UNITY NARRATIVES AND THE COPTIC QUESTION

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Interreligious coexistence is perhaps one of the most consistently misunderstood topics in the post-Cold War world. Countless scholars have followed the claim of the late political scientist Samuel Huntington, who painted a disconcerting image of conflicts between two different and warring civilizations, namely that of the Islamic world and the Christian West. But Huntington's analysis does not make much sense. European Christendom had grown out of its ignorance by drawing on the philosophy and science of Islam, and Islamic modernism in the 19th century synthesized Islamic legal traditions and Western standards of modernity. From a historical perspective, the interaction between Christianity and Islam has been characterized by sharing and exchange rather than conflict.

My research on Coptic Christians in Egypt suggests that Muslim-Christian solidarity is attainable with the right policies and a unity narrative focused on equal citizenship. Indeed, cultural differences can be imposed as part of a political project. In a country like Egypt, where national identity has been repeatedly renegotiated among competing groups, it is important that we distinguish between religion as a *cultural* identity and religion as a *political* identity.

In the late 19th century, the decline of the Ottoman Empire and proliferation of nationalist ideas gave rise to the creation of new identities, leading to fierce fights over what it meant to be Egyptian. Three cultural labels emerged that underpinned nationalist ambitions: religious-Islamic, ethnic-Arab, and territorial-Egyptian. The last, territorial nationalism, was supported by the affluent Coptic middle class, finding its political voice in the Wafd Party.[1]

The liberal experiment that shaped the beginning of the 20th century ended abruptly with Nasser's rise to power in 1952. While the pretence to equal citizenship continued, Coptic Egyptians soon found themselves increasingly marginalized; Nasser's land reforms robbed them of their economic power and despite its liberal façade, their Arab identity was based on an Islamic culture. Their social status was further diminished by the rise in sectarian violence. Since the secular unity narrative denied the existence of sectarian discrimination and refused to offer minority protection, Coptic Egyptians were forced to redefine their own identity. Consequently, they developed a new narrative which gave rise to an "ethnonationalism that considers Coptic tradition to be at the core of what it means to be Egyptian, thus rejecting Arab identity, which it sees as an external influence."[2]

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the 1970s and 1980s, largely due to the return of Egyptian migrant workers from Saudi Arabia, as well as Anwar Sadat's support for Islamist groups in exchange for political clout. This led to tensions between Muslims and Copts, the alleged alien "other," prompting Coptic counter-narratives that shared the anti-Western and anti-colonial thrust of Islamism while also promoting a parallel, exclusively Christian view on Egyptian identity.[1]

To understand the wide acceptance of Islamism in all layers of society, one must take Sadat's economic policy, *infitah*, into account. Initially aimed at opening the Egyptian market to foreign investment and reducing the role of the public sector, it ended up blurring the lines between the financial and political elites in the country. While Sadat's liberal capitalism was regarded as favoring the rich, Islamism appealed to all classes of society with the message that being Egyptian and being Islamic were synonymous. The resulting sectarian violence alarmed Sadat's successor, Hosni Mubarak, who subsequently entered a strategic partnership with the Orthodox Church to fight Islamism. Nonetheless, Mubarak did little to challenge "the increasing Muslim bias in conventional narratives […] [that] led to the rise of Coptic counter-narratives in which the Copts are portrayed as the only true and authentic Egyptians," Sebastian Elsässer, a Middle Eastern Christianity scholar, concluded.[1] By focusing on the abstract equality between Muslim and Christian Egyptians, Mubarak ignored the discrimination Copts faced in everyday life and only fuelled the rise of counter-narratives that retell Egyptian history as a story of continuous oppression of the Christian minority at the hands of Muslims.

Both strands of nationalist narratives—the official unity narrative and the religious nationalist narrative—were imposed from above, or at least in response to policies from the top. In opposition to both, the Arab Spring protests in January and February 2011 told a different story of national unity that was not imposed from above, but articulated by the protestors themselves.[2]

The Arab Spring as a paragon of interreligious coexistence

Unlike previous narratives that suppressed religious elements, national unity during the revolution of 2011 stressed the interaction of different religions on neutral grounds. It promoted the common language of a shared Egyptian culture through which both Christians and Muslims could express their beliefs. As Rougier Bernard, a French sociologist, observed, "Religious symbols were abundantly displayed both during and after the revolution. Mosques became rallying points for protesters, the prayers held in Tahrir Square, which were protected by Christians, demonstrated unity between the two religions."[2] This new unity manifested itself in slogans such as "Hold your head up high, you are an Egyptian,"[3] showing that religion could play a crucial role in peace-making and act as more than a source of conflict.

This analysis is supported by the non-representative interviews I have conducted with Coptic Christians in Cairo, who made a unanimous plea for the revival of an Egyptian project that first began in the early 20th century. While they all stressed that their ethnicity—unlike their language and culture—was not Arabic, many of them also emphasized that they saw themselves as Egyptian first, Christian second. This sentiment opens the door for a less exclusivist interpretation of Egyptian identity.

Although most of the secondary literature I have reviewed shares this perspective, my interviewees contradicted previous analyses on one important point. By using the identity crisis as a starting point of their research, most social scientists had uncritically adopted the terminology of the regime and echoed the false narrative that ethno-religious conflict is the norm. According to the Copts I spoke to, however, the underlying struggle is not between different religious beliefs, but between different classes. The protests in Tahrir Square were not just against an oppressive regime, but an economic order that—beginning with Sadat's *infitah*—had deepened social disparities. As my interviewees stated, the near absence of sectarian violence during Nasser's reign was not due to his unity narrative, but his economic policy which had guaranteed a comparatively high standard of living. Likewise, the economic crisis at the end of Nasser's regime resulted in the rise of both Islamic and Christian fundamentalism. In other words, people tend to discuss their identity in cultural-religious terms during recessions, and economic terms during upturns. This hypothesis is corroborated by the interviews I conducted with Muslim members of the Egyptian upper class who, despite their religious affiliation, supported the downfall of Mohammed Morsi's regime.

This perspective sheds a new light on the question of how to bring about peaceful interreligious coexistence. The case of Tahrir Square provides two answers: first, a new Egyptian narrative must be developed—one that embraces both religions instead of marginalizing them. Second, and perhaps more importantly, politicians must stop exploiting religious differences and instead focus on creating an equitable economy that blunts religious cleavages and benefits all Egyptians. Only then can both Christians and Muslims be an integral and equal part of Egyptian public life.