and to experience a genuine sense of belonging, not in spite of but because of being Copts. The 20th-century witnessed several Coptic migration waves from Egypt, creating an international diaspora in six continents, and accordingly confronting the Church with a new reality. Our driving question is whether the Coptic Church, in the light of modern social changes, can maintain its power and influence over the Coptic identity. With this in mind, we will first take an epistemological path where we will question the terms and definitions and their nexus with Coptic self-perception and identity. Then, we will examine the development of the Coptic Church as an identity space in the light of the socio-political changes in Egypt and in the diaspora. Finally, we will conclude with two possible future scenarios of the Church as an identity catalyst.

## Minority but in the Motherland

There is no consensus on the right etymology of Copts. Some trace its origin to Capthorim, traditionally a grandson of Noah who settled in the region and gave his name to the Copts. Others refer it to the name of the Egyptian temple Ha-Ka-Pth, which means the house of the soul of Ptah and metonymically means the old capital Memphis, and thus Egypt. In any case, the different approaches converge in agreeing on the Greek word *Aigyptus* as the origin of Copts. Today the term Copts is used to refer exclusively to the Christian minority of Egypt.

This minority is a challenging one to analyse, as it may be considered a *sui generis* community. The percentage of Copts in the Egyptian population is taboo, and the last one based on an official census in 1986 was 5.9%.<sup>1</sup> Since then the state stopped releasing numbers or percentages of Copts, perhaps due to the sensitivity of the issue: if the percentage is low it is used by extremist Islamists to diminish Copts' requests and claims for equal rights,<sup>2</sup> but if the official statistics give a high percentage of Coptic population, Islamists accuse the state of appeasing Copts,<sup>3</sup> as a higher percentage may lead to higher representation in parliament and government. Consequently, the Church officials responded by releasing higher numbers. Pope Shenoudah (1923-2012) declared that Copts in Egypt numbered 12 million –

out of 84 million in 2008, meaning 15% of the Egyptian population – and highlighted that “the Church knows the numbers of its subjects through (our) internal census conducted for all Christian families... and we do not care about the numbers announced by state agencies.”<sup>4</sup>

Disregarding the percentage dialectic, it is widely agreed that Copts are the biggest religious minority in the predominantly Muslim region of the Middle East, which is another fact contested by the Copts. One reason is the usual association between minorities, inequality, or domination.

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Moreover, Copts are different from other religious minorities in the region when it comes to the concept of the motherland: for instance, a Lebanese of Armenian origin may perceive Armenia as the motherland, or a Moroccan Jew may see Israel in the same way. Copts see Egypt differently. Belonging to the Coptic community on my mother's side, I have received the intellectual input that any Copt will receive from their childhood, whether in family circles, from friends, and especially from the Church. The core of this input is a rich discourse about the inherent Egyptianness of Copts, and how

1. Amira Saleh, “CAPMAS: No count for Copts since 1986”, *Almasry Alyoum*, 2012, <https://www.almasyalyoum.com/news/details/185798>

2. Hamdy Rezk, “How many Copts are there in Egypt?”, *Almasry Alyoum*, 2017, <https://www.almasyalyoum.com/news/details/1200646>

3. Leyla Khaled, “Why does the Egyptian state fear the number of Copts?”, *Daraj*, 2023, <https://daraj.media/108173/>

4. “New controversy about the number of Copts in Egypt”, *Aljarida*, 2008, <https://www.aljarida.com/articles/1461749893904970000>

by persevering in their religious identity they also preserved their Egyptian identity. This discourse is based on two main theories complementing and explaining each other.

## A Church and a Civilisation

The first theory is the continuity of the old Egyptian civilisation in the Coptic Church. This theory is expressed in the different traditions of the Coptic Church and the way it presents these traditions as a Christian adaption and a development of old Egyptian artistic practices.<sup>5</sup> By not competing or replacing the existing Egyptian culture, Christianity was an accessible religion for Egyptians who were attached to their arts and culture.

The most obvious element is the Coptic language, the main liturgical language still used in any Coptic Church in Egypt or in the diaspora. It is a matter of debate whether the Coptic language is a real language in the *purest* sense, as it is mainly a vernacular development of the demotic stage of the Egyptian language, written in the Greek alphabet with a supplement of seven letters from the old Egyptian alphabet.

The second important expression of Egyptian roots in the Coptic cultural heritage is Coptic liturgical music, chanted by a chorus of deacons in any service. Some parts of the ecclesiastical hymns have been

translated into Arabic in Egypt or the respective languages of the diaspora, but the melodies are always the same ones that have followed a tradition of oral transmission over the centuries, before the emergence of the modern audio recording technologies and the relatively new interest in preserving the cultural heritage of ancient civilisation. The Church presents its musical tradition as a pure adaption of old Egyptian music with Christian texts.<sup>6</sup> Abba Gregorios (1919-2001), General Bishop for Coptic Culture and Scientific Research, explained extensively that the hymn chanted on Good Friday uses the same melodies that ancient Egyptians chanted to bury their king,<sup>7</sup> and the hymn chanted upon the entry of a Bishop is an old Egyptian hymn that ancient Egyptians used to welcome the arrival of their kings.<sup>8</sup>

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Another component of Coptic cultural heritage that affirms the continuity of Egyptian arts in churches is the visual arts. The Coptic Church in the Egyptian Christian era continued using pagan religious symbols with new interpretations conforming to the Christian faith. For example, the seashell of Aphrodite, which the Church continued using to decorate buildings and manuscripts,

5. Ilie Melniciuc Puică, "Biblical Elements in Coptic Icon", *European Journal of Science and Theology*, 2, no. 2, 2006, p. 37.

6. Severine Gabry, "Transmitting Coptic Musical Heritage", in Nelly van Doorn-Harder (ed.), *Copts in Context: Negotiating Identity, Tradition, and Modernity*, University of South Carolina Press, 2017, p. 82.

7. Abba Gregorios, "A comment about the Coptic heritage, and its Pharaonic origins", Coptic prayers and hymns, 02:10 to 03:49 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gLOFDOH9-Lc>

8. Tereza Kamal, "Coptic melodies are derived from ancient Egyptian royal music", *Almasry Alyoum*, 2021, <https://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/2304534>

but it was introduced as a symbol of the Virgin Mary who had Jesus Christ in her belly (as the pearl). The *Ankh*, which is an important ancient Egyptian symbol of abundance and life, was also introduced as a variation of the cross and hence a symbol of salvation.

## Copts but not Arabs!

The second theory is that Copts are not Arabs. After the Arab conquest of Egypt (639 AD) an influx of migrants from the Arab peninsula came to settle in Egypt. The new state imposed the *Jizyah*<sup>9</sup> on the Copts; following this, many families converted to Islam and hence were distanced from Egyptian identity. Disregarding the historical accuracy of this narrative, it does represent an integral part of the self-perception of the Coptic community who take pride in maintaining their faith and their proximity no matter the hardship. This theory is agreed upon among a wide spectrum of Copts: several senior clergy people made this argument publicly. Bishop Thomas of the El-Qussia declared in a lecture that "... when the Arabs invaded Egypt, those who converted to Islam they were no longer Copts [...] Egypt is our identity, our nation, our land, our language [...] that is why a Copt is offended when called Arab."<sup>10</sup> In 2010, Abba Bishoy (1942-2018), General Secretary of the Holy Synod, stated in a press interview that "Copts are the origin of the country; we treat-

ed guests who came to us and dwelled in our land with kindness."<sup>11</sup> Both statements caused a great deal of controversy and received a lot of criticism considering this discourse hostile. Certainly, the discourse implies a dichotomy: on one side, Copt (associated with Egyptian civilisation) and, on the other, Arab (associated with Islam). Interestingly, this association is conceded by some Egyptian Muslim intellectuals. Taha Hussein (1889-1973), a prominent modernist writer, described it as follows: "The Coptic Church is an ancient Egyptian glory, a mainstay of the Egyptian nation."<sup>12</sup>

## *The Coptic Church in the Egyptian Christian era continued using pagan religious symbols with new interpretations conforming to the Christian faith*

These theories of Coptic identity extend beyond discourse, and are also promoted and practised through the Church's programmes and services, which allow the Coptic community to discover their shared heritage, build stronger ties and hence share a common identity.

## The Wind of Change

The institutionalisation of the Church's programmes and activities started with the Pontificate of Pope Cyril VI (1907-1971), who in 1962 established the first General Bishopic

9. A tax paid by locals who did not convert to Islam in exchange for state protection, as non-Muslims did not have the right to join the army of the Caliphate.

10. Abba Thomas, "The Experience of the Middle East's Largest Christian Community during a Time of Rising Islamization", lecture, Hudson Institute Washington, July 2008.

11. Ghada Abd Elhafez, "A hot interview with Abba Bishoy, the General Secretary of the Holy Synod", *Almasry Alyoum*, 2010, <https://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/1851557>

12. Taha Hussein, *The future of culture in Egypt*, Cairo, Dar El Maaref, 1996, p. 267.

for Public, Ecumenical and Social Services in the history of the Coptic Church. This bishopric was mandated to initiate, maintain and expand an international network for the Coptic Church with other churches, as well as with international organisations and donors. This network had two main goals: supporting the Coptic migrants abroad and raising funds for development projects in Egypt for youth and limited-income families.

This unprecedented development in the structure and functioning of the Church was a response to several socio-political changes in Egypt, which happened consecutively. In 1953, the Revolutionary Command Council issued a decree dissolving all political parties: this was a forced withdrawal from public life for all the political leaders (including the Coptic leaders), who made their way to top positions in the government and political parties as popular figures recognised for their qualities, disregarding their religion. It was possible for those Coptic leaders to be engaged in the public sphere before the 1952 revolution in the wake of the modernism and liberalism Egypt enjoyed in the first half of the 20th-century. After this forced withdrawal, the Church stepped forward to play the role of the spokesperson for the Copts and to represent them before the state, which probably found this partnership favourable. The second change was in 1956. After a series of state nationalisation decisions, ownership of several assets of the Church and the Coptic bourgeoisie were transferred to the state. The 1970s brought bigger changes to the scene:

the general climate in Egypt was tilting towards Islamisation. President Sadat gave the green light to the Muslim Brotherhood to come back into political life after years of banishment under President Nasser.<sup>13</sup> In the same period, the middle class began migrating to the Arab Gulf, which was witnessing the peak of its development and recruited en masse professionals of every specialisation and of different levels.

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Upon their return, those migrants brought Wahhabism, a conservative version of Islam that was widespread in the Gulf. In parallel, some Muslim preachers adopted a hostile discourse towards Copts, such as Cheikh Shaarawy or Cheikh Kishk.<sup>14</sup> This conservative trend gradually and steadily attracted many adherents; and some of them were quickly radicalised. Militant groups started committing violent attacks against Coptic properties or governmental institutions.<sup>15</sup> This atmosphere pushed the Copts to shrink and to assume some distance from the public sphere.

## To Caesar and to God

Another momentous change is related to the election of Shenoudah III (1923-2012) as Pope of Alexandria in November 1971.

13. Gilles Kepel, *Muslim Extremism in Egypt: The Prophet and Pharaoh*, University of California Press, 1986, p. 175.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 206.

15. Saad Eddin Ibrahim, "Anatomy of Egypt's Militant Islamic Groups: Methodological Note and Preliminary Findings", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 12, no. 4, 1980, p. 425.



He came to the throne of Saint Mark with a fresh vision for the Church; an active, international and strong institution. Shenoudah's era was a real Coptic renaissance. Existing services were developed and new ones were created, to the extent that the church became a central place in the life of Copts, and continued being the spiritual hub where all the rituals take place. Some of these rituals are considered a crucial part of the social life of Copts. A marriage is not socially accepted without the ecclesiastical rituals; a baby is introduced to society only upon his baptism; and a death is announced by the funeral services. Shenoudah – at the beginning of his pontificate – ordered the documentation of all these rituals in regional databases from which demographic data was extracted to support the design and implementation of new services, such as kindergartens, sports activities for teenagers, cultural and artistic competitions, and Coptic language courses. The Church also started providing medical services, financial support for needy families, libraries and tutorials for students, counseling services, and more. This matrix of rich services was provided through the qualified Coptic experts on a voluntary basis, making the Church a “third place”<sup>16</sup> par excellence.

The church became a place where Copts meet each other, forge friendships, share stories and discuss politics, or for other informal activities; hence, we see in most churches elements such as coffee shops and restaurants. The church became a space for the construction and consolidation of identity, a home from home, as one of the famous songs taught to children says: “My church (is) my home,

my mother, the joy of my life.” This made the church an important element for Copts and their stability, in Egypt but also abroad.

## Accompanying the Exodus

Copts experienced three waves of migration: the highly qualified wave of 1956 following the nationalisations, the middle-class consecutive waves in the 1970s towards the Gulf, and the climax of Coptic migration from different social and economic backgrounds in 2011 after the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood to power. The Church systematically followed these waves of migration first by delegating priests to be sent to settle and to celebrate liturgical services in several cities. Gradually, and upon the reports sent to the headquarters of the Church, more priests were delegated, until the point the Pope recognised the region as a diocese and ordained a bishop. These dioceses proved to be efficient in importing projects and activities that strengthened the ties of Copts in the diaspora with their motherland.

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A few examples are the Coptic Museum in Toronto, the Coptic Cultural Centre in Antwerp, and the Coptic Cultural Centre in Tipperary. Moreover, a wide network developed of monasteries, theological schools, seminaries and Coptic associations, too many

16. Ray Oldenburg, “Our vanishing third places”, *Planning Commissioners Journal*, 25, Winter 1996-97.

to provide an exhaustive list. Such projects may serve as a focal point to promote and spread knowledge of Coptic cultural history and arts, but, above all, they remain tools to remind Copts in the diaspora of their roots, their faith, and their identity. The ecclesiastical hierarchy supports the diaspora through the usual contact and regular visits to different dioceses. Bishops visit each other; and the Pope himself may travel for big events like the consecration of a cathedral or the opening of a major project. Over 40 years of pontificate, Pope Shenoudah made more than 100 trips to 35 countries, while the incumbent Pope Tawadros II has made over 35 trips to 26 countries since the beginning of his pontificate in 2012. During these trips, Popes celebrate liturgies and dedicate sufficient time to meet with different clusters of Coptic people: besides meetings with clergy, they also hold audiences with youths, and sometimes even with children.

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Recently, Pope Tawadros II stated that there are 15 million Copts in Egypt, and two million in the diaspora throughout 100 countries.<sup>17</sup> Currently, the Church's Holy Synod has more than 135 bishops, 39 of them overseeing the Coptic dioceses in the diaspora. The number of these dioceses is correlated with the Coptic population in the respective countries; 12 bishops in North America, 15 in Europe, 6 in Africa, 2 in Australia, 2 in South America, and 2 in Asia.

Tawadros II initiated a new project to ensure a stronger bond between the Coptic youth in the diaspora and the motherland. In 2018 the first edition of the Coptic Youth Forum was held, an event similar to the Catholic World Youth Days, on a smaller scale, where every diocese in Egypt and around the world delegated two young people, respecting gender equality, to spend 10 days in Egypt. The programme was a comprehensive range of spiritual activities, cultural events and guided tours, but the most significant activity was the Youth Seminar, where the participants were divided into five subgroups to study and reflect on the several issues of the Church to offer a synthesised document to Pope Tawadros II on their perspectives, questions and recommendations. This document was later presented to the Holy Synod to discuss its content and establish future plans.

## Conclusion

The aforementioned Youth Seminar and similar initiatives, which attempt to observe the social changes and their possible impact, revealed the awareness of the Church and its hierarchy of the unprecedented challenge it is confronting. For the first time in its history, the Coptic Church is dealing with heterogenous mentalities: the Copts in Egypt adhere to the traditional conservative school not only accepted but also promoted by the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Part of this conservatism relates to the Islamic environment that sets the societal norms, a good example of which is the Church discourse

17. Wael Aly, "Pope Tawadros: 15 million copts live in Egypt", *Almasry Alyoum*, 2023, <https://www.almasyalyoum.com/news/details/2874344>



forbidding alcohol consumption. Meanwhile, Copts in the diaspora, especially the second and the third generation of migrants born and raised in their respective countries around the world, are no longer migrants: they are French, Italian or American Copts. They are part of these nations and their cultures, many do not speak Arabic, and they are more liberal in their understanding of global modern challenges such as climate change, gender issues, abortion, premarital sex, euthanasia and other controversial issues that the Copts in Egypt tackle from a conservative point of view, if at all. This intellectual divergence may result in two future scenarios. The first is that the Coptic Church becomes a truly universal one, embracing the cultural diversity of its people, their belonging to different backgrounds, and the continuous developments in societies. In such a scenario, a bold line has to be drawn between the substance of

the theological dogmas (which has to be accepted and unified on a universal level), and the cultural and anthropological conditions that depend on several local factors and hence may be handled with a margin of discrepancy. The second scenario is the one by which the diaspora will be the Church's driving force of modernity, bringing a mature and growing understanding of current global challenges and an authentic way of seeing these challenges: in other words, a Coptic point of view based on human experience, profiting from today's open horizons of research and analysis.

In both scenarios, the Coptic Church, with its ancient legacy that continues to be relevant, has a historic opportunity not only to survive the challenge but to flourish and to experience a universal expansion under one condition: acceptance of the Mahler-attributed aphorism: "Tradition is not the worship of ashes, but the preservation of fire."