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Ayad, Mariam F. *Coptic Culture and Community: Daily Lives, Changing Times*. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2024. 346 pages. ISBN: 1649031823.

Reviewed by: Mohamed Bourouayah, Professor of Religions and Interfaith Dialogue, former Vice-Rector, Emir Abdelkader University, Constantine, Algeria.

The Coptic people have a deep presence in human history, as evidenced by archaeological excavations. The Copts have proven their presence on the historical scene for many centuries, and their culture has formed a rich subject for historians and anthropologists.

This book features several papers that highlight various aspects of Coptic daily life and arts. Its content aligns with the overall findings of historical and archaeological studies, which concur that Coptic history and culture represent a pivotal element in human history, with its historical narratives and social events. This categorically refutes the unfounded claims made by those who sought to diminish Coptic history or overlook its crucial stages, falling prey to misguided ideas driven by a dubious agenda that attempts to distort Egyptian history through the deliberate falsification of the Copts' role in building Egyptian civilization and their contributions to human civilization. The book covers all these aspects and provides answers to many of the questions that have preoccupied historians regarding Coptic history and culture. It also provides compelling evidence of the impact of Coptic culture on the development of global cultural heritage.

The book puts an end to the deliberate separation between ancient and modern Coptic history, affirming that it is a single history despite the temporal differences. Ultimately, Coptic heritage is the fruit of this historical accumulation and integration, and any attempt to separate its parts is a futile endeavor and a pointless study that contradicts the facts and documents that have shaped Coptic history from its earliest beginnings to its various stages of development. The book does not merely present a purely historical narrative about Coptic culture but rather complements this narrative by clarifying the societal aspects that define Coptic society in its various historical stages and in all its manifestations and

expressions, whether related to cultural practices or to the daily life of Copts in their society or in the diaspora, the societies in which they live.

According to "The American University in Cairo Press," this volume brings together leading experts from a range of disciplines to examine aspects of the daily lived experiences of Egypt's Coptic Christian minority from late antiquity to the present. In doing so, it serves as a supplement and a corrective to institutional or theological narratives, which are generally rooted in studying the wielders of historical power and control. The American University in Cairo Press added that this book reveals the humanity of the Coptic tradition, giving granular depth to how Copts have lived their lives through and because of their faith for two thousand years. This book is a massive work that includes many main and sub-themes, but they can be summarized in the following themes, which express the central ideas contained in the writings and articles that make up this book. The first three sections consider, in turn, the breadth of the daily life approach, perspectives on poverty and power in a variety of different contexts, and matters of identity and persecution. The final section reflects on the global Coptic diaspora, bringing themes studied for the early Coptic Church into dialogue with Coptic experiences today. These broad categories help to link fundamental questions of socio-religious history with unique aspects of Coptic culture and its vibrant communities of individuals.

This book is a type of collaborative research work characterized by revolving around the dynamic interaction between participants, the diversity of viewpoints, and the focus on a deeper understanding of the subject through open discussions, which allow for the collection of rich and diverse information that reveals subtle details about social phenomena. Focus groups and group interviews are considered its most prominent applications for obtaining rich insights from their natural sources. The diverse fields of knowledge represented by the contributors to this book are a valuable asset, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the subject from all its religious, historical, cultural, and social perspectives. This fosters a rich intellectual discourse, a quality often lacking in many research studies.

This book provides a highly nuanced and precise understanding of a complex and crucial topic that concerns the most significant ethnic group in the history of Egypt in particular and human history in general. This intellectual richness complements the existing body of scholarship that has elevated Coptic culture to a high priority for researchers engaged in the history of ethnic groups. This book benefits from the contributions of researchers from diverse academic disciplines, lending it a noteworthy academic quality. It analyzes numerous historical issues in detail, revealing many hidden aspects of Coptic culture that

have not received due attention in historical, demographic, and archaeological studies.

This book demonstrates the positive impact of collaborative work and the collaborative writing process, which is increasingly favored by many research centers. The diversity of ideas fosters a remarkable dynamism often lacking in individual research; the shortcomings of one researcher are complemented by those of another, and so on. This review cannot cover all the issues and topics addressed by the researchers involved in this remarkable academic work, but that does not prevent us from highlighting some selected research. Selection here does not mean that the unselected topics are not important, but rather it is a factor of brevity, nothing less and nothing more.

I agree with the publisher that this volume attempts to fill a gap in the scholarship of Coptic culture by focusing on the questions of daily life of Coptic individuals and the Coptic community (Coptic Culture and Community, pp. 1). Otherwise, and contrary to what Mariam A. Ayad said in his introduction, that “the Coptic community has unfortunately been doubly marginalized in recent scholarship” (Coptic Culture and Community, pp. 1), I think that the Coptic experience cannot by any means be denied or marginalized in both ancient or recent studies regarding the vast historical, religious, and social studies on Coptic history in recent times. In my opinion, claiming that Coptic culture is marginalized in recent studies stems from a lack of familiarity with the research written in this field, or perhaps it is a promotional tactic employed by the publisher to encourage researchers to give more attention to this ancient culture, which encapsulates a significant part of human history.

In their study entitled “An Egyptian Family and a Woman’s Freedom: A Case Study of Late Antiquity,” Alanna Nobbs and A.D. Macdonald argue—based on some letters attributed to some Coptic families who lived in that period—that these letters reveal a certain degree of freedom when it comes to travel. The authors highlight the case of Ploutogenia, who did not otherwise restrict her travel to her own house, and Paniskos had no qualms about her traveling to Heliopolis, though he wished her to travel by boat to Koptos (Coptic Culture and Community, pp. 63).

Alanna Nobbs and A.D. Macdonald added that these letters reveal a rather complicated and tense family situation positioned against a background of military and political tension; women have the means to communicate with their families in strong terms and feel free to chide or to remain silent. They are free and able to move around, and they are happy to disregard the wishes of others (Coptic Culture and Community, pp. 63). The authors' arguments on women's freedom in the Coptic community are noteworthy, but the most important matters

to be mentioned are women's freedom to participate in governance and their freedom to reject laws that infringe upon their human dignity. Freedom of movement and speech are inherent freedoms, and their absence in any society is contrary to nature and violates the natural rights of all human beings, regardless of gender.

Even in modern times, the status and position of Coptic women in society have not changed, and the deliberate marginalization of women has continued in all religious, social, and daily life. In contemporary Coptic Orthodox Egypt, as claimed by Karolina Jeppson, women have been a part of the structures of the Coptic Orthodox Church, but not as part of the dominant groups. It does not take away their importance as social servers. Even in the field of religion, women have rarely been part of the structures of authority. Hence, there has been a lack of female writers and tellers within religious institutions (Karolina Jeppson, *Gender, Religion, and Society*, pp. 8). In our view, the greatest challenge is to think about changing the stereotypical status of Coptic women inherited from history and to find ways to enhance the status of women in society. Gender should not be an excuse for the deliberate exclusion of women of Coptic origin.

In his study entitled “An Exploration of Power Distance in the Early Church and the Modern Coptic Diaspora,” Ihab Khalil highlights the most serious challenge for the recent Coptic Church, which is Coptic immigration as an active and vibrant diaspora that moves further into the twenty-first century, where there has been discussion among members of the community of what Coptic identity means and the roles of clergy and laity. In this context, Ihab Khalil argues that a challenge for many churches with large immigrant populations is how to keep successive generations in the church with the presence of cultural differences between these diaspora cultures and the culture of Egypt, where the mother church resides, and the consequences of these differences.

Ihab Khalil proposed a series of solutions to overcome the potential disconnect between the new generations and the Coptic Church and the possibility of their assimilation into the societies in which they reside, which have religious and social customs contrary to Coptic customs. Among these solutions is that the churches in the diaspora should work to attract these generations by activating church associations and enabling them to perform their missionary and awareness-raising role among Coptic immigrants. The church in the diaspora should also open up to the community in an acceptable manner and abandon the state of isolation that does not serve the church and the Copts in a changing era marred by many manifestations that discourage people from the church.

There are a considerable number of recent studies that focus on Coptic culture in its various aspects. These studies are an important addition to this book;

they provide a historical survey of the past, present, and future of Coptic culture. Among the most important of these studies is “The Coptic Orthodox Church in the Netherlands: Shedding Light on Overlooked European Coptic Diasporas,” written by Milicic, M. This study is part of a book or chapter of a book (Tamcke Martin (ed.), *Europe and the Migration of Christian Communities from the Middle East*, pp. 79-90). The author of this study highlights that the largest Coptic (Orthodox) communities outside of Egypt are those in English-speaking countries, mainly in the USA and Canada. Accordingly, those communities are well-known both within the transnational Coptic Church and among scholars (Coptic and non-Coptic alike) who deal with Coptic diasporas in their research (*The Coptic Orthodox Church in the Netherlands*, pp. 79).

One of the most important strengths of this book is the deep academic analysis based on the diverse and comprehensive references to the book's topics, and the researchers' ability to employ the diversity of knowledge and intellectual differences in clarifying the stated goals and providing the desired additions to the subject of Coptic culture in its relationship to society in the past, present, and future.

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