

PATRIMONIO CULTURALE ARABO CRISTIANO

TESTI, SAGGI E TRADUZIONI

16

*Patrimonio Culturale Arabo Cristiano/Arab Christian
Cultural Heritage*

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PATRIMONIO CULTURALE ARABO CRISTIANO

TESTI, SAGGI E TRADUZIONI



Nel momento in cui la lingua araba acquistò una rilevanza letteraria per i cristiani d'oriente, spettò prima di tutto ai melkiti dotare il nuovo genere di una propria letteratura religiosa, che non consistesse soltanto in traduzioni dei testi antichi del periodo ortodosso precedente ma anche in opere autonome.

Georg GRAF

Non c'è un errore nel titolo di questa serie. Molti saranno sorpresi nel leggere affiancate le parole “cristiani” e “arabi”. Eppure nel giorno della Pentecoste ci sono degli Arabi che si fanno battezzare (At 2,11). In seguito diverse tribù arabe si convertono al cristianesimo, inventano la scrittura araba e danno all'Arabia i suoi primi regni, ben prima della comparsa dell'islam.

I cristiani arabi hanno raccolto l'eredità scientifica e filosofica dei greci. I califfi musulmani li hanno chiamati alla corte di Damasco e poi a Baghdad per farne i loro medici privati e i loro accreditati consiglieri. Ci hanno trasmesso le opere mediche di Ippocrate e Galeno, quelle filosofiche di Platone, di Aristotele e dei loro continuatori, quelle scientifiche di Euclide e Tolomeo. Sono stati i continuatori della ricerca dei greci e gli artefici della grande rinascita araba del X secolo che, a partire dal XII, è filtrata lentamente in Occidente.

La collana è stata creata al fine di far conoscere la cultura dei cristiani arabi. È promossa da una trentina di ricercatori che dal 1999 hanno dato vita all'associazione «Gruppo di Ricerca Arabo-Cristiana» (GRAC: <http://www.grac.it>).

At a time when the Arabic language acquired a literary significance for Eastern Christians, it was first of all for the Melkites to endow the new genre with its own religious literature, which consisted not only of translations of the ancient texts of the previous Orthodox period but also of autonomous works.

Georg GRAF

There is nothing wrong with the title of this new series of studies. Although many people may be surprised in seeing the words Arab and Christian in the same sentence, Arabs were present at the first Pentecost and received the baptism of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:11). Later some Arab tribes accepted Christianity, invented the Arabic script, and formed the first kingdoms in the Arabian Peninsula long before the rise of Islam.

These Christians preserved and synthesized the scientific and philosophic inheritance of the Hellenic world and because of this the Muslim Caliphs of Baghdad and Damascus sought them out as court physicians and councilors. They transmitted this treasure, through translations and commentaries on the medical treatises of Galen and Hippocrates, the philosophy of Plato, Aristotle, and their disciples, and the scientific works of Euclid and Ptolemy. They were students of Greek learning and they began in the 9th century a renaissance in the Arab world that three centuries later spread to the West.

In order to remedy this serious gap of knowledge about the Arab Christian world, the present series, *The Treasures of Arabic Christian Culture* is being offered to scholars and interested readers in Italy and all over the World. It is promoted by about thirty researchers who have given birth to the association «Arab-Christian Research Group» since 1999 (GRAC: www.grac.it).

Paola Pizzo

**Religion and Politics
in 20th Century Egypt**

Translated by

Laura Rosella

Mike Harakis



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Foreword

With this book we present a revised and updated English translation of the central part of *L'Egitto agli egiziani! Cristiani, musulmani e idea nazionale (1882-1936)*, that is volume 7 of the series «Patrimonio Culturale Arabo Cristiano» published in 2003. That publication was born within the activities of the Christian Arab Research Group (GRAC) that aims to promote and spread the knowledge of the contributions that Arab Christians have given and continue to give for the cultural, social and political progress of Middle Eastern societies. Our research group, founded in 1993 thanks to the untiring efforts of Father Samir Khalil Samir and his contagious enthusiasm for the literature and the history of Arab Christians, has now published about twenty titles, including many editions of Arabic Christian texts with Italian translation in addition to some historical studies.

In the last few years we have felt the need to promote our work and to connect it with the researches made by other scholars in a wider context. Thus the initiative was born to include in the series some studies and translations in English in order to encourage a wider and international dissemination of our research works not only in academic circles but also among all those who care about the past and especially the future of Christian communities in the Arab world.

P.P.

Rome, October 2018

Editorial Note

Abbreviations

AE:	Italian Embassy in Egypt
AP:	Affari politici (Political Affairs)
ASMAE:	Historical and Diplomatic Archive of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs – Italy
b.:	busta (envelop)
DW:	Dār al-waṭā’iq al-qawmiyyah – Egypt
f.:	file
FO:	Foreign Office
MAE:	Ministère des Affaires Étrangères – France
TNA:	The National Archive – UK
v.:	volume
vv.:	volumes

Transliteration

For Arabic words and names the Grac scientific transliteration system has been adopted except for terms that have a common English equivalent (islam, sheikh, Beirut, Cairo, Mehmet Ali, etc.).

Turning Points in the Middle East in the 20th Century

The coming to power of Gorbachev and the beginning of perestroika led to the creation of a new vision of Soviet policy in the Middle East¹. The Soviet leadership reduced relations with the most radical Arab countries in an attempt to improve Israeli-Soviet relations. At the same time, it did not seek to curb American political ambitions in the Gulf in 1990-91. The Middle East remained one of the privileged scenarios for the Russians in terms of building international relations and, in 1991, Gorbachev sent the Minister of Foreign Affairs Primakov to the region to thank Egypt and other Arab countries for the support they had provided during the attempted coup d'état². The USSR would collapse not long after the Madrid conference but – as Kreutz recalls – Russia continued to play a role in the Middle East, albeit a less relevant one than it played previously, although it has been more prominent in recent years. Moreover, the events in the Middle East had an impact on the Russian Federation in an increasingly significant manner. We need only consider how much Islamic extremism influenced the Chechen conflict or how the preaching of a different conception of Islam spread compared to the one traditionally diffused in the former Soviet area, such as Wahhabism.

1. See KREUTZ, *Geopolitics* (2002), p. 51.
2. See KREUTZ, *Geopolitics* (2002), p. 51.

Despite the Cold War coming to an end, the competition between America and Russia continued, and the Middle East remained one of the key scenarios of action. The Russians' aspiration to represent one of the countries which exercised the most significant influence on world politics found in the Middle East a privileged place in which to fulfil this desire³. We must reflect on the consequences of the collapse of the Soviet regime and the impact it had on the region, thus changing the relationship between political and religious power. In other words, how the Arab leaderships used religion in a new geo-political context marked by globalization and the end of ideologies. This contribution tries to highlight the kind of relationships existing between the Egyptian political leadership and religion, and how and if it changed over time from the Nasser to the Mubarak government, considering the end of the Cold War as a turning point in this process.

Some turning points have contributed in shaping contemporary history in Egypt in connection with key events at regional and international level. We need only recall that many scholars believe the emergence of modern Egypt coincides with the Napoleonic invasion of the country in 1798, even if this approach was deemed to follow a colonialist or "Orientalist" rationale by Edward Said⁴. If we consider the events which occurred in the country from an Arab regional perspective, there are specific dates that have had a tremendous effect on the history of Egypt. First of all, 1952, the year when some officers of the Egyptian army carried out a coup d'état that put an end to the Khedivial government first and the monarchical power later, which

3. See GRESH, *Russia's return* (1998).

4. See SCARCIA AMORETTI, *Problemi storiografici* (2000), pp. 56 ss. On the criticism of "modernization" of historiography on the Middle East, see the insightful introductory pages to PAPPÉ, *Modern Middle East* (2014).

had been started one and a half centuries earlier by Mehmet Ali. The latter, an Ottoman officer of Albanian origin, is considered to be the one who inaugurated the history of modern Egypt after the Napoleonic troops had been driven out of the country. Since 1952, initially with Neguib and two years later with Nasser, for the first time in many centuries, an Egyptian returned to lead the country of the Nile.

The history of Republican Egypt developed within the international context of the Cold War and was marked, at regional level, by the series of Arab-Israeli Wars. 1967 was one of the most critical turning points for the country. A shock not only for Nasser's leadership but also for the conscience of many Egyptian thinkers and politicians who had sided with the ideology of Arab socialism and, after being disappointed by the defeat, had chosen to return to their Islamic identity. The defeat had a devastating effect on the conscience of Egyptians and Arabs in general⁵. Such a blow to national pride could only leave a mark on all the men of letters of the time⁶.

The stricken conscience of the rapid defeat of June 1967 was redeemed by the Kippur-Ramadan War in October 1973, another symbolic date in Egyptian national history. The political regime exploited its linguistic, literary, cultural and iconic ability to the full in order to turn the partial Egyptian military victory – Egyptian military gains were soon lost to Israel's counterattack – into the myth of Egyptian redemption⁷. On the wave of the great emotion aroused by the enthusiasm for the triumph over Israel, the following year saw Sadat implement a new policy of *infitāḥ*, opening. The new path embarked on by Sadat led the country, on the one hand, to build peace with Israel in 1978 – another

5. See LAROUÏ, *Crise* (1974).

6. See BADAWĪ, *Arabic Drama* (1987), p. 229.

7. See MENSRAWY, *State* (2017), pp. 28-29.

symbolic date in Egyptian history – and, on the other, to undertake a series of *laissez-faire* economic reforms.

Three years later, Sadat would pay with his life for the choices he imposed on Egyptian politics; he was murdered on the very day of the anniversary of the onset of the Kipur-Ramadan War – 6th October 1981 – by a militant of the Islamist group *al-Jihad*.

All the turning points considered so far lie within the regional context marked by the Arab-Israeli conflict and, more in general, within the international perspective of the Cold War.

Nasser had used the image of the three circles to represent his vision of Egypt: the Arab circle, the Mediterranean circle and the African circle. But Nasser's representation of Egypt went far beyond Pan-Arabism and Mediterranean relations, thus finding a place in the broader circle of the non-aligned countries. Nasser opened up a decisive phase in the decolonization process with the decision to nationalize the Suez Canal in 1956. The previous year, in Bandung, Nasser, Nehru, Tito and other leaders had laid the basis of the doctrine of neutralism and the condemnation of colonialism⁸. This event accelerated the process towards independence by other countries at a global level.

A similar phenomenon occurred with the liberal experience of Egypt in the 19th century. At the time, the country was experiencing significant economic, political and cultural development, thus acting as a point of convergence for the entire Arab world. With Nasser and Sadat, Egypt – though in very different ways – became a driving and attracting force in the regional and international context in which it found itself.

The collapse of the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe in 1989 and the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991

8. See DI NOLFO, *Imperi militari* (2007), p. 265.

occurred ten years after Mubarak had assumed the leadership in Egypt following the murder of Sadat. The vice president was left a difficult legacy by Sadat; an unprecedented economic crisis along with a weakened political position, which was undermined on several fronts, from the Islamist to the liberal and socialist ones⁹. In a country like Egypt, whose international equilibrium was designed in the context of bipolar relations, the collapse of the Soviet system had a considerable impact. Sadat's choice in 1974 of a laissez-faire economic position (*infitāḥ*) which was closer to the American sphere, had become a constant in Egypt's international relations, confirmed – or even reinforced – by Mubarak.

During the first decade of the regime, the successor of Sadat successfully consolidated his authority in the country and resumed international relations by being re-admitted to the Arab League and by obtaining slightly greater independence from American foreign policy in the Middle East. In 1991, with the end of the Cold War following the collapse of the Communist regimes, Mubarak started wielding greater authoritarian power. Civil liberties were reduced while, as far back as the mid-1990s, organizations for human rights protection and against torture were complaining that torture was systematically used by security forces¹⁰. This coincided – not by chance – with the signing of an agreement on *stabilization* and structural adjustment programmes with the International Monetary Fund¹¹. Kienle demonstrated how economic reforms during the Mubarak era were partial and selective and produced no major democratization of the political system in the country¹².

9. See AMIN, *Egypt* (2011), pp. 3-4.

10. See GÓMEZ ISA, DE FEYTER, *International Human Rights* (2009), p. 433.

11. See AMIN, *Egypt* (2011), p. 17.

12. See KIENLE, *Grand Delusion* (2001).

Essentially this is the summary of the temporal references that characterized the history of Egypt in the second half of the 20th century. The turning point in 1989, considered in terms of the context of the Middle East and Egypt in particular, was the perfect moment for Mubarak's regime to consolidate power. If Nasser and Sadat had a vision of the future of Egypt with an attractive and evocative force – for better or worse – Mubarak's personality, some say, appeared to be dull: he pursued Sadat's political line in terms of economic opening and peace-building with Israel with no creativity at all¹³. The severe judgement of the Egyptian economist and historian Galal Amin is that Mubarak's regime was just an authoritative and somewhat bland one that lasted for thirty years, unable to express a vision or a mission for Egypt, dull like its ministers and bureaucrats – corrupt and with no initiative; a regime that during its last stage, was not even able to name a dauphin or a successor apart from Mubarak's son.

13. See AMIN, *Egypt* (2011), pp. 16-17.

The Confessional Crisis in 1908-1911

1. Implications of the Religious Factor in Occupied Egypt

1.1. The Dinshaway Incident

A few years after the British occupation had begun, a seemingly insignificant accident during a hunting expedition marked a turning point in the history of Egyptian nationalism and gave an anti-Christian implication to the movement, which would add to the climate of conflict between the Muslim and the Christian communities in the following years¹. In June 1906, a group of British military officers were pigeon hunting in the Delta, near the village of Dinshaway. Pigeons were considered to be common property by Egyptian peasants and their hunting by the British was seen to be importunate. The tragedy was triggered when a woman, the wife of the local imam, was accidentally injured. The enraged peasants surrounded the British who, in panic, fired on the crowd that reacted to the attack. In the ensuing turmoil, a British officer was injured and another was killed. Fifty-two of the peasants involved were arrested shortly afterwards, and put on trial. In 1895, the legal proceedings on attacks against British troops were regulated under a specific provision. At the time, the court was chaired by the Coptic Minister of Justice, Buṭrus Ġālī, while three British officers were also mem-

1. On the Dinshaway incident, see VATIKIOTIS, *Egypt* (1991⁴), pp. 206-207.

bers of the jury. The verdict handed down on 27th June was severe: four peasants were sentenced to death, others were sentenced to forced labour and the rest to public whipping. The sentences were brutally carried out the following day. The incident had a huge resonance at national level and hardened the people's anti-British and anti-colonialist sentiments and, above all, on the wave of the deep emotions raised by the Dinshaway convictions, the nationalist press fanned the flames of hatred and tension. The fact that Buṭrus Ġālī was the head judge, sitting beside the British, was seen by many as a betrayal of the national cause by the Coptic community.

Although some eminent members of the community participated in the national struggle on the side of the Nationalist Party of Muṣṭafā Kāmil, in general, the period from the beginning of the British occupation to the 1919 revolution marked one of the most critical phases as regards the relationships between the Copts and the rest of the country. The main reasons for such difficult times can be found in two factors. Firstly, the tendency to emphasize the common Islamic belonging and loyalty to the Ottomans by the national movement led by *Ḥizb Waṭani*, in the conviction that if Egypt returned under the authority of the Sublime Porte, it would thrive in the fight against the British. Yet, this confessional inclination of the Egyptian independence movement was not the nationalists' key goal in as much as some historians did not believe that their intention was to place Egypt under Ottoman tutelage again, but rather to exploit this alliance for anti-British purposes².

The second factor hindering the Coptic-Muslim relationships at the time was the struggle for appointing government administration officials. While the Coptic notability demanded justice and equity and feared that its members might be removed from the positions of power they had

2. See FAQĪ, *al-Aqbāt* (1991²), p. 31.