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INTERFAITH DIALOGUE IN EGYPT

National Unity and Tolerance

This study serves both exploratory and analytical purposes. It is exploratory in that it creates a general picture of Muslim-Christian relationships in Egypt and maps out the variety of IFD activities conducted in the country. It is analytical in that it contextualizes these relationships historically, politically, and socioeconomically. Unlike approaches that reduce socioreligious problems to psychological explanations—such as hatred, fear, or intolerance—the approach presented in this chapter examines problems socioeconomically and culturally, in their anthropological sense. We argue that these “problems” are better understood as a very part of the modernization process in Egypt and as reflecting the contradictions of modernity in the particular form it has taken in Egypt. The current versions of these problems are nested in the context of globalization, with all its political, economic, and cultural implications.

The study is based on a series of interviews conducted in Egypt in the fall of 2003. The interviewees are Egyptian IFD activists, representatives of IFD organizations, and writers who are concerned with (or experts on) Muslim-Christian relationships in Egypt. It is also based on a review of books, papers, and documents on the topic of IFD in Egypt. Fifteen people were interviewed: three females and twelve males, nine Muslims and six Christians. The Christians were from different denominations: four Coptic Orthodox, one Roman Catholic, and one Evangelical.

What we could not attain directly through interviews was gleaned through the review of publications and Web sites from the forums and organizations not represented in the interviews, as well as books and articles of a number of writers, scholars, and researchers in the field. Although many people involved in IFD in Egypt refused to be interviewed or even to meet with us, we believe that the interviews we conducted drew from most of the dialogue forums in the country, and that most literature on the topic is covered here. However, we discovered that using printed materials such as books and articles could be problematic; we often found competing narratives about the reality of life in Egypt today. Often even the “facts” themselves varied widely, depending on the source and the way the information was intended to portray Egypt.

Interviews were either recorded on tape or by hand on paper, depending on the interviewee's preference. Interviewees frequently emphasized that the views expressed in the meetings were their own and that they represented no one but themselves. Even those with institutional affiliations felt more comfortable speaking only on their own behalf and not in the name of the organization or forum. Furthermore, it became apparent from the research that the term "interfaith dialogue" is very problematic and highly politicized in the Egyptian context.

The controversial nature of IFD in Egypt made research extremely difficult. Throughout, we struggled with numerous problems that arose due to the sensitive nature of the topic. Most of the people whom we interviewed wished to remain anonymous, fearing that the publication of their name would result in personal retribution from institutions or individuals who disagree with them. Numerous people refused to be interviewed at all, concerned not to have their name linked in any way with a book about IFD. To present the socioeconomic and cultural dynamics of Christian-Muslim relations in Egypt, the study is divided into three major parts: historical background, problematization of Muslim-Christian relationships, and interfaith dialogue in Egypt.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Premodern History

Islam entered Egypt for the first time through the Arab conquest under the leadership of A'mr Ibn El-Aas from 639 to 642 CE. The Arabs used the word "Copt," derived from the Greek word "Aigyptos," to denote the entire indigenous population of Egypt, which was dominantly Christian at the time (Van Nispen 1997, 23). The beginning of contact between Arabs and Copts—Muslims and Christians—was very warm and peaceful. The new ruler, after defeating the Roman army and thus ending the persecution of the Copts by the Romans, invited the fleeing patriarch to come back and live in peace with his people (Kelada 1994; 1998). Three major factors dramatically changed the nature of Egypt in the four to five centuries following the conquest, transforming it into an Islamic country: the immigration of Arab tribes from Arabia to Egypt; the gradual but massive conversion of Copts to Islam; and the change in the language used in everyday life from Coptic to Arabic (Ibrahim 1994; 1998, 382; Labib 2000, 17). Studies indicate that it was probably during the Mameluke period (1250–1517) that the proportion of Copts to the population as a whole became generally fixed at its modern level: scarcely 8 percent (Van Nispen 1997, 23).¹

Throughout the course of history, Muslim and Christian inhabitants of Egypt have shared extensive commonalities. In Christian Van Nispen's words (1997, 24), they "speak the same language, live in the same culture, practice more or less the same customs and traditions, and share the same feelings and

relations.” Interestingly, the prominent Coptic intellectual and judge, William Soliman Kelada, removes the line of division between Muslims and Christians and instead differentiates between “the rulers” and “the ruled.” For him, the ruled are “the people of the land,”² whether Muslims or Christians. He wrote,

There is a basic fact in the Egyptian history that is the sharp division between the rulers and the ruled. This division continued for hundreds and thousands of years. There is a horizontal sharp and decisive line dividing the Egyptian society into two sectors: the rulers who occupy the upper sector . . . and the ruled down the line; they are the people of the land with all their components (Kelada 1994, 28).

Kelada’s ideological argument, though capturing an important perspective, neglects much of the sociopolitical reality of Egypt and the complexity and specificity of Muslim-Christian relationships through long centuries. Kelada frames the relationship between the two communities as one of “citizenship,” a relationship that is grounded in the land, between people of the same land. This is, doubtless, a very modern framing, one involved in the nation-state concept. To understand the current Muslim-Christian relationship in Egypt, we need to trace it back to the foundation of the modern Egyptian state.

Muslims and Christians in the Modern State

It was during Mohamed Ali’s reign (1805–48) that Egypt was transformed from an Islamic satellite state—part of the larger Ottoman Empire—into a modern nation-state, politically independent and nationally distinct. The creation of modern Egypt turned the “people of the land” into the “Egyptians,” an identity that categorizes all citizens based on nationality, not religion. In his distinguished work, *The Muslims and Copts in the Framework of the National Society*, Tarik El Bishri wrote (1988, 12), “the Egyptian organization preceded the consciousness of Egyptianity.” El Bishri extensively and eloquently demonstrated that modern Egypt was created through, first, the creation of a modern Egyptian army, and then, the creation of modern administration, education, and parliament.

An Egyptian army composed of the local people was created in 1822, not to wage jihad but to protect the nation-state. However, it was not until Khedive Said’s 1855 decision to allow Christians to join the service that this army became representative of all communities in Egypt. With this decision, the *jizya* system, by which Copts were not asked to fight for the country, was overturned. The decision crowned a series of others that granted equal rights regardless of religious belief. Henceforth, Copts would be on equal footing with Muslims in educational missions, the administrative system, the parliament, and the army. In 1879, the National Party, the first political party in modern Egypt, was founded. It reflected the same spirit of nationalism and equality. The fifth article of the party’s political program describes the party as follows:

The National Party is a national, not religious, party. It is composed of men belonging to diversity of beliefs and denominations. All Christians and Jews and whoever cultivates the land of Egypt and speaks its language can be included in the Party, as it does not look at the difference in beliefs and considers the all [members] brothers, with equal political and legal rights. It is especially considered by the Sheikhs of Azhar who address this Party and believe that the true Shari'a forbids animosity and considers people equal (El Bishri 1988, 46).

The movement from the traditional to the modern system, in the first half of the twentieth century, was rough. Elements of the inherited religious system and religious identity intermingled with those of the national system and Egyptian identity. The constant exploitation by Muslim and Christian political actors—namely the king, the British occupation, the political parties, and the religious political movements—made the transition even more difficult. The traditional religious institutions, such as Al Azhar and the Coptic Orthodox Church, were dragged onto the complicated sociopolitical stage. The implied tension, however, never erupted into extensive violence.

The second decade witnessed both the worst example of a national split and the best example of national unity. In March 1911, the Coptic Conference was held in Asiout to demand political rights for the Coptic minority. It was followed one month later by the Islamic Conference, held in Heliopolis, Cairo, in which the very basis and legitimacy of the Coptic demands were refuted. The two conferences, which have been used to symbolize the peak of the Egyptian Muslim-Christian problems, were followed by a healthy and vivid discussion of the national destiny. Eight years later, in 1919, the most prominent national and popular revolution against the occupation erupted with its two unforgettable slogans: "Religion for God, homeland for all" and "Long live the crescent and the cross!" Even today, the 1919 Revolution is used as the symbol of national unity.

One can get a glimpse of the national political debate around the Coptic question by reading the literature published in 1922 and 1923. At this time, the Constitution Committee was writing a constitution for Egypt. A Coptic member of the committee demanded that the parliamentary elections and the distribution of seats be confessional. Aziz Merhom, a Coptic writer and activist, objected to the proposal and argued that Copts were not a political entity. Mahmoud Azmi, a Muslim writer, contended that the religious minority must be represented in the parliament for the sake of national unity. He argued that Merhom's position was idealist and did not take reality into consideration. The reality, Azmi argued, is that people were still influenced by their religious affiliation while creating public policy. Azmi challenged Merhom's proposal of separating religion and public space by pointing out that declaring Islam as the state religion also violated such a separation. Merhom insisted on his position. He believed that the future would bring new stratification of the society and new classes and groups, and that the constitution must expedite the change, not block it.³

Political exploitation of the debate was obvious. King Fuad, whose ambition was to be the caliph of Muslims and stretch his rule to include the Islamic world, supported the creation of an Islamic state. He appealed to Al Azhar for support. The British, on the other hand, supported a confessional system in which the minorities in Egypt would be protected. Evangelical missionaries, who were actively working to convert Copts, immediately adopted “Coptic rights” as their agenda. The Coptic Orthodox Church rejected a confessional system and supported a national project in which Copts were not a political entity. The Wafd Party, the legal heir of the 1919 Revolution, was in favor of a secular national state, in which Islam was not the religion of the state and Copts were not represented through a confessional system.

Dualities shaped the sociopolitical life in Egypt in those fifty years: national independence versus political democracy, religious identity versus national identity, national independent church versus modern reformed church, traditional Azhar versus modern Azhar. These dualities influenced both the Egyptian bureaucracy and the Coptic Church. The bureaucratic relationships were not exclusively based on secular, modern regulations and laws. Traditional affiliations to communities and groups—the village, the family and, of course, religion—also played an important role in and influenced the workings of bureaucracy. Consequently, both Copts and Muslims complained about their rights not being adequately recognized in the administrative structure because of biases of each side.

The tension between religious and national identity also presented itself to the Coptic Church in the creation of El Maglis El Milli (the Communal Council), which was created in 1873. It consisted of Coptic laymen representatives who were elected to supervise the financial and administrative business of the church. From its creation until the July 1952 Revolution, the clergy and the council rarely worked in harmony. Their relationship throughout the years was shaped by bitter conflicts and inflamed competition for authority. While the clergy was in favor of a national independent church, with power maintained by the clergy, the council was in favor of a modern reformed church with power in the hands of the laymen. These conflicts influenced, and were manipulated by, the larger national political struggle.

July Revolution and State-Religion Relationship

In July 1952 the Free Officers staged a military coup, later referred to as the July Revolution, by which they ousted the king. In 1953 the monarchical regime was terminated and Egypt was converted into a republic. The Free Officers began political negotiations with the British that resulted in the departure of British troops in 1956. An ambitious new system adopted an Arab nationalist ideology with a socialist economic agenda. Leaders liquidated all political parties and political religious movements and tried to create a one-party political system through the Socialist Union. Overemphasizing national unity and national identity, the new system unified the court system and

abrogated religious legal courts, communal councils, and nongovernmental Islamic and Christian endowments. It also stopped missionary work and put missionary schools under strict regulations. The confiscation of endowments, the collapse of the Coptic Communal Council, and the passing of Al Azhar reform laws made the participation of both Al Azhar and the Coptic Church in public life merely symbolic.

Summarizing the effects of the July Revolution on the Egyptian citizenship, Coptic writer and researcher Samir Morqus wrote that from 1952 to 1971, the political citizenship (in terms of political participation) retreated, while the social citizenship (in terms of social justice) improved because of the spread of free education and social services (Morqus 2000, 192–99). In fact, the July Revolution dramatically changed Egyptian society. Agrarian reform, the spread of free education, the industrial uprising, and the establishment of an egalitarian social system had a profound influence on the structure of the society and its classes. However, these reforms were conducted through an omnipotent state that recognized society as homogeneous. There was no discrimination based on ethnic or religious grounds, and all social and political diversity was downplayed. Civil society collapsed, and what remained of it played only a symbolic and insignificant role. A sharp line was drawn between the previous age—with all its ideologies, structures, and institutions—and the revolutionary age.

On the Coptic side, social reform had unfortunately some unexpectedly negative impacts. The nationalization of giant private properties excluding the Copts dramatically weakened the influential aristocratic Coptic class, “which had previously played an important role in political life; this also contributed to reducing the weight and role of the laity within the church itself. Some members of this upper class initiated the movement of emigration, which was a completely new phenomenon of the Copts (and for all native Egyptians) and which was to become so important from the 1970s onwards” (Van Nispen 1997, 27). Unexpectedly, the collapse of the Communal Council did not result in a conservative traditional church solely dominated by the clerical voice. Laity from lower middle and middle classes flowed back to the church during the 1950s and 1960s, leading to ecclesiastical renaissance of the Coptic Church.

The newfound vigor included also the strengthening of theological instructions, especially with the foundation of evening courses in theology addressing university students, many of whom were to become parish priests or monks. This resulted in an important rejuvenation of the clergy (above all in the towns) and of monasticism, which was to become the principal pole of Coptic life, and hence of the episcopate. The nature of this renaissance involved a progressive strengthening of the ecclesiastical, indeed the clerical structure (Van Nispen 1997, 28).

In short, the church was rejuvenated but became strictly apolitical.

Economic Liberalization and the Political Role of Religion

The 1970s witnessed not only a new president, but also a second profound shift in Egyptian society. After waging a successful war against Israel, President Anwar Sadat dissolved the Socialist Union, created a multiparty political system, and introduced a new constitution. The more serious changes he made, however, were liberating the economy and encouraging private enterprise, as well as tolerating and even encouraging Islamic activism. The increasingly powerful Islamic movements aimed to compete against leftist opposition and called for a return to Shari'a and living in accordance with the "Islamic model." Such movements had negative effects on the Copts (Van Nispen 1997, 30). The call of these movements found increasing acceptance in Egyptian society. As one author predicted, "the influence of the Islamist movement will not be limited to the various Islamist groups. It will spread out through a growing Islamization of the general atmosphere of the country, even if the institutions of the state generally continue to function according to more secular models" (Van Nispen 1997, 30).

On the Christian side, the increasing clericization of the Coptic Church continued to develop the reign of Pope Shenouda III beginning in November 1971. The church began to play a greater political role and "the patriarch himself, Pope Shenouda, a very strong personality and one of the symbols of the Coptic renaissance, came increasingly to play a political role and to be seen not only as the representative, but as the real political leader of the Christians" (Van Nispen 1997, 30). Naturally that development was not welcomed by the state, which found in the church a challenging new political actor. Disputes, which became frequent between the president and the patriarch, reached a height in 1981, with the presidential decision to depose the patriarch. On a global level, especially in the United States, Copts in the diaspora began to advocate from abroad, taking the removal of the patriarch and the increase in terrorist attacks as the foundation for their claims of persecution.

The return of the patriarch and the quashing of terrorism during President Husni Mubarak's reign (1981–present) has not made the emigrant Copts' opposition less active. On the contrary, the opposition has often organized demonstrations when the president visits the United States and has paid for advertisements in American newspapers to denounce the systematic daily persecution, murder, forced conversion, and rape that Copts have experienced in Egypt. In 1997, the opposition took an even more active step, lobbying the United States Congress to issue the Freedom from Religious Persecution Act to "establish an Office of Religious Persecution Monitoring, to provide for the imposition of sanctions against countries engaged in a pattern of religious persecution, and for other purposes" (Ibrahim 1998, 14). The enactment of the law, with the annual follow-up visits by an American fact-finding mission committee that reports to Congress every year, is a source of major annoyance to the Egyptian state.

The situation became worse in the context of the American invasion of Iraq, the American sanctions against Sudan, and the Greater Middle East view of American President George W. Bush. The Coptic Church in Egypt has continuously and officially denounced all those claims and actions by the emigrant opposition, as well as the U.S. interference in the matter. It insists on a “national” discussion and solutions to any Coptic problem. In 2004, the congressional committee made its annual visit to Egypt, but the patriarch refused to meet with them. This development intensified the issue of Coptic problems. Coptic concerns today are met with suspicion and caution by the Egyptian government, as a politicalization of such problems might have potentially dramatic consequences for Egypt’s national security.

PROBLEMATIZATION OF MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN RELATIONSHIPS

Coptic Problems

Sameh Fawzi, a Coptic researcher, discussed problems of Copts with more than thirty Egyptian intellectuals representing the whole political and cultural spectrum: Muslim and Christian, religious and secular, left and right. Analyzing the answers, Fawzi (1998, 62) concluded, “It is possible to put a common agenda, which represents the consensus of the intellectuals, from all currents, schools, and ideologies, of the Coptic problems.” Fawzi notes that Egyptian Copts experience the following problems:

- Restrictive regulations on church construction
- Diminished Christian presence in media
- Ignoring Coptic history in educational curricula
- Appropriation of Coptic endowments
- Lack of an official population count of Copts
- Lack of access to high and vital governmental positions
- Constitutional recognition of Islam as the state religion, Shari’a as a source of law
- Lack of proper Coptic representation in the parliament
- Muslim terrorism against Copts

The problems listed above could be generally classified into three overlapping categories: political, administrative, and social. The political problems are those rooted in state policies and/or laws, such as the restrictions on building new churches or renovating old ones. The social problems are rooted in social traditions and cultures, such as the lack of a Christian presence in the media. The administrative problems, such as endowments and university appointments, are rooted in the practice and behavior of the administrative system of the state. The roots of these problems are not distinct: a state policy is driven by the culture of the society, just as the social culture is shaped by the state policy; the administrative area is an overlap between the political and the social areas.

The situation seems to have shifted during the last decade. The repair of churches was put on equal footing with that of mosques, and Coptic endowments were returned to church control. Chapters on Coptic history were added to the educational curricula, the media became more sensitive to Coptic issues, and the Christmas sermon is broadcast by the official TV station. Coptic characters and churches are more frequently shown on soap operas. A few Coptic ministers were appointed to the government, and a number of Coptic representatives serve in the parliament. Actions to eradicate terrorism are effectively being taken.

Social Problems

Despite these changes, problems persist. An important dimension to these problems, according to those interviewed for this study, is the social one. One major complaint was the lack of strong social relations between Muslim and Christian families. A Coptic mother commented that Muslim and Christian children prefer to have friends who share the same religion. It became clear from the interviews that sectarian feelings predominate and supersede those of national unity. The paradox, then, is that social cohesion is taken for granted and all blame centers on the government, while the latter attempts to solve the problem politically.

According to a Coptic interviewee, the problems have become so acute and deep that changing the Constitution, increasing the Coptic presence in the media, returning the endowments, or adding chapters to history books will no longer solve them. The main problem, according to him, is growing sectarianism: people live in faith-based, isolated communities where knowledge of the other is lacking and stereotypes about the other are created and nurtured.

According to many researchers, this “return” to religion or sectarianism was exacerbated by the 1967 Arab military defeat and the economic problems of the 1970s. Eric Davis argues (1984, 139), “the increasing contradiction between differential accumulation and decreasing legitimacy produces a crisis of authenticity.” Islamists have declared the bankruptcy of “Western” ideologies, be they liberalism or secular socialism. This argument was also raised by Bryan S. Turner (2002, 28) who wrote, “With the failure of communism, Islamic fundamentalism becomes one of the few remaining political options in the Third World as a protest against secularization and consumerism.” On the Christian side, there was a parallel return to the church (Habib 2001, 140). The end result was increasing religious fervor in civil society.

A Coptic author and researcher said, “Religion replaced the withdrawing state and collapsed civil society in providing social services. Muslims resort to mosques to seek social support and Christians to the churches. Children go to different summer camps, patients to different polyclinics.”⁴ Emphasizing this notion, Sameh Fawzi wrote (1998, 124),

The society has received, since the mid 1970s, a sociopolitical crisis. The state withdrew from some social care fields, leaving people to their own and according

to the common logic of market. Had a strong civil society existed, social organizations would have replaced the State in offering social functions and would have secured the gradual withdrawal of the State. Nevertheless, in case there is a structurally weak civil society, bound with legal and bureaucratic restrictions, a simple citizen will have but to retreat to the traditional narrow loyalty to satisfy his/her necessary needs. The religious group is the first to be addressed. That was what happened and is happening now. Islamic institutions satisfy the needs of Muslims and Copts have but the Church to satisfy a greater part of their social needs.

Political Role of the Church

In this context, we must revisit the church and the central role it came to play. With the collapse of political participation and civil society in the 1950s and 1960s, the withdrawal of the state from provision of social services, and the rise of Islamic “revival” in the 1970s, the Coptic Church has come to play not only an important religious and social role, but a political one as well. Rafiq Habib said (2001, 133), “The Church attracted the [Coptic] people to make them one church group with mere religious interests and away from getting occupied with public concerns or social issues. Their belonging to the church became practiced on a daily basis. In this way, this institution absolutely dominated everyone. Later, in the 1970s, the church came to represent these people politically.” Some interviewees complained that this development unfortunately resulted in isolating the Copts within the walls of the church. Two interviewees commented that after the clash between the patriarch and the president there was a new “deal” through which the church was guaranteed full freedom to conduct whatever social and religious activities it wanted, on condition that it not get involved in direct criticism of the state. In other words, the church has been supported by the state itself and political demands are directly negotiated between the state and the church.

This development is not welcomed by everyone. Many Muslims and Copts believe that it will only increase the isolation of Copts. Other Coptic researchers think that Copts are mistakenly considered a homogeneous group. Prominent Coptic intellectual Milad Hanna said (2001, 150–51),

The Church was the only organization in which Copts find refuge after the abrogation of political parties, and societies. . . . When Sadat came to power and allowed the Brothers and Islamic Groups to work, Shenoda worked as well in an opposite direction. Copts became followers to the Pope who became their leader. No Coptic leadership gets out but through him. A minister or a parliament member will always be careful that the Church approves of him. The Church became the principal Coptic political institution, something that divided Egypt, because it turned it into religious institutions.

It seems as though the Coptic masses support the church to strengthen it in the eyes of the state and the increasingly Islamized society. It has become more apparent to secular Coptic intellectuals that they will be marginalized

unless they decide to work through the church. Habib emphasizes this notion (2001, 134), noting,

This opposition has its history that goes back to the beginning of the Communal Council and the endeavors of the seculars to have a role in the Church when Copts were playing a role as Egyptians in the political Egyptian field. What is happening now is quite different. The clergy is playing all roles in the Church and dominating the Copts in the public affairs. There are some objections but they are ineffective and interrupted . . . some words here and there. The real issue now is that whoever opposes the Church will feel that he is opposing a huge institution that has huge masses and consequently he is threatened to be rejected by them. There are many people who would get away from such an adventure.

An Islamic political activist and researcher complained that healthy Muslim-Christian interactions are frequently difficult because Copts unnecessarily behave as representatives of the church.⁵ He said that even the Coptic candidate of the parliament, Munir Fakhri Abdul Nour, complained that Copts would not support him unless the church allowed them to do so.

A Coptic author and researcher added a new dimension by highlighting the bureaucratic nature of religious institutions:

Institutionally, there are plenty of problems facing dialogue because the institutions themselves suffer internal problems; whether churches (not only Orthodox) or Islamic institutions. And even if there are people inside the institution who have the capacity and the will to engage in dialogue, they are being marginalized inside their institutions.⁶

In his interview with Amr Abdel Samea, the patriarch responded to those who complain about the bureaucratic/autocratic nature of the church:

We organize the membership inside the Church. There are four kinds of membership: general . . . spiritual . . . working . . . and leadership. Had somebody who has no relation with the Church, its spirituality, its meetings, its religious life, its rituals, its service, come and demanded to suddenly jump on leadership positions of the Church, would that be accepted? If he does not make it, he makes troubles and asks for reform, which means but to be one of those who lead the Church (Abdel Samea 2001, 42).

When Abdel Samea proposed a more significant role of the congregation besides the hierarchy, the patriarch replied,

Making use of the seculars does not mean abrogating the clergy because this is a Church system; otherwise we change the Church from orthodoxy to something else! We are a religious people; the Christian asks the blessing of the clergy, and the Muslim asks the blessing and prayers of Imams. Do they want the secular to dominate the religious man until he becomes his employee? (Abdel Samea 2001, 55).

The Underlying Sociocultural Competition

The collapse of civil society and its later invasion and domination by religious institutions makes it increasingly a space for competition rather than for understanding and cooperation. Unlike the 1911 Coptic and Islamic conferences, which were organized by secular Copts and Muslims, two conferences in 1977 were organized by the Coptic Orthodox Church and Al Azhar: one was chaired by the patriarch, the second by Sheikh Al Azhar. This reflected the decreasing secularism in Egyptian society. Other developments that demonstrate this competitive religious drive are the use of stickers that reveal the religious identity of a car owner, giving newborns names that reflect their religion, and the competition between Christians and Muslims for the domination of the Egyptian public sphere.

With the increasing Islamization of society, Copts have shown a sudden departure from using elements that could be interpreted as “Islamic.” Using *As-Salamu Alaikum* instead of “good morning” as a greeting or wearing a headscarf rather than uncovering the head have become indicators not of social background but rather of religious identity. One interviewee listed the following social customs as threatening to Christians: Islamic signs, the forehead marking of a praying Muslim, the silver ring of Muslim husbands, the headscarf, and even the greeting of *As-Salamu Alaikum* (“peace be upon you”). In his book, Sameh Fawzi (1998, 117–19) lists some of the elements that are imposed to create a more Islamized society: the wearing of hijab, Al A’qiqa (a celebration that is held in the seventh day of the life of a new baby), the Islamic wedding, and the change of the oath of physicians.

The very practice of religion becomes loaded with perceived menace. Codes of ethics, social conduct, and dress become symbols of religious identity and, in some instances, cause for offense. Religious symbols are interpreted as having political meaning, and questions about comparative power become relevant. Whose symbols will dominate the social sphere? Whose gathering before the mosques or the churches will be larger? Whose religious audiocassettes will become more popular in the streets?

Blaming the State

Copts and Muslims both blame the state for problems relating to religious identity, but for different reasons. One interviewee considered the state, in terms of its security, as an obstacle to Muslim-Christian dialogue, stating, “Dialogue became a security issue not a cultural issue. This is very dangerous.”⁷ He is not against the state’s role in the issue of dialogue; he just wants it to be kept away from the security apparatus. A second interviewee raised the same issue by saying, “I believe that security has played an important role in the development of sectarian violence, for many reasons. One of the reasons is that security always—by definition—wants to put an end to any sectarian activity, immediately.”⁸ He further elaborated that “it is dangerous to keep the

file of Christian-Muslim relations in Egypt in the hands of security. As a very [sensitive] issue, it should be in the hands of the president.”⁹

It is clear that there is ambivalence toward the state on the issue of Christian-Muslim relations. While some see state involvement as the problem, others see it as a solution. Reliance on the state is central to Copts. Rafiq Habib said (2001, 142), “Copts rely on the state because it owns power and therefore has to grant Copts their demands. It is the same relation between the church and the state, an institution asking a superior institution to pass down its rights or take care of its interests.”

Negotiation and Compromise Strategies

Understanding the history of the Egyptian state is essential for understanding IFD in the country, because it was through the formation of the modern state in Egypt that Muslim-Christian relations and religious identities were contested and problematized. Furthermore, the peculiar history of the formation of the Egyptian state, as well as the Coptic demands, pushed the state to play a central role in shaping the agenda of dialogue and setting its regulations. It is important to understand that Egypt is neither a liberal democracy nor an autocracy. It is not a liberal democracy because of the absence of an independent bourgeois class. Capitalism and the bourgeoisie were created, maintained, and contained by the state. Even after Sadat’s liberal policies, which were continued during Mubarak’s reign, businessmen have allied themselves to the state and represented themselves through its ruling party, the National Democratic Party (NDP). Despite the reinstatement of a multiparty system, the NDP remains the political institution of the state, through which different classes and social groups compete and lobby for their interests.

Other political parties, as well as civil society, play the role of forums to develop, further, and campaign for specific agendas, be they liberal, nationalist, Marxist, or Islamist. Agendas are then represented, negotiated, and compromised through the political and administrative systems of the state. Even Islamists, whose political organizations are strictly banned and frequently crushed, occasionally have their agenda promoted and adopted through the state’s institutions (Mosaad).

Egypt, as mentioned above, is not a democracy in the Western sense, where representatives of corresponding parties negotiate politics in the parliament and where the government is composed either of the majority party or a coalition. Egypt is also not an autocracy, where the will of the ruler and his regime is directly and oppressively imposed on opposition groups. The ruling party has, thus far, never displayed a specific ideology in contrast to the “opposition” ideologies. On the contrary, it demonstrates “compromised” ideology and policy. There is a constant negotiation process in which compromises are made. These compromises are not final; they change with global, regional, and local demands, which are reflected in the diversity of views held by political parties, social movements, and civil society organizations.

The dynamics of continuous internal negotiation and compromise have always shaped the nature of the Egyptian state: it is democratic and autocratic, secular and religious, liberal and socialist, conservative and progressive. The basis of Egypt's policies has been moderation and avoidance of radical solutions. The state has become a master of compromise.

The fact that Egypt is not an autocratic country means that demands of groups will not automatically be met once the ruler is convinced of their merit (Fawzi 1998). Additionally, civil society cannot be considered the solution. The fact that Egypt is not a democracy limits the ability of civil society to confront, lobby, or pressure the government. Egypt's socioeconomic reality does not provide the basic elements for a vibrant and independent civil society.

Unlike European Christianity, whose church sometimes played a political role, Sunni Islam has had no institution to represent itself in the political realm. But this does not mean religion was separate from the state. Religion, as a reference system of beliefs and actions, has always been a dominant political force in the Islamic world. In fact, secularization, in a European sense, has failed in the Islamic world, because there was no churchlike institution to be banned from politics. In Egypt, for instance, the creation of the modern nation-state was not the consequence of a failed Islamic system; it was expedited by and legalized through Islam.

It is important to note that the Coptic Church also expedited the state's creation. Mohamed Ali appealed to both Al Azhar and the patriarch to encourage Muslims and Christians to join the army. Since then, both religions have never failed to contribute to national negotiation and decision making through representing, not the voice of God, but the conscience of believers.

THE LEXICON OF INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

Before examining IFD in Egypt, we must question the language used to address this issue. An entire lexicon of concepts and meanings has been used to treat this topic: religious freedom, persecution, discrimination, conflict, conflict resolution, peace education, civil society, secularism, fundamentalism, and interfaith dialogue, to name a few. Such terminology frequently does not relate to the Egyptian reality and experience of IFD.

When IFD is attempted in Egypt, given all the local complexities, doubts and confusion increase. IFD, with its diverse labels and terminology, was not a local initiative; it was brought in by foreigners. In the *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, under the entry for "interfaith dialogue," Ariarajah (1991) wrote,

Suspicion of interfaith dialogue among some Christians surfaced in the open controversy at the WCC's [World Council of Churches] fifth assembly (Nairobi 1975). For the first time, five persons of other faiths were invited to a WCC assembly as special guests and took part in the discussions of the section on "Seeking Community," where the dialogue issue was debated. Plenary discussion of the

report of this section highlighted the deep disagreement within the church on the issue of dialogue. Fears were expressed that dialogue would lead to the kind of syncretism against which the 1928 Jerusalem meeting warned, or that it would compromise faith in the uniqueness and finality of the revelation in Christ, or that it would threaten missions seen as fundamental to the being of the church itself.

When IFD is framed as a type of peacebuilding project, local Egyptians question the need for it, especially since there is no war.

Our interviewers in Egypt found that their main obstacle was the framing of the interview itself as research about IFD, because the concept itself was viewed with suspicion. Even those participating in interfaith activities outside Egypt do not feel totally at ease about it. There is a feeling among some that the concept of IFD is imposed from an alien, Western cultural context. One interviewee interrupted his interview in frustration asking, “Why interfaith dialogue? Because your friends outside of Egypt are interested in this? Why should we think of our problems and their solutions in their terms?”¹⁰

STATE SECURITY ROLE

A religious group in Egypt is officially recognized if it does not pose a threat, upset national unity, or disrupt social stability. Such recognition usually is done by the Religious Affairs Department at the Ministry of the Interior, after consultations with leading religious figures in the country, particularly the pope of the Coptic Orthodox Church and the sheikh of Al Azhar. The interference of the state in religion is apparent by the fact that the government controls mosques, appoints and pays the salaries of the imams who lead prayers in mosques, and monitors their sermons (U.S. Department of State 2003).

To approve the construction of places of worship, the State Security (SS) not only looks at the documents provided but also goes directly to the field, conducting long and thorough investigations and negotiations to uncover who finances each project, where each place of worship is built, and who builds it.

A CONCLUDING EXAMPLE

Mute tension between Muslims and Christians exists in Egypt, but rarely does it erupt into real violence. However, when violence does erupt, it reflects the sociocultural competition to dominate the public sphere. An example of just such a violent sectarian clash erupted in February 2002 in an Upper Egyptian village near the governorate of Maghagha. An eyewitness recalls, “I heard that the whole thing began when the exaggerated ringing of the church bells drowned out the call for the *fagr* [dawn] prayers coming from an adjacent mosque, something that provoked the Muslims. One thing led to another and the clashes happened” (Howeidy 2002). A local resident of a nearby village further commented on the factors that triggered these tensions: “The church

was always there, but recent extensions have made it as high as fifteen meters. The adjacent mosque has similarly been extended upwards. On Sunday, instead of ringing the church bell briefly, Louka—a school secretary whose uncle is a priest—went on and on ringing. When some Muslims objected, he took his gun and shot at them. . . . Since then, armed men in green [antiriot squads] have occupied the village and enforced a curfew. It's been extremely tense" (Howeidy 2002). One Coptic resident stated, "We've always lived in peace with Muslims. This whole thing has been blown out of proportion. We live peacefully."¹¹

What was clear in this incident was the politicization of the issue and its implications for security. Controlling the situation politically was the state's most important priority. While the state intensified the security in the villages, it also downplayed the danger and the intensity of the incident. One journalist observed,

Heavy security forces have cordoned off Bani Wallnems since the clashes erupted preventing anyone from entering or exiting the village. . . . More than a dozen armed members of the Central Security Forces and assorted policemen blocked the entrance with the help of an armored vehicle. . . . A statement, issued by the Interior Ministry a few hours after the clashes, affirmed that the situation was "under control" and that the security apparatus succeeded in containing the violence which, according to the statement, was nothing more than a "minor incident" (Howeidy 2002).

In the days following the incident, ceremonial meetings were held emphasizing national unity and stressing that a minor incident will never crack the social solidarity of the Egyptian people. However, in reality, similar incidents and tensions could recur. The problem is a social one, and solving it through a political framework is therefore likely to be an inadequate solution. In addition to being places of worship, mosques and churches are also considered symbols of dominance, where communities compete with one another to dominate the social and culture spheres. Sociocultural approaches to the problem are needed—perhaps in the form of a dialogue that involves all stakeholders, not simply official representatives of the government and the religious institutions.

The politicization is not the sole responsibility of the state and its security institution. Many forces intentionally or unintentionally push the state to respond politically to the problem of Muslim-Christian relations. These forces include fundamentalist groups with a fanatical political agenda; the church, which claims to represent all Copts; the few emigrant extremist Copts who appeal to the international community, and especially to the United States, to intervene and put an end to the alleged murders and rapes against the Coptic minority; the United States, with its annual delegation to inspect "religious freedoms" in Egypt; and a national discourse that overemphasizes social harmony and national unity and reduces problems to "minor incidents." The state

is an important party in dialogue between different communities. An interviewee describes the situation: “For the last thirty years, we have constantly been in a ‘sectarian environment’ filled with religious sectarian claims that have destroyed the roots of coexistence in the Egyptian society on both sides. We need dialogue to remove the unfounded fears and to get out of this environment.”¹² The objective and focus of dialogue should not be how many churches are registered annually or how many Copts should be elected to the parliament. The core question is how to convert the competitive environment between Muslims and Copts into a cooperative one.

INTERFAITH ACTIVITIES IN EGYPT: APPROACHES

State of Dialogue in Egypt

Some of the leaders in the IFD movement emphasized that dialogue is very repressed in Egypt. Some felt that the religious authorities rejected dialogue and that the issue of dialogue was a taboo topic. One participant said, “There is no dialogue in Egypt; whenever there is an issue that is raised, it is immediately blocked the same way topics like Satanists or homosexuality are blocked.”¹³

One possible reason for the lack of support for dialogue at the national level may have to do with the way it has been practiced thus far in Egypt. The tendency apparently has been to sugarcoat the process and avoid hot spots or authentic engagement. One seasoned veteran of IFD characterized the essentials of dialogue this way: “Set the exact agenda, tackle the real issues and declare the real opinions . . . then you are talking about a real problem and therefore dialogue can be fruitful. On the contrary the dialogues of ‘protocol’ or of ‘celebration’ make the people lose all faith in the credibility of dialogue, and so we can say we have now reached a very bad dialogue climate here [in Egypt].”¹⁴ Many participants in Egyptian IFD feel that there is no earnest attempt to wrestle with “real” issues and differences, and thus the events are not dialogues so much as they are staged rituals.

Dialogues occurring on smaller, local levels are more likely to engender honest self-expression. The International Center for Studies (ICS) hosted a series of effective grassroots dialogues between Muslims and Christians. One organizer remarked, “We started a grassroots initiative of Muslim-Christian dialogue; we often met here at the ICS. . . . We also met elsewhere, like in the Maronite school, and we put on the agenda the ‘hot issues’ that affect the Muslim-Christian relationships in Egypt. And there was an important convergence with regards to the agenda, and that was translated to many important activities.”¹⁵ The organizer found that the process of building consensus on various topics became the basis for further cooperative efforts in the community.

Even though much of the dialogue in Egypt may seem surface level in comparison to efforts elsewhere, the fact that dialogue is seen by some as a positive contribution is promising. One sheikh commented,

Generally speaking, dialogue—when the world political factors are moderate—is the common human language. And God ordered the Muslims to communicate with the other whoever he may be, and this is a Quranic verse that expresses an Islamic duty; the necessity for the Muslim to communicate with all creatures or people. This communication should lead to acquaintance. This acquaintance should not be formal but should flourish into relationships that lead to the advancement and development of humanity on one hand, and on the other hand bring peace and prevent war. This is why if a person knows about a serious invitation for dialogue, he promptly responds to it as [if] he is accomplishing a duty.¹⁶

Unity Model

Most people do not readily associate Egypt with religious conflict. The relationship between the Muslims and Christians in Egypt rarely piques the attention of the Western press. Ignorance and denial of differences and conflict result from the unity model. Under this model, Egypt works hard to present a unified picture of solidarity among its people and hopes that the presentation will morph into reality.

On the surface, the desire to be nationally united is a profoundly important one. Egyptians fundamentally want peace and stability within their nation. Unfortunately, rather than examining the differences or roots of conflict, countries living under the unity mind-set move directly into enforcing unity. It appears that, within Egypt today, speaking about the need for dialogue between Copts and Muslims is seen as a kind of disloyalty to the country. It implies that something is amiss and contradicts the preferred image of strength and accord. Under the unity model, differences are suppressed or smoothed over, rather than explored, for fear of surfacing more conflict.

Even the way that most Egyptians define dialogue reflects the country's orientation toward the unity model. When asked to define dialogue, one author's answer is quite typical: "The 'cultural dialogue' highlights the common spaces, the common worries, and the common dreams. In Egypt for instance, Christians and Muslims have the same economic pressures, problems, and ambitions on the general level. This is what I mean by cultural dialogue, which highlights the importance of the value of tolerance in religion."¹⁷

The desire to appear united as a country is so strong that dialogue occurring between the Muslims and Christians is often hidden or unannounced because dialogue is viewed as an indicator of a divided Egypt. Many interviewees stressed finding common ground:

It is a dialogue between . . . not a dialogue between two religions, otherwise it becomes a dialogue of dogmas. . . . Consequently, what are the issues that are common to both sides? Moral issues or social issues or life issues . . . this is our approach to dialogue—to find the convergences and decrease or marginalize differences concerning these issues.¹⁸

Secondary or universal language is extremely important in the maintenance of this model of unity in Egypt. Issues of faith are closely associated

with dogma or fundamentalism and are seen as a route to debates and clashes rather than to discussion.

Critical to the preservation of the unity model is the concept of equality. In Egypt, one important norm in the dialogue is the equality of both sides. Each side must see the other as a full partner in the discussion. At the same time, each culture wants to be recognized as unique and free from the imposition of the other's values. One Egyptian rejected the phrase "acceptance of the other" because he felt that it undermined the basic concept of equality too much.

I absolutely refuse the term or concept "acceptance of the other." It is a concept that leads to exclusion and marginalization. . . . The other is someone who is highly different. Let's compare—although I don't like this comparison—the Christian personality and the Muslim personality. You will find that many things are common—except for religion, everything is common. It is therefore not an "other." Then what is an American, or a French person or a German? We have one culture, one language, one education; the things that are common are numerous.¹⁹

Usually in a mixed culture, the majority population will be more difference denying and unity emphasizing, while the minority population will more quickly point out differences. In Egypt, denial of difference is present among many in both the majority and minority populations. When asked to speak about dialogue in Egypt, one IFD leader said, "I want to start by saying that there is no dialogue between the Copts and Muslims because they have lived together and coexisted for 1,400 years. We are from the same family so the word 'dialogue' is not appropriate. . . . There are no two sides or two parties to engage in dialogue—so the word 'dialogue' is wrong."²⁰ A significant portion of the Coptic leadership rejects the idea that Copts are any different from the rest of society for a different reason—the fear of attracting too much attention to their community. One leader said, "We are citizens before all. We have complete rights and we have obligations to fulfill on the land of our country Egypt—as the Copts are not guests, we are not outside immigrants, our roots are Egyptian. Even Muslims are before all Egyptian. And so we are citizens before all."²¹

In the case of Egypt, the unity model functions on two different levels. The majority Muslim population denies that dialogue is needed because they do not want to appear to be oppressors, while the minority Christian population denies that dialogue is needed for fear of appearing to be traitors and attracting negative attention.

But one Coptic author is unafraid to dispute the unity model openly. "For the last thirty years we have constantly been in a 'sectarian ambience' filled with religious sectarian claims that have destroyed the roots of coexistence in the Egyptian society—on both sides. We need dialogue to elude the unfounded fears and get out of this condition."²²

The American invasion and occupation of Iraq—as well as the British, Spanish, Dutch, Italian, Danish, and Australian support for the military action—has only deepened the power of the unity model in Egypt. The war created the belief that the only way for Egypt to survive if targeted for a second colonization by Western European governments is to stand strongly behind the national government, regardless of its possible faults. Any internal problems that might threaten national unity are currently muted by the need to be a strong Egypt.

Advocacy Model

Most Egyptians express a strong desire to see concrete results, in the form of improved social relations and development activities within Egypt, as an outcome of dialogue. One sheikh expressed that dialogue without action is neither desirable nor truly religious. He explained that the dialogues held in the United States and Europe had not changed the actions of citizens there and were thus pointless unless larger social change occurred. He said, “There must be fruits to dialogue, if there are no fruits other than celebrations and conferences and recommendations, you will find in fifty years we will be much weaker . . . and not advanced one step towards peace.”²³

In Egypt, religious institutions have become social service institutions as well as places of worship. Local places of worship meet the needs of their members by initiating private development projects within the mosque or church. Some Egyptians fear that this situation is shifting the loyalty of the people away from the state and toward their local religious institution. One active member of a political party said, “Everything is now transformed and related to the religious institution and the people are locking themselves in the religious institutions—mosque or church. They are gradually withdrawing from interaction in the society through public work to working for the benefit of the mosque or the church.”²⁴

While some Egyptians feel that the exclusive religious social service agencies are a problem, others do not see them as a barrier to interfaith relations.

I think this [religiously based social service agencies] is a good thing [contrary] to what some people may say—that it divides people and provides services for the Christians only or the Muslims only. . . . there is no problem if some institutions serve the Christians and Muslims, as long as there is a healthy ambiance.²⁵

Not everyone agrees. An Egyptian government official commented,

I think this idea [of shared development projects] is dangerous because there are some very explosive places in Upper Egypt. . . . I think it is too explosive—there are tribal loyalties, fanaticism, and there is one essential suspicion with regards to interfaith dialogue and that is that I want you to become Christian or Muslim. The ordinary people are not qualified or prepared for that at all.²⁶

The fear that development projects are a subtle form of conversion efforts is a barrier to the success of the advocacy model. Many Christians view devel-

opment projects initiated by Muslims as subtle attempts to subject them to Shar'ia. Similarly, organizations like the Coptic Evangelical Organization for Social Services (CEOSS) have been working in social and economic development for many decades in many Egyptian rural areas and have faced such accusations in early stages, but they managed to build a certain level of credibility with local communities that allowed them to work effectively in a Muslim and Christian context.

But some Muslims feel that the Christians may be more adept in the field of social services because they have been working in the field longer and have more support from foreign funders. Therefore, these Muslims believe, the entire nation would benefit from the wider distribution of this expertise and access to resources.

The Role of Ritual

One arena where interfaith exchanges seem to be flourishing is in formal, ceremonious participation by religious leaders in one another's holidays. Much of the obvious contact between the religious leaders seems to occur at major religious ceremonies and holy days such as Easter, Ramadan, or Eid. On such occasions, the heads of religious institutions communicate their greetings to each other in recognition of their respective days of celebration. For a number of years now, the pope of the Coptic Church has dined with the Muslim community, breaking fast with them during their holy month of Ramadan. Similar gestures are also common from the Islamic community toward the Christian minority.

The practice of sharing rituals is extremely popular in the Egyptian interfaith dialogue movement. Around Ramadan, numerous Iftars take place with the participation of Christians. One organizer of such an event commented, "I organize each year an Iftar and invite a large group of Muslims and Christians. The Justice and Peace commission of the Catholic Schools also organize one, and they always invite them [Christians] and they have dialogues in those events—both sides are always present."²⁷

It is important to restate, however, that the power dynamic between the ruling Muslim community and religious minorities deeply taints the perception of these gestures, often leading them to be viewed as insincere and patronizing.

Objectives of IFD in Egypt

The intended effects of IFD in Egypt are numerous. Most Egyptians interviewed seemed to agree that one of the primary objectives of IFD in their country should be to enable the citizens to begin to know one another better.

Muslims do not know much about the Christians, there is ignorance with regards to the customs and traditions. . . . I don't know why they tattoo a cross on their hand. . . . I don't know many of their celebrations. And actually I should know the

differences between their different branches. . . . And the same thing for the Christians, they don't know about the differences in Islam.²⁸

At the moment, Muslims and Christians tend to hold deep-seated fears about one another. Suspicion and misunderstanding abound. One Muslim admits, "The Christians fear the Muslims want to cut them to pieces . . . that they are infidels and ought to be killed or expatriated. . . . All these are unfounded fears but this atmosphere of fear does not help or encourage dialogue."²⁹ While many participants corroborated this societal fear of the other, one religious leader dismissed the idea, saying, "No, there is no fear. There is doubt with regards to its [IFD's] usefulness or a conviction that it is useless."³⁰

Another commonly held objective of IFD is to open up more effective channels between the religious institutions and state institutions. One sheikh emphasized the need for an article in Egypt's constitution that generally recognized the value of religious institutions within the country. He stressed that this would not be a guarantee of religious freedom, but a way to give religious voices more power and credibility.

The religious current must have a constitutional credibility rather than me dialoging with people who have no impact—it is useless. And so we need to invite [both] the people of dialogue on one hand and the State [government] on the other to recognize constitutionally not the right of the citizen to choose his creed but the recognition of the national and intellectual role of the religious people.³¹

At first glance, this statement may seem unrelated to the function of IFD in the state but it is, in fact, a strong indicator of the need to balance power relationships within Egypt. The religious leaders perceive themselves as being viewed as inferior to secular leaders. Thus, until there is some recognition of their importance in the state, they feel less able to work for change.

As previously mentioned, a primary objective of dialogue in Egypt is to create tangible positive change. The need for measurable advancement in areas of civil society is evident. One frustrated religious leader and burned-out dialogue participant stated,

The effectiveness of any dialogue is measured by its fruits for humanity, and how it can be put to the service of humanity. The idea of dialogue started about a decade ago but did not give any fruits. . . . I consider your [the interviewer's] activity and mine in the field of advocacy as a way of distracting people from what the states [the government] are doing to them. What is the point of me preaching every Friday or you spending part of your time and knowledge to try and communicate with people here and there when they will in the end say "but what more can we do?"³²

Unless a dialogue can produce substantial results that participants can see, they are likely to become frustrated and withdraw from the initiative.

Unfortunately many people are hesitant to join an IFD group because they see it as politically affiliated. They often fear that the dialogue is being

held as a covert political operation by a government or institution. This fear is not unfounded; many dialogues do approach the conflict on political terms. While some Egyptians think IFD should be moving toward a democratic system, most Egyptians see the conflict between Muslims and Christians as sociocultural and consider the concern for democracy a distraction from resolving it. Politics is a hot topic. Some feel that politics strangle dialogue and should be avoided, that politics can only serve to stir up the people. Efforts within IFD to address politics are not directly forbidden by the government, but such efforts are frowned on.

IFD participants are often particularly concerned with the presence of fundamentalism in Egypt. Many see one of the objectives of dialogue as being to marginalize extremist and fundamentalist voices on both sides. Unfortunately, many of those creating terror and violence within Egypt pair their acts with religious language. This creates a further barrier to seeing religion as a source of reconciliation and dialogue.

Subjects and Topics of Dialogue

Aside from politics, the subjects of religion and Israel often feature in IFD in Egypt. Secular issues are seen as more “sensible” and “appropriate” topics for dialogue. One interviewee explains, “The Egyptian society has opened new files that are suitable for discussion: democracy, citizenship, participation, liberties, acceptance of the other. These are sociological and political issues that are easy to agree upon.”³³ By dwelling more heavily on topics outside of religion, groups feel more comfortable getting to know one another without appearing to threaten national unity. In such cases, the use of secondary language can be very helpful in creating relationships and dispelling stereotypes about the other.

If religion is to be discussed, most feel that it is best left to the religious leadership. “In a country like Egypt, the religious issue is essential and therefore it is important that the mosque imams and church priests be aware of these questions and interact together.”³⁴

Egypt’s close proximity to Israel/Palestine makes the topic impossible to ignore in a dialogue setting. One IFD participant went so far as to suggest that one of the objectives of dialogue in Egypt should be to strengthen a national vision and action plan on the issue of Palestine. Some dialogue participants believe that internal unity is necessary because Egypt needs to be able to “face” Israel. This is a double-edged sword. While some Egyptians see IFD as a necessary step in strengthening Egypt to live in a world with Israel, others see it as an unnecessary diversion that distracts the Egyptians from the topic of Israel.

Thus, the question is not whether IFD will in some way address the issue of Egypt’s relationship to Israel, the question is how it will be addressed. If the issue of Jerusalem is addressed as a national issue—that Jerusalem should be a shared capital because such a situation would increase stability in the region—then the Christian population within Egypt actively engages in the dialogue.

But if the issue is addressed as an Islamic issue—that Jerusalem must be shared because Muslims want to retain control of Haram al-Sharif and al-Aqsa—then Christians are excluded and deterred from direct participation in the discussion. For most Egyptians, the question of how the topic of Israel should be addressed is answered again by the need for national unity. The approach most often taken is to discuss the holiness of Jerusalem to both Christianity and Islam, and the increased stability that a shared capital with the Jews would bring.

Who Participates? Secularists, Elites, and Youth

Participation in Egyptian dialogues must be balanced between the secularists and the religious believers. Often in the past, dialogues have tended to include more secularists than people of faith. Some participants in such dialogues demanded a more balanced representation, while others argued that the secularists must be present to keep the dialogue level-headed. One frustrated participant remarked,

They [the organizers] discuss the issues from a secular point of view. And I get into conflict with them, I say this is a dialogue between religious people and they get a large number of secularists. But they started modifying this a bit. I told them this [too many secularists] would be a failure because the majority of the audience is religious—the Egyptian audience.³⁵

Another imbalance to be redressed concerns class. Most IFD in Egypt involves the participation of the elite members of society only. One organizer admits, “We find that many of the dialogues are elitist, and so they share a common understanding but do not reach the grassroots.”³⁶ While involving only elites in dialogue makes issues of specialized language or status within the group less problematic, such dialogues often fail to impact the masses outside the dialogue room. One participant in a prominent dialogue project withdrew after he observed that all the participants seemed to be friends and acquaintances. He claimed that the group purposely wanted to restrict membership and exclude people who were not in their inner circle of friends.

The religious elites of both the Muslims and the Christians control a significant portion of public opinion surrounding politics. Even among other intellectuals in society, the religious leaders hold important sway. Many intellectuals admit that their religious leaders tell them whom to vote for and encourage them not to form their own opinions.

In deciding to hold an IFD, there seems to be an elite class of people who must be invited. These are the unofficial staples of the dialogue world: “those you have to approach if you want to engage in any dialogue,” according to one participant.³⁷ These elites are seen as “knowing how to dialogue,” “knowing the rules of dialogue,” or being “better at dialogue than others.”

Dialogue is not seen as an activity that is appropriate for the common person. The belief that special skills are necessary to participate may only

contribute to the elite-centered nature of dialogue in Egypt. In many cases, these “nonofficial dialoguers” may be appointed or nominated by the state to take part in interfaith encounters. One Egyptian said such persons were “nominated by the state to take part in whatever dialogue as they know how not to make anyone angry—and they may be subjected to pressures. But this does not allow for serious dialogue—dialogue becomes formal and superficial and doesn’t get into the depths.”³⁸ The idea that professional government dialoguers are routinely participating in interfaith encounters may be enough to deter others who deem themselves less qualified. This dynamic of participation can become a cycle that only further confines dialogue to the elite members of society.

There is a sense among many in Egypt that it is time to move dialogue from the elite, institutional level to the popular, grassroots level. In an encounter between ordinary Muslims and ordinary Christians, there may be a greater opportunity for mutual empowerment and understanding. While dialogue between elites may create a rich intellectual contribution to the state of dialogue, the absence of a vibrant grassroots dialogue may be stifling other kinds of contributions. The elite and grassroots levels of dialogue are not mutually exclusive. Egyptian society need not choose one or the other. Engaging in both may be more deeply productive.

Another area having to do with inclusion across demographics concerns the typical age of participants. In Egypt, the gap between the generations is seen as both a resource and a liability. The older generation is seen as having the necessary experience to engage in dialogue, but do not because they are either too busy or too cautious. The younger generation has the will to dialogue, but is seen as lacking the necessary capacities, life experience, and skills. One interviewee told us,

The older generation has the experience and has some answers . . . but they are depressed. They ask themselves what is the meaning and what is the point of doing anything. There must be cohesion of both generations for many things, including interfaith dialogue, and this can move the stagnant waters.³⁹

While there are few dialogues occurring today involving the youth, many see them as the antidote to a world of IFD ruled by elites. One dialogue participant explained, “The important dialogue is the dialogue of youth who do not represent anyone. (Even true representatives do not truly represent anyone.) The problem is we are waiting for the representation while the representation is not necessary.”⁴⁰ However, the young people also need some sort of training in dialogue. Dialogue is not easy work, and the youth need to be adequately prepared both emotionally and intellectually. They should be chosen based on an earnest desire to participate in getting to know people from the other side. Some Egyptians observe that the young people are volunteering to participate in dialogues outside of Egypt as a way to travel abroad. This angers those who see the urgent need for dialogue at home and who organize domestic dialogues in hopes of having a positive impact on society.

INTERFAITH ACTIVITIES IN EGYPT: ORGANIZATIONS

Al Azhar Committee for Dialogue

Despite acts of proclaimed egalitarianism on the part of the government, there is a long-standing, intimate relationship between the state and the official Islamic institution, Al Azhar. This unique rapport has often presented minority religious groups with a highly visible point of contention.

In 1997, Al Azhar created an interfaith committee called the Permanent Committee of Al-Azhar for Dialogue with the Monotheistic Religions. The committee is very official, concerned with neither grassroots activities nor local dialogue, but rather with addressing IFD from the perspective of religious and governmental organizations. Al Azhar representatives have met with Rabbi Samuel Sirat, former chief rabbi of France and vice president of the Conference of European Rabbis. Al Azhar officials have met also with government leaders of the United States of America, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Norway, and the Czech Republic.

Religious Fraternity Association

The only official IFD NGO in Egypt is Al Ikhaa Al Dini, the Religious Fraternity Association. Its origins can be traced to 1938, when a group of Egyptian Muslims and Christians decided to launch a dialogue group called the Ikhwān Al Safa Group. The Religious Fraternity Association was officially established in 1978 as a simple initiative devised by a group of people who wanted to come to know one another better. Unlike many groups that form in the wake of a traumatic community event, this one was born out of the desire to talk to one another. This foundation for the group continues to affect the way that group members see themselves. In discussing the relatively long history of the group, one member reports, “The most important thing is that it wasn’t a reaction to anything—because a reaction fades when the action is over—this is what happens to all the new associations you hear about.”⁴¹

The group supports religious fraternity by organizing about nine seminars per year. The seminar is more of a cultural activity than a religious one, and religious differences are not a topic of conversation. One board member firmly stated, “We do not accept discussions on conflictual issues: whether the Christ was crucified or not, [nor] the Bernaba Bible predicting the arrival of [the] Prophet Mohammed. No one dares to tackle these subjects.”⁴² Discussions focus more on common values and morals; to discuss religious topics feels too close to fundamentalism. Only topics relating to Egypt are considered. The members acknowledge that there may be religious tensions in many other parts of the world, but they choose to focus only on Egypt so that they do not stray too far from their primary goal, which is religious fraternity within the country.

Membership currently stands at about 250 people—mostly elites of society, such as physicians, engineers, sheikhs, police officers, and priests. Members

include prominent persons like Abdu Sallam, the former minister of health; Sheikh Ahmed Baqoury, the grand sheikh of Al Azhar; Bishop Samuel, the bishop of public services in the Catholic Church; Ahmed Al Wetaidy, the former president of the police academy and the former deputy minister of youth; and Abdul Fattah Shawqi, board member and treasurer of the Syndicate of Physicians. Membership is not open to everyone, and members are chosen carefully. An important criterion in the selection of members is that those who are chosen should not bring up sensitive issues in the discussion that might lead to conflict. The group does not want “troublemakers” within its ranks.

Muslim Brotherhood Group

In addition to the official initiative by Al Azhar, an Islamic group split from the Muslim Brotherhood Group (MBG) and founded the Al Wasat Party in 1995. The spokesman of the Al Wasat Party, Abu El Ela Madi, also directs a research center, the International Center for Studies (ICS), and cofounded an NGO called Misr Society for Culture and Dialogue (MSCD). It is through these three organizations that MBG pursues its political and cultural agenda. The ICS and MSCD have been the MBG’s instruments for promoting a series of meetings to which it has invited representatives from across the Egyptian political and cultural spectrum. MBG had to be seriously engaged in a number of national dialogues in order to situate itself properly in the political and cultural arenas. MBG’s ideological principles were based on the works and thoughts of a number of Islamic intellectuals, especially Mohamed Seleem El Awwa and Tarek El Bishri, who write about Muslim-Christian relations and participate in IFD activities. Unlike many of those who are involved in dialogue efforts in Egypt, MBG started its dialogue locally and later extended it regionally and globally.

MBG has not embarked on secular approaches or “liberal” Islamic interpretations to address Coptic concerns, but rather bases its work on fundamental Islamic interpretations.⁴³ It roots its views in accepted Islamic scholarship and the authenticated methodology of Ijtihad. MBG’s spokesman noted,

Some of the progressive ideas of people like El Awwa, El Bishri, and Hewaidi are not known and so I presented these ideas and clarified them [in dialogue meetings] and they got it. That was important for our Imams to be able to talk about citizenship in Islamic terms. These views are important not because they are the trend nowadays, or because they are Western, but because they represent a new Islamic discourse, a new Ijtihad.⁴⁴

He added that imams have a problem of communication in dialogue because “they use a specific language derived from Fiqh.”⁴⁵ MBG emphasizes that from the Shari’a point of view, there is no place today for concepts like *jizya* or *dhimma*, and that Copts are equal citizens who can be appointed as judges and can be elected to any office, including the office of presidency. Though the Al Wasat Party has never been recognized, MBG had the opportunity to

practically implement their views and influence the last parliamentary elections; in 2000, Madi enthusiastically campaigned for Munir Fakhri, a Coptic candidate to the parliament.

It is important to note that MBG's work has been primarily an intellectual rather than a grassroots form of engagement and activism. This does not mean that its work is not important, but again points to the elite nature of IFD in Egypt.

Coptic Orthodox Church

The dialogue through the Orthodox Church has an impressive history grounded in an intrachurch clergy/laity dialogue. In 1985, a group of Coptic youth decided to found the Cultural Development Group (CDG). Samir Morqus, who used to write in *Al Ahali* (an Egyptian Marxist newspaper) before founding and leading this group, has written (2002, 2–3),

This Group became the basis from which the Coptic Center for Social Studies (CCSS) emerged later in 1994. The Group and the Center could be considered as the two arms of the cultural and dialogical activities in the Coptic Church. Each one of them integrates the other; the Group works with the youth at the basic level under the umbrella of the Youth Bishopric and the Center works with the intellectual elite and the Egyptian research group under the umbrella of the Services Bishopric.

Morqus continues (2002, 4), “this activity [of the CDG] took into account that it does not reflect a specific political trend or intellectual school, but that it rather gets benefit from all human thought, achievement and experience through different ages and leaves it to the youth to decided for themselves what suits them.”

A course on cultural development, with a primary focus on Muslim-Christian relations, was later designed according to the CDG's objectives:

1. Understanding the church history from a cultural view as well as giving it a more modern rereading
2. Rereading the Coptic history in the context of the history of the Egyptian national society
3. Studying the current reality with its many phenomena
4. Extending bridges of dialogue to the society and encouraging youth to vivid and effective participation
5. Developing thinking skills and gaining cultural skills (Morqus 2002, 4)

Besides Muslim liberals and Marxists, CDG invited Islamists, especially Emara, El Awwa, and El Bishri, to its lectures. It vehemently rejected both the religious Dhimmi and secular minority framing of Coptic issues and instead emphasized the notion of citizenship as the only accepted framework for the Coptic question (Morqus 2002, 14). To that end, CDG organized a number of lectures and, workshops, and invited Muslim and Coptic writers to participate.

By and large, the Coptic Orthodox IFD experiences are successful. Many factors contributed to this success:

- Cooperation and understanding between enthusiastic and wise young
- Copts like Morqus as well as clergy such as Archbishop Mousa, the archbishop of the Youth Bishopric
- Emphasizing the indigenization of dialogue, in terms of analytical concepts used, issues raised, and approaches
- Addressing the issue of national unity rather than pushing the dialogue toward sectarianism
- Raising important, and yet difficult, questions no matter how sensitive some people might consider them

Instead of the ceremonial meetings, in which dialogue sessions devolve into a celebration of national unity, the participants chose to get involved in hot and problematic issues that concern the Copts.

Some problems, nevertheless, still exist. Although Muslims are invited to speak, Muslim audiences have not been invited. This has meant that the greater number of people needed to further the dialogue have not been included. Morqus explained, “the audience is Christian, but the guests are Muslims. Because of objective reasons, the center’s activities can include Muslims. Expanding a public invitation for Muslims to participate is, however, difficult in the church or cathedral.”

One prominent CCSS leader said,

There are some very good intellectual results, but the problem is that you cannot implement them. You find some excellent ideas coming out of sincere people who sat together and discussed and got real good results...but they only represent themselves; they have no means to implement these ideas. Now we can both of us find twenty ideas to create spaces for Muslims and Christians to interact and to calm down the environment, and even to solve the sectarian problems in Egypt, but what are our tools to implement this on the political level? This is the real obstacle against the intellectual dialogue. In the end, they have nothing but their thoughts and voices. The best they can do is to distribute these books on the largest number of people . . . given you don’t find obstacles in the distribution of these books in the first place!⁴⁶

She hinted at two institutional problems, bureaucracy and conservatism, saying, “When there is an institution, you always have problems with dialogue because part of the institution’s identity comes from its difference with the other. And this prevents it from being open, particularly when the institution is weak. . . . In the end I believe the conservatives get the upper hand—not the fundamentalists, but the conservatives.”⁴⁷

Coptic Evangelical Church

In addition to the Coptic Orthodox Church, the Coptic Evangelical Church has also promoted IFD activities via the Coptic Evangelical Organization for

Social Services (CEOSS). Originally started as a literacy project in 1950, CEOSS is now a social as well as development organization. Currently it is one of Egypt's largest development organizations and addresses needs such as health care; education; and economic, agricultural, and environmental development.

Dialogue is one of the three central tenets of CEOSS's work. Beginning in 1992, the organization worked to bring together Christians and Muslims to promote mutual understanding and tolerance between the two religions. CEOSS has a forum called the Forum for Intercultural Dialogue, which "brings together Christians and Muslims, clergy and lay people, intellectuals and individuals from the entire array of society for the sake of promoting mutual understandings on contemporary issues in religion, culture and civil society" (CEOSS Web site). The forum is very active: sixty-seven meetings and forty-five workshops have been held since its creation.

In 2003, the forum introduced a new program to break barriers separating East and West through collaboration with the Lutheran Evangelische Akademie in Loccum, Germany. Participants in this dialogue included a mixed group of religious leaders, Christians and Muslims, and influential intellectuals from Egypt and Germany.

One forum leader elaborated on an interesting program that started in 2000, the New Generation Program, which is a joint project with the Ministry of Awkaf/Endowment. He explains,

The objective of the project is to create an environment of understanding between young priests/pastors and imams. When the sheikh and the priest coexist, this is transmitted to their communities. In the next phase, the sheikhs and priests will work together on developmental activities. The program tackles general issues such as plurality, citizenship, etc.⁴⁸

The imams are invited through the Ministry of Endowment and the priests/pastors are invited from the three major churches of Egypt. The speakers have a diversity of secular and religious backgrounds, and the issues raised are social, cultural, and political. The forum launched a special program for Upper Egypt, where most of the violent events between Muslims and Christians take place. Additionally, it organizes Opinion Makers Round Tables, which bring Muslim and Coptic opinion makers together to discuss general social and political issues.

Roman Catholic Church

The Catholic Church in Egypt has demonstrated interest in promoting inter-faith dialogue through forums such as the Egyptian Committee for Justice and Peace (ECJP). The ECJP invites Muslim and Christian participants to its national projects, through which a genuine dialogue is initiated to address real-world problems. It became clear through our interviews and research that

participants in such dialogues usually belong to the intellectual elite and often do reshape their ideas and views according to the challenges they encounter in their work with the ECJP.

The ECJP called an interfaith meeting in 1995, which brought together a number of middle-aged Muslim and Christian intellectuals and activists. This group organized meetings in which participants were invited to present papers and discuss them. The meetings gradually stopped, but the work that was done was captured in a Catholic Church publication. The general secretary of Catholic schools in Egypt has also adopted IFD as one of his objectives. Muslim lecturers, some of them Islamists, are invited to its meetings and summer camps. Academically, both the Dominican Institute and the Human and Theological Sciences Faculty invite Muslim lecturers and writers to contribute to their academic work. The Jesuits also invite Muslim intellectuals to enrich their meetings and discussions.

Moral Rearmament Society

Some of the most prominent dialogues in Egypt are imports. One such imported organization for dialogue is Moral Rearmament (MR). MR first began in Europe after the Second World War as a way for people to arm themselves not with weapons but with morals. In Egypt, the initial founding members of the group were intellectuals. Their meetings were not religious, but were about morals. Internationally, the organization is now called Initiatives for Change. Egypt's group preferred to keep the old name. Initiatives of Change/Moral Rearmament is now registered as an international NGO.

The local founders—Muslims, Christians, and Jews—belonged to the Egyptian bourgeoisie or the agrarian aristocracy classes. Membership was composed of either Europeans or members married to Europeans. Members were expected to invite their families to the meetings and involve them in the activities. Initially, a Swiss couple in Alexandria hosted the meetings once a week, which later met in the homes or private gardens of group members to discuss life situations and how to deal with them. The focus was on moral standards, not on personal religious beliefs. Religion was not ignored, but the group chose to focus on the common ground shared by religions.

Most of the dialogues in which Egypt's MR participates take place outside of Egypt, usually in Europe. The focus is typically interfaith understanding, but the case of Egypt is not usually addressed directly. Discussions focus on broader Christian-Muslim understanding between the West and the East. The press is not invited to such interfaith meetings so that the people feel more free to speak openly.

In Egypt, MR is a registered organization, headed by Dr. Mohamed Hasoun. A few years ago MR organized a lecture on morals in sports in one of the sporting clubs and another one at the Nutrition Institute on morals against commercial cheating. After September 11, they called for a common prayer for peace—but there was no response from the larger community. However,

a few months later, when the siege of Ramallah occurred in Palestine, Pope Shenouda and the sheikh of Al Azhar invited the group to a prayer in the cathedral, and one MR member helped to organize the event.

Although MR occasionally addresses IFD in Egypt, for the most part members claim that Egypt does not have the kind of problems that require dialogue. They focus more on supporting dialogue outside of Egypt between Christians and Muslims.

Today, the group is unfortunately decaying and holds irregular and infrequent meetings in the home of Nagia Said, usually whenever a European member is visiting Egypt. In the last three years, nevertheless, there was a small increase in its activities when a few members were invited to attend meetings in Switzerland and Malta.

Studio 206

A very small group called Comparative Religions meets in Studio 206, an art studio on Street 206 in the Ma'adi District of Cairo. The two founders explained that the objective is to use dialogue as “a tool to narrow the gap between religions.” One founder explained how they both believe that “the essence of all religions is one. So we try to focus on this essence.”⁴⁹ The other added that she has “read a lot of the Hindu religion texts, philosophy, etc. . . . It all points to a one Creator, the source of existence. And all the religions point to that, so the plurality of religions is just a question of flavors; different foods have different flavors.”⁵⁰ Comparative Religions, which started as a Web-based discussion group, is inclined toward a humanistic approach that emphasizes psychological interpretations of problems and solutions, such as hatred, love, and unity. In their meetings, members do not discuss the social or legal systems of religions, or the social or political problems of religionists. They prefer talking about elements of the creed—like Heaven, Day of Judgment, Restoration—to demonstrate the diversity of interpretations displayed by different religions, and then trying to show how the essence in the end is one. The few meetings are frequented by youthful bourgeois.

Comparative Religions plays at most a minor role in Egypt; however, it is unique in that it displays the sort of discourse more common in the Western model of IFD. Unfortunately, such initiatives do not speak to the majority of people in Egypt.

The above list of forums of dialogue is not comprehensive. A number of other dialogue initiatives, unfortunately, have failed to continue or thrive in Egyptian society. Such initiatives usually have a short-term objective: they are created when violence erupts to emphasize national unity, propose ways of studying the problem, and try to radically solve it. Nevertheless, they gradually evaporate, although perhaps leaving a residue of positive relationships between Muslims and Copts, which could later grow and expand in other frameworks.

OBSTACLES TO INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

Four obstacles hinder IFD in Egypt: the overpoliticization of dialogue efforts, the deficiency of grassroots initiatives, the suspicion surrounding dialogue efforts, and the lack of a clear vision for dialogue. Despite the fact that these problems cannot be easily isolated from one another, it is important to try and explain them separately to shed light on their complexity.

Overpoliticization

The prevalent national unity discourse will satisfy neither Muslims nor Copts, who are engaged in a very competitive, albeit unnecessarily volatile, environment. There is a need to tackle the problem differently, promoting more cultural and social approaches. Unfortunately, numerous factors stand in the way of such approaches: Islamic radicalism, the negative role played by the immigrant Copts in the United States, and especially the pressure placed by the U.S. Congress through its monitoring of religious freedom. These factors stand in the way of removing IFD from an inflammatory political context.

Many Egyptians see the current state of politics within Egypt as a primary obstacle to dialogue. While state institutions insist that dialogue already occurs in the country, the facts on the ground are more complicated. Some have suggested that dialogue is merely a cosmetic exercise that has little connection to political and social realities. One prominent Egyptian declared,

There is no clear and sincere recognition of the importance of dialogue. The existing dialogue is one of elites. The state institutions pretend they are capable of conducting dialogue, when in fact, they are not. Besides, they say there is dialogue when there isn't. Dialogue is no more than a good gesture, a décor. . . . Dialogue and interaction during social events and social celebrations is normal, it is a matter of ethics. What we need is a deeper dialogue, on the political and sociological problems. The Azhar and the Church are not even agreeing on the issue of normalization.⁵¹

Dialogue is seen as an issue of national security within Egypt. The Egyptian national security leaders want to put an end to any sort of sectarian activities within the country. The security arm of the state classifies dialogue as a sectarian activity; it encourages people to explore their identity as a member of one group in relation to another group.

Deficiency of Grassroots Initiatives

Civil society is essential to boost and support social activism. There must be a plethora of forums, societies, educational and research centers, institutions, and other organizations working to heal the bitter rift between Muslims and Christians. The lack of such cultural, educational, and social work is the second obstacle to IFD. The lack of serious grassroots activism to dispel the fears and doubts held by the respective sides and to build up bridges of confidence,

understanding, and respect is a serious obstacle and must be overcome if any real change is to occur.

Building a vibrant grassroots effort is no easy task; establishing an NGO in Egypt requires a lot of work. One has to go through a battery of ancient laws and regulations that make such an endeavor almost impossible. Significant bureaucratic and administrative obstacles stand in the way. Moreover, any financial aid provided to these organizations is not tax deductible; such institutions might quickly run out of funds. Seeking foreign financial aid presents other serious problems, as the state and its media usually view such aid with suspicion. Recipients of foreign aid could find themselves suddenly either jailed by the state or accused and insulted by the media. Liberal NGOs that are financially supported by foreign aid became stigmatized as corrupt Westernized organizations founded by wealth seekers, entrepreneurs, and activists. There is also a lack of volunteerism in Egypt, which is grounded in the history of economic crises. Egyptians typically find little time for activism.

Suspicion and Separation

In Egypt several factors contribute to distrust and isolation. In a society divided by religious differences, members of either religion who seem comfortable with the other may be regarded with suspicion by their own group. One Muslim reported, “The frequency of my meetings with the Copts now started arousing some questions, as people say ‘you are more with them than with us.’ This makes me limit my participation [with the Copts]. This is a barrier . . . because you need to preserve your credibility.”⁵²

The Christians and Muslims often live quite separate lives from one another socially. Just as the religious institutions are taking on the role of social service institutions, so too are they taking on the role of social centers. The church and the mosque provide a variety of social activities and sports that encourage each group to keep to itself and isolate each from interacting with the other.

In Egypt, the organizer of an IFD must be careful to appear as honest and transparent as possible. A frequent obstacle to dialogue is that many participants harbor suspicions about the motivations behind the dialogue. The participants need to trust that the dialogue is not sponsored by a foreign institution that is attempting to intervene in Egyptian affairs. Many people fear that some invitations to dialogue are fronts for foreign political institutions involved in intelligence gathering.

Lack of Vision

The fourth major obstacle to IFD is the absence of a clear vision toward which grassroots activism could work. Many IFD initiatives did not move beyond trying to answer basic questions like what is dialogue and what does it involve. These philosophical questions are important, but the grassroots movement tends to require more concrete goals. Good intentions have always

existed and are frequently expressed and emphasized. However, lack of clear objectives and models of best practice makes it impossible for noble intentions to be translated into action and social change.

AGENDA FOR THE FUTURE

Our research revealed that several adjustments need to be made to move forward. Ambitious IFD work should start with a process of “indigenization.” The concepts, the problems and their theoretical framing, the approaches and proposed solutions, the objectives, and the organizations carrying out the work must be indigenous and rooted in Egyptian culture and experience. As we have seen, it is only when the dialogue is based locally and shapes its agenda through the daily encounter with Egyptian reality that it blooms and becomes fruitful. Such localized initiatives will be more successful than those imposed from the outside.

The rise of Islamism in the 1970s made the core question of interfaith relations in Egypt one of citizenship. Much effort, work, writing, and discussions situated the Coptic question in this framework. This conceptualization of the problem was good for the 1970s, but today, it risks adding to the undesired overpoliticization of dialogue. Social manifestations of sectarian conflict, which are currently considered minor or incidental, should be taken more seriously. The core question now is social relations; it is about the highly competitive social environment between Muslims and Christians. A political approach is necessary and important only if it is supported by social and cultural approaches as well.

CEOSS’s successful experience of working through, not against, the state, in terms of its Ministry of Endowments, should be extended and reiterated. The state initiatives, like that of Al Azhar or the National Dialogue and Social Peace Committee of the parliament, are currently either ceremonial or too official. Such initiatives must be expanded to the grassroots, something that the state has the power and facilities to do. The question is how to properly communicate with the state to create and secure such spaces for dialogue. Cooperation between social/cultural forces and the state is important. What is required is a reduction of state bureaucracy to make such cooperation easier.

A plethora of dialogue forums and organizations must be created and encouraged to carry on the significant task of converting a competitive environment into one of cooperation and understanding. These organizations have to work at the grassroots level with all sectors of society. Besides these organizations, the religious civil society, instead of being recognized as a source of sectarianism, must be used to encourage dialogue.

It is important to remember that in Egypt, religion has played and will play a major and central role in daily life. Religious identity should not be disregarded in favor of national identity. It is through this religious identity that social unity has to be promoted. In this regard, Islamic and Christian

organizations must be encouraged to conduct social services and joint projects together. They also should put IFD high on their agendas. "The maintenance of authentic and deep relations between Copts and Muslims," in Christian Van Nispen's words (1997, 32), "is not an automatic matter that can look after itself." A deliberate work to enhance such unity and carry it forward must be emphasized. It is through the local mosques and churches in every corner of Egypt that IFD must be conducted and maintained.

Living in a society with a Muslim majority, Copts have a reasonable degree of knowledge about Islam. However, Muslims' knowledge about Christianity in general and Coptic Christianity in particular is too scant. As Coptic initiatives to spread knowledge about Christianity have been perceived suspiciously as missionary work to convert Muslims, efforts to pursue and spread such knowledge must be initiated by Muslims. Popular writings, articles, booklets, curricula, and different audiovisual materials need to be created and put at the Muslims' disposal so that they can choose to learn more about their neighbors' history and legacy. Materials about Muslims and their heritage should also be made available to Copts, as such knowledge must be mutual.

The pull of national unity is at the moment silencing or marginalizing most efforts at Muslim-Christian dialogue. Those who advocate dialogue risk being portrayed as wanting to divide the greater nation of Egypt. Dialogue continues to be defined as a national security issue. Because of the perception that many dialogue efforts are the product of foreign institutions attempting to gain influence within Egypt's borders, the Egyptian government keeps a close eye on dialogue activity. If the nature of the relationship between Muslims and Christians is to change within the country, the government must stop seeing dialogue as a security issue and begin seeing it as a social issue.

Ultimately, IFD can help to open up relations between Muslims and Christians, but it may do little to change many of the country's problems. Dialogue may plant seeds of trust within the population, but these seeds will have to be watered with a more transparent political process and the lifting of institutional discrimination. Dialogue may provide a starting place for the exchange of ideas between religious leaders or political elites, but these ideas will have to be cultivated and nurtured by a public sector willing to implement them.

Despite efforts at a reduction in discriminatory actions on the part of the state, it remains to be seen whether economic conditions or legitimacy will be strengthened. Doing so would lead to the formation of an environment more conducive to dialogue, where people will see few economic differences as well as the presence of a universally enforced authority. This will help prevent conflicts of passion and frustration that are rarely rooted in differences of religion. As economic conditions worsen in Egypt and the income gap widens, inter-faith disagreements stem increasingly from a sense of inequality. When this is combined with the fact that in most cases the distinguishing factor between Muslims and Christians is their faith and little else, religion becomes the focal point in the blame game that ensues.

It is encouraging many people are able to recognize this fact and make deliberate efforts at continuing to live in peace with their neighbors of a thousand years. Such efforts include shared nonprofit and humanitarian organizations at the local level, interfaith schools, sermons that preach tolerance and understanding, and the formation of committees and organizations dedicated to IFD. There exist so few examples of the latter that the need for an increase in the number of private and state-sponsored institutions of dialogue is quite clear. When faced with a rapidly growing grassroots Islamic revival, largely committed to nonviolence, it becomes all the more important that the state avoid antagonistic actions that destabilize interfaith relations (such as extrajudicial crackdowns on supporters of Islamic political parties, which can lead to their radicalization). With the vast majority of the Egyptian population being Muslim, and with the state's declaration of Islam as the national religion, responsibility for the enhancement of IFD falls largely on the state's shoulders. Local levels of dialogue also hold tremendous importance, but such efforts are often retarded and made fruitless by state policy.

The three-pronged core of the matter, our research concludes, is that interfaith work must be supported by the government as well as by the majority of the Egyptian population. It should extend beyond the boundaries of the church (and mosque) and include both Muslim and Christian participants. There is a need for additional venues for pursuing interfaith activities in civil society and for transferring the knowledge to a larger portion of society. Working on the grassroots level is of utmost importance.

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