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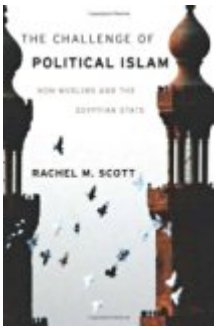
Rachel M. Scott. *The Challenge of Political Islam: Non-Muslims and the Egyptian State.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010. xiii + 277 pp. $24.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8047-6906-8.



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Rachel M. Scott's new book, ***The Challenge of Political Islam: Non-Muslims and the Egyptian State***, is a much-needed account for the study of both Islamism and Copts in contemporary Egypt. Although Copts are a considerable minority in Egyptian society, about 10 percent according to unofficial estimates, few scholarly accounts examine this Orthodox Christian community in relation to Egyptian history and politics. There is considerable breadth in the existing literature on Egyptian Copts in
English and Arabic, including historical studies on their status as a protected religious group under classical Islamic empires and the Ottoman period (the seventh through nineteenth centuries), their dynamic role in the movement of national liberation against British colonialism in the early twentieth century, and, in recent work by Nadia Ramsis Farah, Sana Hassan, and Rafiq Habib, on the church's confrontations and reconciliations with the state from the 1970s until today. Yet Scott's book is the first study that attempts to introduce a systematic survey of Islamist positions regarding the political rights of Copts, and Coptic reactions to them.

In principle, Copts enjoyed equal civil rights under the post-independence secular, socialist state of Gamal Abdel Nasser (1956-70). His successors Anwar Sadat (1970-81) and Hosni Mubarak (1981 to present) both adopted an ambiguous notion of a secular state, where Islamic ***shari'a*** is recognized as "the main" source of lawmaking in the second article of the constitution. As Islamic movements became increasingly active in Egyptian politics since the 1960s, they have shown a
persistent concern with the degree of political rights granted to Copts, whether in the current semi-secular state, or in the
ideal Islamic state that they aspire to establish. Though she refers to them collectively as Islamists, Scott distinguishes between conservative and moderate Islamic groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood and the al-Wasat Party, offering important insights on their positions toward Copts. Equating modernity with Westernization she argues that "modernization" is a major challenge

faced by Egyptian Islamists, as it pressures them to modify their thought by adopting Western concepts such as democracy, human rights, and citizenship. Her study promises that "By examining Islamist articulations of pluralism and citizenship in relation to the role of non-Muslims, this book illustrates the complex ways in which Islamic tradition is modified, reinterpreted, and changed in response to the demands of modernity" (p. 10).

The first two chapters provide background about non-Muslims in classical Islamic sources. Copts fell under the legal category of ***dhimmis***, or protected people who as monotheists were granted freedom of worship but were required to pay a poll tax, ***jizya***, in return for protection by the Muslim state. While it is difficult to generalize over such a vast expanse of time, Scott mentions that they faced occasional waves of forced conversion, and they largely did not enjoy political equality. She also explains that in the 1800s and early 1900s, Islamic revivalists were challenged to modify classical discriminatory attitudes toward the rights of non-Muslims in order to respond to European colonialism and modernity. She chronologically maps the various trends of Islamic groups and political parties in the twentieth century, in particular the Muslim Brotherhood and Jihadi Islamists, whom she characterizes as propagating more conservative views about non-Muslims, and the al-Wasat Party, which claims to be a moderate offshoot of the Muslim Brothers, and which considers Copts as full citizens.

In chapter 3, the author details the official position of the Egyptian state regarding non-Muslims, as reflected in the constitution and legal codes, themselves based on Islamic law. Scott indicates that Copts have lived in an increasingly Islamized state since the days of Sadat, when the constitution was amended to stipulate Islamic law as the main source of law, instead of merely one of its sources. Faced with the rise of Islamic political parties, the state adopted religious language, so that Copts were "caught between the Islamists and the state" (p. 78). These trends led to a degree of separation between Copts and Muslim citizens, and the growth of "Coptic cultural nationalism centered on the political authority of the church" (p. 65).

Chapters 4 and 5 lay out the visions of different Islamic groups on Coptic rights and citizenship. For instance, conservative groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood and thinkers inspired by them, including Sayyid Qutb and al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya, insist on a classical, nonegalitarian definition of non-Muslim citizens as ***dhimmis,*** arguing that in an Islamic state non-Muslims should not have access to positions such as the presidency. For fundamentalists, ***jihad***, or holy war to protect Islam, should be launched against non-Muslims as well as Muslims who do not embrace their concept of an Islamic society that applies ***shari'a*** law. The author views the position of al-Wasat more positively, noting that although the eminent thinkers of this party call for the application of ***shari'a***, they still embrace Western concepts of democracy and citizenship. Thus, they would allow Copts greater political rights, and some envision them as active participants in government, becoming prime ministers and presidents. Al-Wasat thinkers call for new ***ijtihad***, or legal reasoning, to revise Islamic legal provisions on the concept of the ***dhimma*** (contract of protection). Scott indicates that they have shifted to a pragmatic agenda and accepted the existing realities of the Egyptian nation-state, discarding the classical ***dhimmi*** status. She concludes these chapters by summarizing these various positions: "Islamist statements on citizenship illustrate that Islamist ideology is in a state of flux as it adjusts its ideology to the context of the Egyptian state and to the hegemonic concepts of citizenship and pluralism.... Citizenship is no longer considered an imported secular ideology but has gained legitimacy within the Islamist framework" (pp. 145-146).

Scott then examines Coptic responses, arguing that in a number of ways they match the agen-

da of liberal Islamists. The Orthodox Christians of Egypt generally do not call for a secular state, as they recognize the centrality of religion in shaping their identity as well as that of Muslims. ***Shari'a*** law after all does allow them religious autonomy. Thus, they would accept an Islamic government if it were ruled by a party such as al-Wasat that grants them citizenship rights and autonomy in communal affairs such as personal status. However, " the idea of convergence between the Wasatiyya and the Copts can go only so far," because Copts still fear the idea of an Islamic state (p. 189).

In her coverage of Islamic classical history, Scott generally uses secondary sources or primary sources in English translation. In the remaining chapters she largely relies on interviews with Islamist thinkers and prominent Coptic personalities though it seems that her subjects tried to present the Western interviewer with what they thought she wanted to hear. Muhammad Salim al-'Awwa, a Wasatiyya thinker, appears in the book as a greatly enlightened Islamic scholar who calls for granting almost full equality and citizenship rights to Copts. Yet in a recent interview on al-Jazeera, al-'Awwa made outrageous statements about Copts to the predominantly Muslim audience, which precipitated immense sectarian strife in Egypt. His conservative position has also been cited as provoking bloody attacks against Christians in Iraq. Supplementing these interviews with their publications and media sources would have afforded a more accurate reading of their ideologies.

The commercial considerations of the publisher may explain the title and its misleading synopsis of the book's content. The book is not about political Islam and its challenges per se, but about Islamist and Coptic discourses of the state. By not including Copts in the title, it marginalizes them in favor of the more fashionable Islamists, as indicated by the image of two mosque minarets. The title also suggests that the book covers all of the non-Muslim communities in Egypt, but it only makes brief mention of the Bahais, and is primarily about Copts. Nonetheless, this book will serve as a welcome addition to undergraduate courses in Middle East history and politics, as well as Islamic studies courses on religious minorities, as it provides a nuanced account of Islamist parties and their discourses.

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