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Keywords
Mubarak, Coptic Question, Arab Spring

Since the early 2000s, and especially after the so-called Arab Spring, there has been increased scholarly and popular attention on the Copts of Egypt, and Christians throughout the Middle East more generally. Sebastian Elsässer has written a thorough analysis of the discourses by which Copts, in particular, have been objectified as a field of study. The Coptic Question provides an account of the Copts as a question, in order to explore the “problem of knowledge about the Copts” (7). The book’s greatest strength and contribution to the literature is the meticulous compilation of scholarly work in English, Arabic, German, and French, on Copts in modern Egypt. Elsässer, in his aim of “systematically relat[ing] the literature about the Copts to the broader field of social and political studies on modern Egypt” has produced a book of importance not only to scholars of minority communities and sectarianism, but also to scholars of religion and politics in the modern Middle East.

Elsässer traces the Coptic question and its turning point in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when civil society activism and media liberalization brought Coptic concerns to the fore in Egyptian society. He analyzes, through texts, oral interviews, and public newsmedia discourse, how the discourses of national unity, religious patriotism, and liberalism, including citizenship and human rights, have marked the Copts as an object of inquiry, especially beginning in the colonial era. The uncovering of the internal dynamics of these discourses—their relationships and public negotiations—is one of the central aims of Elsässer’s study.

The book can be said to have two parts, where the central aim of the first part (Chapters 1, 2, and 3) is to trace and reintegrate the Copts into the historiography of modern Egypt, through the Ottoman period, colonialism, religious revivalism, and, finally, the republican regime. The second part (Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7) of the book provides important, original insight that breaks down the ways in which Copts are positioned in contemporary Egypt between national unity and sectarianism.
Throughout the book, Elsässer excavates possible answers to the Coptic question. In particular, the Coptic question becomes centered on the various, interrelated discussions around sectarianism as a social phenomenon. While this certainly has relevance to the ways in which Copts are marked as religious subjects and are subjected to various forms of discrimination within Egyptian society, Elsässer does not necessarily challenge the terms by which inter-communal relations in Egypt are and have been framed, particularly since the colonial era. His position presents sectarianism and inter-communal violence as given, and seeks to find answers to such paradigms, instead of understanding the ways by which these paradigms themselves structure the formation of collective life between Muslims and Christians in contemporary Egypt. Despite Elsässer’s focus on the Coptic question (rather than the analytic problem of such paradigms), his book is an engaging and important contribution to understanding how these paradigms are negotiated and how the Coptic question has developed in modern Egypt.
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Bruce B. Lawrence, Duke University

A. J. Droge is the author of Homer or Moses? Early Christian Interpretations of the History of Culture and, with James Tabor, of A Noble Death: Suicide and Martyrdom among Christians and Jews in Antiquity.

2013 558pp 246 x 189mm
hb ISBN 9781845539443  £75.00/$135.00
pb ISBN 9781845539450  £24.99/$39.95

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