



Christians versus Muslims in Modern Egypt: The Century-Long Struggle for Coptic Equality

S. S. Hasan

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The Copts of Egypt are the largest Christian minority in the Middle East. In recent years they have often figured in the news as victims of bloody attacks by Islamic militants.

Christians versus Muslims in Modern Egypt is the first study of Christian identity politics in contemporary Egypt. S.S. Hasan begins by looking at how the Coptic generation of the 1940s and 1950s remembered, recovered, and imagined the ancient history of Christianity in Egypt in order to weld the Copts into a unified nation, resistant to the growing encroachments of Islam. She argues that this interpretation of history, in which Egyptian martyrs figure prominently, made possible the rebirth of the Coptic church and community—in much the same way as the preservation of Hebrew and the historical memory of Jewish tribulations served the purpose of national reconstruction of the state of Israel.

The bulk of the book focuses on the period beginning with the consecration of Pope Shenuda in 1971. Drawing on extensive interviews with church leaders, clergy, and others Hasan finds that during this period the responsibilities of the church for the welfare of the Coptic community grew immeasurably. Church leaders arrogated to themselves the exclusive right to the political representation of their community and reconceived their role from the narrow care of souls to the promotion of economic and cultural efflorescence of the entire Coptic community. The leaders of this revival, she shows, have nurtured a potent and distinctive religious culture with a sense of communal pride and identity in an environment in which they were increasingly exposed to discrimination and outright hostility.

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