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***ISLAMIC STATE OR SECULAR STATE?  
EGYPT AS A CASE STUDY***

**Abstract:** The Christian Egypt (Copts) appreciated the Muslim conquest for stopping the persecution by the Christian Byzantine emperor. Gradually and optionally, many Egyptians converted to Islam in a period of six centuries (from 639 AD to the 12th century). Muslims and Christians lived as neighbours for centuries, with no conflict. To establish the contemporary state, there had been a great debate about making the Egyptian state Islamic or secular. This debate converted to a conflict between the religious, social and political forces in Egypt. This caused a lot of problems and resulted in the loss of the gains of 2011 Egyptian revolution. In this paper, I show the impact of the perspectives of both sides on the democracy in Egypt and on the Egyptian revolution path. Then, I propose a framework to resolve this conflict.

**Keywords:** *Religious Pluralism, Islamic State, Secular State, Egyptian Revolution.*

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## INTRODUCTION

By the mid-third century, a sizable number of Egyptians were persecuted by the Romans on account of having adopted the new Christian faith, beginning with the Edict of Decius. Christianity was tolerated in the Roman Empire until AD 284, when the Emperor Diocletian started persecuting and putting to death a great number of Christian Egyptians. This event became a watershed in the history of Egyptian Christianity, marking the beginning of a distinct Egyptian or Coptic Church. When Egyptians were persecuted by Diocletian, many retreated to the desert to seek relief<sup>1</sup>. The Muslim conquest of Egypt took place in AD 639. Despite the political upheaval, Egypt remained a mainly Christian land (although the influx of Arab immigrants and gradual conversions to Islam over the centuries changed

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<sup>1</sup> "Persecution of Copts," accessed July 12, 2014, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/>

*Danubius*, XXXIII, Supliment, Galați, 2015, p. 123-133.

Egypt from a mainly Christian to a mainly Muslim country by the end of the 12th century). Today, Christians (Copts) are about 7% of the Egyptian population. In Egypt, Muslims and Christians live as neighbors. They share a common history and national identity. They also share the same ethnicity, race, culture, and language<sup>2</sup>. However, they have different points of view regarding the establishment of the contemporary state. Section two will present the relation between the Islamic state and secularism, from the point of view of the Islamic scholars and of the moderate movements. Then, the ideas provided by the reformists about democracy and pluralism are discussed in section three. The other point of view, of the Egyptian Christians and secular Muslims is presented in section four. In section five, I demonstrate how the different perspectives had a great negative impact on the Egyptian revolution. In section six, I provide a framework for a solution with some high level recommendations to solve the problems of different ideologies.

### 1. ISLAMIC STATE AND SECULARISM

The conventional wisdom that assumed the centrality of secularism in a modern state and viewed religion as only a private affair has been challenged in much of the Muslim world. A hallmark of all Islamic movements and scholars has been the belief that Islamic principles and values govern all aspects of life and that Sharia acts as a framework for all human activity, whether in public or private realms. This belief counters the idea that the legislation of a modern state should not be dependent on any religious tradition. Muslims also consider that Sharia is able to change and adapt to contemporary concerns and conditions<sup>3</sup>.

Many Muslims, in particular Islamists, cast secularism as a completely foreign doctrine imposed on the Islamic world by colonial powers. They hold up the traditional Islamic society, particularly that from the first centuries of Islam, as an ideal model reflecting religious principles guiding the community in all areas of life, including politics<sup>4</sup>. For example, the prominent judge and Arab historian Tariq al-Bishri, rejects the idea that modernization and secularization must be linked. Yusuf al-Qaradawi, famous and respectful Islamic scholar, believes that

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Persecution of Copts.

<sup>2</sup> Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, "Egypt, International Religious Freedom Report 2008," September 19, 2008, accessed July 12, 2014, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2008/108481.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> John L. Esposito, "Rethinking Islam and Secularism," *Association of Religion Data Archives, ARDA Guiding Papers Series*, accessed July 12, 2014, <http://www.thearda.com/rrh/papers/guidingpapers/esposito.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Tariq al-Bishri, *Al-Hiwar al-islami al-'ilmani* (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 1996), 12.

Secularism and Islam are incompatible in a country in which the majority of the population is Muslim<sup>5</sup>.

Qaradawi rejects the assertion that humans simply interpret the law according to changing circumstances, using over-arching principles such as charity and consultation. While he agrees that there is no “divine rule” in the sense that the ruler is a human being, he sees the rulings as divine because they are based on divine sources. Humans, he argues, have managed to form rulings, in spite of the law school differences, based on divine directives that are not as ambiguous as they may seem. For example, the Qur’anic obligation to cut off the hand of a thief has been specified and qualified by the Sunna of the Prophet, but the basic directive has remained the same and, therefore, is not subject to human interpretation. Qaradawi, like many Islamists and secularists, views Christianity and Islam as fundamentally different in the ability to accept the separation of religion from politics. He cites the popular argument based upon Jesus’ command in the Gospels to give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s as proof that Christianity accepts the separation of life into two parts: a part for religion and one for the state. Islam, on the other hand, represents an inseparable unity in a life ruled by God alone, God who is Lord over both the heavens and the earth (xviii). Secularism, Qaradawi says, seeks to subordinate Islam and reduce its natural supremacy to one corner of life — an agenda that Islam must refuse<sup>6</sup>. Below are some examples given by them for Islamic principles and rules inspired by the Sharia in different aspects of life.

### 1.1 Economic system

Economy of poverty prevailed in Islam until the 13th and the 14th centuries. Under this system, God's guidance made sure the flow of money and goods was purified when being channeled from those who had much of it to those who had little by encouraging *zakat* (charity) and discouraging *riba* (usury/interest) on loans. The prophet also helped poor traders by allowing only tents, not permanent buildings in the market of Medina, and not charging fees and rents there<sup>7</sup>. No interest rate was allowed and investors were not permitted to escape the consequences of any failed venture—all financing was equity financing (partnership). In not letting borrowers bear all the risk/cost of a failure, an extreme disparity of outcomes between “partners” is thus avoided. Ultimately, this serves the purpose of social harmony. Muslims also could not and cannot (in Sharia)

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<sup>5</sup> Yusuf al-Qaradawi, *Al-Islam wa-al-almaniya wajhan li-wajh* (Cairo: Dar al-Sahwa al-Nashr, 1987, 126.

<sup>6</sup> Esposito, “Rethinking Islam and Secularism.”

finance any dealings with forbidden goods or activities, such as wine, pork, gambling etc. Thus, ethical investing is the only acceptable investing, and moral purchasing is encouraged<sup>8</sup>.

## 1.2 Social system

In the social system, there are a lot of Islamic teachings. Some few examples are presented below<sup>9</sup>:

Of major importance among these is the equality of mankind. Allah created a human couple to herald the beginning of the life of mankind on earth, and everybody living in the world today originates from this couple. So, Islam disapproves the prejudices which have arisen among mankind because of the differences in race, color, language and nationality.

## 1.3 Institution of the Family

According to Islam, the correct relationship between man and woman is marriage, a relationship in which social responsibilities are fully accepted and which results in the emergence of a family. Sexual permissiveness and other similar types of irresponsible behavior are not dismissed by Islam as mere innocent pastimes or ordinary transgressions. Rather, they are acts which strike to the very roots of society. Hence, Islam holds all extra-marital sex as sinful and forbidden (*haram*) and makes them a criminal offence. Severe punishments are prescribed to deter would-be offenders.

## 1.4 Relatives and Neighbors

After the limited circle of the family, the next social sphere is that of kinship and blood relationship. Islam wants all those who are related through common parents, common brothers and sisters or marriage to be affectionate, cooperative and helpful to each other. In many places in the Qur'an, good treatment of the near relatives (*Dhawi-al-qurba*) is enjoined. In the Hadith of the Prophet, the proper treatment of one's blood relatives was strongly emphasized and counted among the highest virtues. A person who cold-shoulders his relatives or treats them indifferently is looked on by Islam with great disfavor.

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<sup>7</sup> Michael Bonner, "Poverty and Economics in the Qur'an", in *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* XXXV, no.3 (winter, 2005): 391–406.

<sup>8</sup> „Islamic economics in the world,” accessed July 12, 2014, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islamic\\_economics\\_in\\_the\\_world#cite\\_note-Michael\\_Bonner\\_2005-3](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islamic_economics_in_the_world#cite_note-Michael_Bonner_2005-3).

<sup>9</sup> Abul Ala Maududi, "*Social System of Islam, Jamaat-e-islami*," interview given by the author on Radio Pakistan, Lahore, on 10th February, 1948.

### 1.5 Sports system

In general, Islam promotes good health and fitness and encourages both men and women to engage in physical activity to maintain a healthy lifestyle. The Islamic Sharia permits all things that are beneficial to the body and do not harm it and it forbids all things that may cause damage or harm to the body<sup>10</sup>. The Prophet said: “Your body has rights over you”<sup>11</sup>. For that, some sports like boxing, in which the player gains by harming the opponent and throws him to the ground, preferably with a “decisive blow”, can be forbidden in Islam.

## 2. PLURALISM AND DEMOCRACY IN THE LITERATURE OF THE REFORMERS

The issue of Islam and secularism represents one of the most contested debates in contemporary scholarship and policy circles. An increasing number of Muslim scholars in the recent years have utilized rigorous historical and textual analysis to reexamine the role of Islam in the secular state and related issues like Islamic conceptions of democracy, pluralism and religious freedom. Although emphasizing the value/merit of classical Islam and its legacy, reformist scholars like Yusuf Qaradawi do not regard it as an absolute reference point or religious authority, but only as a tool for solving modern problems. While they acknowledge the authority of the classical tradition, they have methodologies to legitimate substantial reforms. Modern reformers more freely bypass the classical tradition and go back to the Qur’an as the primary basis for fresh understandings and interpretations<sup>12</sup>.

The reformists desire a system of government in which religious principles and democratic values coexist. They do not view religious authority and political authority as mutually exclusive and find a role for religious principles in the formulation of state legislation. They advocate a secular democracy incorporating a strong policy of religious pluralism. They denounce those that oppose multicultural, multi-religious, and multinational life, noting that the Qur’an states many times: “If God wanted, he could create you to be one nation, but he wanted you to be different nations ....”<sup>13</sup>. As well, they believe that democracy has

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<sup>10</sup> Iman and Amal, “Muslim Women in Sport,” *Women’s Sport and Fitness Foundation and Sporting Equals*, Jan. 2010, accessed July 12, 2014, <http://www.sportscoachuk.org/sites/default/files/Muslim%20women%20in%20sport%20%20WSFF%20&%20sporting%20equals.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Mohamed al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari* (Kitaab al-Sawm, 1839), accessed July 13, 2014, <http://sunnah.com/bukhari>.

<sup>12</sup> Esposito, “Rethinking Islam and Secularism.”

<sup>13</sup> The Noble Quran, verse 5:48.

Qur'anic precedents, implied in the Qur'anic and traditional Islamic notions of deliberation and consultation. However, they believed that no single model of government exists or is required; instead, different countries need to formulate models appropriate to their environment. They insisted that religious pluralism and tolerance were not simply a theological issue but a divine mandate, rooted in Qur'anic passages<sup>14</sup>.

They take on some of the most controversial issues in contemporary Islamic thought: the legal rights of the non-Muslims in a mainly Muslim state, the rules regarding apostasy and retribution, and the practice of jihad and its relation to rebellion and martyrdom. Despite the fact that numerous examples of tolerance and legal flexibility exist in the Islamic community, nevertheless, some Muslim jurists formulated legal codes relating to the status of non-Muslims, that allow for discriminatory practices. These ideas are not in accordance with the modern conceptions of pluralism and inclusiveness and therefore must be rejected: "Most of the past juridical decisions treating non-Muslim minorities have become irrelevant in the context of contemporary religious pluralism, a cornerstone of inter-human relations". On the other hand, they do not believe that, in order to be truly just, the state must implement a full separation of religious and political authority. Nor do they accept the type of religious state proposed by the "fundamentalists", in which Islam has an exclusive claim over authority in the community. Rather, they argue that the Prophet laid the grounds for a "universal community" that was subsequently corrupted by the political imperative to subdue people of other faiths and by a reading of the traditional sources that lost sight of their original pluralistic intent. By reclaiming the belief that all human beings are "equals in creation", the Muslim community can serve as a model of a religious faith that also calls for justness in society through the creation of pluralistic, democratic institutions<sup>15</sup>.

They believe that democracy is as much a requirement of Islamic teachings as prayer, *zakat*, abstinence from alcohol, usury, fornication, etc. The Qur'an includes a complete chapter with the name of consultation (Shura). By Shura, Islam encourages Muslims to decide their affairs in consultation with those who will be affected by that decision. This is actually some kind of democracy, as reformers explain. By these ideas, the reformist scholars provide their vision about the Islamic state that adopts democracy as the desire of the majority and at the same time, save the rights of minority as instructed by Islam.

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<sup>14</sup> The Noble Quran, verses 2:62; 5:69.

<sup>15</sup> Esposito, "Rethinking Islam and Secularism."

### 3. COPTS AND OTHER MINORITIES

From the Coptic point of view, religious freedom in Egypt is hampered to varying degrees by discriminatory and restrictive government policies. Coptic Christians, being the largest religious minority in Egypt, are also negatively affected. Copts have faced increasing marginalization after the 1952 coup led by Gamal Abdel Nasser. Until recently, Christians were required to obtain presidential approval even for minor repairs in churches. Although the law was eased in 2005 by handing down the authority of approval to the governors, Copts continue to face many obstacles and restrictions in building new churches. These restrictions do not apply for building mosques<sup>16</sup>.

While freedom of religion is guaranteed by the Egyptian constitution, according to Human Rights Watch, Egyptians are able to convert to Islam generally without difficulty, but Muslims who convert to Christianity face difficulties in getting new identity papers and some have been arrested for allegedly forging such documents. The Coptic community, however, takes pains to prevent conversions from Christianity to Islam due to the ease with which Christians can become Muslim. Public officials, being conservative themselves, intensify the complexity of the legal procedures required to recognize the religion change as required by law. Security agencies will sometimes claim that such conversions from Islam to Christianity (or occasionally vice versa) may stir social unrest, and thereby justify themselves in wrongfully detaining the subjects, insisting that they are simply taking steps to prevent social troubles from happening<sup>17</sup>.

Although these issues occur in the secular regime of the military, Copts believe that these issues will be more significant under the Islamic regime. That is why they support a secular regime. However, there are also some Muslim secular elite groups who have often seen secularism as the best means to promote tolerance, pluralism and fairness in a society in which the government is not dominated by any religious ideology. They advocate a synthesis, an identity based on common values as the basis for citizenship. They think that the ethics of citizenship requires decisions to be made in the name of the shared principles such as the rule of law, equal citizenship irrespective of religion, universal suffrage, and the accountability of the leaders not solely based on religious identity.

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<sup>16</sup> „Copts,” accessed July 14, 2014, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Copts#cite\\_note-58](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Copts#cite_note-58).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

#### 4. IMPACT OF THE DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES ON THE EGYPTIAN REVOLUTION

The regime of the former president Hosni Mubarak relied on dividing Egyptians. Authorities carefully presided over a volatile status-quo between Muslims and Copts, all the while pretending that religious strife didn't exist. Police officials often blamed the individual grudges or the foreign terrorists for most of the disputes. Mubarak skillfully manipulated the threat of the extremists from outside to convince the West, which for long criticized Egypt's human-rights record, that he was an ally in battling terrorism<sup>18</sup>.

Nonetheless, the Copts felt secure under Mubarak, who tightened his grip over Islamists - the relatively moderate Muslim Brotherhood as well as the more extreme Salafis and jihadists. The Copts worried that the 18-day revolution that overthrew Mubarak in February would unbottle the ultraconservative Islamist voices and lead to greater problems<sup>19</sup>. So, the pope Shenouda III supported Mubarak's regime although a lot of Christian youth participated in the Egyptian revolution with an excellent spirit of unity in the 18 days at Tahrir square.

After the success of the Islamists in the elections, Islamic fundamentalism made serious inroads into the shaping and the rewriting of the new Egyptian constitution. This change was done under the pressure of the Salaf groups, despite the fact that the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamic progressive parties were not welcoming that. As a result, the situation for the Copts in Egypt worsened, leaving them more vulnerable and more in danger than ever. For that, the Copts had a great role in the 30th June demonstration. Most Coptic Christians consider that anything is better than the Muslim Brotherhood. Thus, the support for the military coup / revolution, as some call, among the Copts was so clear and significant. The Pope of the Church was involved in the removal of the first elected Islamist president. The Pope of the Church alleged that the Islamic Sharia is backward, rigid and reactionary<sup>20</sup>.

As the Church is finding out, the Copts, too, are not safe from the new government's oppressive measures. Fahim reported that a 23-year-old Coptic teacher was sentenced to prison for six months for insulting Islam. On June 23rd, a Christian convert reporter was sentenced to five years in prison for allegedly

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<sup>18</sup> Amro Hassan, "Egypt: Religious conflict becomes the revolution's biggest enemy," May 9, 2011, accessed July 13, 2015, <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/babylonbeyond/2011/05/egypt-sectarian-conflict-becomes-the-revolutions-biggest-enemy.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ashraf Ramelah, "The Egyptian Revolution and the Role of the Copts," *American Thinker* April 10 (2011), accessed July 12, 2014, [http://www.americanthinker.com/2011/04/the\\_egyptian\\_revolution\\_and\\_th.html](http://www.americanthinker.com/2011/04/the_egyptian_revolution_and_th.html).



reporting false information about discrimination against the Copts. The following day, a 29-year-old Copt from Upper Egypt was given a five-year prison sentence for liking a Facebook page put up by a group of Christian converts. The Coptic push for a secular Egypt stemmed largely from the fear of Islamists. Mohammed Morsi's administration may have not taken direct action toward minority groups, but for many Copts their policies and statements suggested that it was only a matter of time before some wide-scale, concrete laws would be issued. From the point of view of the Copts, their marginalization from political life was expected to increase, sectarian clashes were already on the rise and hate speech grew rife at the time. Finally, a year after June 30th, Egypt faces a great challenge in the path of freedom and democracy. According to the Egyptian Center for Social and Economic Rights (ECSER), more than 40,000 arrests have been made since Morsi's overthrow, journalists have been prosecuted, artists have been censored, and opposition voices have been violently silenced. The country has descended into further chaos and fear has become the prevailing sentiment of the day<sup>21</sup>.

## 5. PROPOSED FRAMEWORK FOR A SOLUTION

We can shape the situation as below:

- Mubarak's regime managed some conflicts that were useful to the survival of his regime.
- Islamic extremists really exist, along with their ideas.
- Some Christian authors wrote that with the devastating curb of freedom of expression and the widespread crackdown on journalists and activists, the Coptic Orthodox Church's support for the government's post-June 30th Revolution policies needs to be reviewed.
- As the recent arrests and sentences of the Copts show, the Coptic Orthodox Church may realize that the civil liberties it chose to discard, the bloodshed it opted to ignore and the despotic establishment it continues to back will be the basis for the further suffering of its own people.

It is clear that there are differences in perspectives and position between the Islamists and their supporters on a side and the Copts and the secular people, on the other side. This challenges the intellectuals to find a solution. Certainly, the problem is too complex to find a simple solution. However, in the coming points, a framework for a solution is proposed, as a starting point. It includes:

- Democracy is the solution.
- Democracy does not imply Western secularism.

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<sup>21</sup> Joseph Fahim, "Egypt's Copts, Egypt Pulse," accessed July 4, 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/07/egypt-coptic-christians-sisi-secular-islamist.html>.

- There is a great need for reformers to re-understand the teachings of Islam. Some efforts exist but a lot is still needed.
- There must be a constitutional democracy, that protects the rights of minority and their life style.
- The state should not enforce any religion.
- Along with the reforming ideas, there should be the application of the Islamic law (Sharia) in such a way that it would not conflict with the rights of the minorities.
- There must be a dialogue between the moderate Islamists and the moderate Christians, to find a framework for laws that apply Sharia but also save the Christian rights (e.g. applying the Islamic law on Muslims only in some cases, having the rights to get any governmental position, with no exception).
- All should know that: with democracy, there will be space for dialogue, studying, discussion. But, with the marginalization of Islamists or Christians, all will lose. Generally speaking, under the democracy umbrella, the extremists tend to be moderate.

### CONCLUSION

Muslim reformers in the twenty-first century, whether secular or Islamic oriented, contend with two realities for reform:

(1) the broad Muslim public opinion that favors both greater democratization and Sharia as a source of law and

(2) the need to address the continued centrality and authority of the classical tradition of Islamic law.

Actually, it is not logical to ignore the desire of the majority for applying the Islamic Sharia. It is also illogical not to save the rights of the minority. It is the role of the reformers who admire and desire many of the principles and institutions associated with secular democracies to find a new version of democracy, that is not a Western secular or an Islamic theocratic state. The solution of the sectarian conflict in Egypt is a state that reflects the importance and force of the Islamic principles and values and, at the same time, saves the rights of the minorities. This can be done through democracy. With democracy, extremists tend to be moderate and the moderate movements can reach –through dialogue and discussion- a consent that satisfies the desires of both the majority and the minorities.

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