

4-1-2011

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Recommended Citation

Guirguis, Fatin Morris Ph.D. (2011) "Rachel Scott. *The Challenge of Political Islam: Non-Muslims and the Egyptian State*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010.," *Journal of International and Global Studies*: Vol. 2: No. 2, Article 13.

DOI: 10.62608/2158-0669.1058

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs/vol2/iss2/13>

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**Rachel Scott. *The Challenge of Political Islam: Non-Muslims and the Egyptian State.*
Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010.**

In her book *The Challenge of Political Islam*, Rachel Scott raises timely and serious questions about the ways in which the status of the Copts, Egypt's native Christians, might be affected should an Islamic state be established in Egypt. She attempts to answer these questions by providing the reader with a modernist deconstructionist approach to both Islamist and Western values. She debuts her argument by destabilizing Islamist ideology and Sharia (Islamic law). Scott contends that Islam and Sharia are not monolithic entities and are therefore subject to reinterpretation to accommodate modern values like democracy, tolerance, equality, and citizenship. Rejecting the view that secularism has a monopoly on tolerance, she starts a discourse on the possibility of establishing a religious Islamic state in Egypt that is tolerant toward the Copts and other non-Islamic groups who share the country with the Muslim Sunni majority. Proceeding with her argument, she questions the definition and application of terms like tolerance, equality, and citizenship, with the purpose of allowing for the redefinition of these terms within an Islamic context.

She begins by taking to task Hassan El-Banna, the most influential of modern Islamic authors and ideologues and the founder of the biggest and the most influential Muslim group to date, the Muslim Brotherhood. She refutes his claims that "Islam is a complete system which deals with all areas of life" and points to the Quran's very general guidelines regarding the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims. She also takes note of how these guidelines have evolved and changed according to historical context, whether during prophet Muhammed's life or later during the golden age of the Islamic empire. She demonstrates how the application of Islamic laws regulating and defining the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims in Egypt has evolved over time. She reviews the Dhimma contract, the Covenant of Umar, and the Millet System, all of which were laws predicated upon tolerating the existence of others (including the Copts), permitting non-Muslims to retain their religious identities and guarantying non-Muslims' safety among a Muslim majority, though sometimes for a tax. She cautions, however, that these series of laws, despite their differences, emphasized the political supremacy and dominance of Islam and made no presumption of equality between Muslims and non-Muslims. She adds that even when Egypt became a nation state in 1923 and the role of Sharia as the source of all legislation was reduced in favor of Western laws, forcing the Millet System to give way to Personal Status Law, this secularization of Egypt did not dismantle the country's Islamic identity, and many aspects of Islamic identity were, in fact, maintained, including the Hatti Humayun decree, which restricted church building and repair and restricted the freedom of Coptic Christianity and any other non-Muslim religion. At the same time, the new, more secular Personal Status Law further reduced the autonomy of the Coptic community, despite allowing the Copts self-rule in matters of family affairs. Scott argues that the establishment of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1928 by El-Banna, who called for the abolition of the secular state and a return to

the Islamic Caliphate, revealed, among Muslims, dissatisfaction with the overall secularization and Westernization of Egypt.

Scott explains that the Islamic political scene in Egypt today, whether conservative, moderate, or radical, is the brainchild of the Muslim Brotherhood ideologies. She particularly examines the moderate pragmatic Muslim Brotherhood ideologies and locates in these the possibility of a meaningful citizenship for the Copts, although she admits that the definition of citizenship in an Islamic state remains a contested domain. She also acknowledges the existence of conservative and radical thoughts stemming from the writings of the influential Islamist Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966), who promoted violence against the secular state and non-Muslims. His thoughts and ideas influenced, to different degrees, the members of the Brotherhood. Different interpretations of his writings caused the division of the Muslim Brotherhood into several groups, some of which were and still are militant in their opposition to the secular state and the Copts. Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya and Jihad are two such militant groups active in South and North of Egypt responsible for several attacks on Copts, tourists, secular Muslims, and politicians. However, the author does report that Al-Jama'a has lately denounced violence against Muslims, and the Jihad are said to have been decimated during confrontations with the police.

The reformist wing of the Muslim Brotherhood, in which Scott locates her hope for the Copts, distanced itself from the ideas of Qutb, rejected violence against the State, preached incremental advances toward an Islamic state, and called for a "democratic mechanism of the modern civil state" founded on justice and equity without discriminating against color, race, or religion (50). However, she warns that there is tension inside the group between the conservatives and the moderates, and at times, she explains, the conservatives assume control. Scott contends that these differences should be seen in light of development and change, although secular Muslims and many Copts tend to view these frequent changes of leadership and ideologies from conservative to moderate and back again as a political ploy by the Brotherhood, who want to reach political control at any price and wouldn't hesitate to use deception of the public to achieve such goals. At the same time, Scott provides narratives that support the suspicions of the secular Muslims and the Copts. For example, she explains that the Muslim Brotherhood's success in infiltrating the professional syndicates and their efforts within those organizations resulted in the spawning of another political group called "Al-Wasat," or "the middle." Al-Wasat members had their own disputes with The Muslim Brotherhood and accused its members of dictatorship and not believing in democracy or humanity. Still, when the moderate Al-Wasat members were refused political party status by the government, many of them rejoined the Muslim Brotherhood.

Scott sums up the demands of the Muslim Brotherhood, in general, in their desire to widely apply the Sharia. However, the implications of a widespread application of Sharia and how this application might affect the status of the Copts hasn't been clarified by the Brotherhood, which has so far avoided articulating in detail a position regarding the status of the

Copts. Scott then discusses the status quo of the Copts in Egypt under the Mubarak regime's constitution. She notes that the Copts have a history of religious reform and revival and that their current Pope has emerged as their political leader and representative in front of the State. Pope Shenoudah summed up the Copts requests in 1977 when he demanded that officials stop applying Sharia to Copts, end the restrictions on building and restoring churches, end discrimination in state employment, and be allowed to publish books on Coptic history and traditions. These demands were never met. On the contrary, Sadat, the Egyptian President at the time, changed the constitution to read that Sharia would be the major source of legislation. Several confrontations ensued between the Pope and Sadat, who finally exiled the Pope to his monastery in the desert. The conflict with political authority came to an end with Sadat's assassination and Mubarak's coming into power. The latter restored the Pope to his position. At the same time, sectarian violence continued to erupt. Al-Jamaa Al-Islamyia was held responsible for several attacks, which continued into Mubarak's rule. Prominent Copts like Yusuf Sidhum blame the state for these incidents because it continues to allow extremism to flourish and turns a blind eye toward the perpetrators of such crimes. Scott argues that the State avoids the debate on the Coptic situation altogether, under the pretext of protecting national unity and to avoid defining itself as a Muslim or a secular state.

Current discussion about the status of the Copts in Muslim political literature in Egypt reflects both the views of mainstream Islamists, who seek to reestablish the Dhimma contract, in which Copts are a tolerated, protected group within a Muslim-dominant society and radicals, who see the Copts as enemies and unbelievers and, therefore, believe that the Dhimma contract should be revoked, the result of which would be an Egypt within which the Copts have virtually no place to safely exist, requiring them to convert or leave. The Wassatyia intellectuals, (the moderate Islamists), however, believe that yet another alternative exists. They believe it is possible to revise Islamic jurisprudence by separating it from Islam; they see the Dhimma contract as a result of specific historical conditions that are no longer valid and, therefore, believe that the Dhimma contract can be done away with, opening the gates for citizenship for Copts in an Islamic state. The moderate Al-Wassatyia party, for example, views Islamic civilization as made up of both Muslims and non-Muslims. Citizenship in an Islamic State, however, while an approximation of the modern concept of citizenship, is not the same civic concept as it is defined elsewhere. Citizenship for Copts hasn't been defined by the Islamists yet. However, indications of the limitations of Copt "citizenship" appear in the comments of Wassatyia intellectuals like Tareq El-Bishry, who says that it is impossible, for example, for a non-Muslim man to marry a Muslim woman. "Citizenship" in this context is based upon loyalty and friendship between Muslims and Copts as well as common history and struggles. Muslim Brotherhood intellectuals themselves disagree on the interpretation of equality and rights for the Copts. Some of them speak about equal rights, whereas others interpret citizenship to be an extension of the Dhimma contract, in which the rights of the Copts are limited. Scott cautions, however, that such conflicts also exist among Al-Wassatyia members. One Al-Wassatyia

member, Imara, published a book in which he quoted medieval thinkers on the definition of unbelief and the legality of killing non-Muslims. Copts saw this publication as contradictory to Imara's previously stated ideas on citizenship and equality, and he was forced to offer a public apology for his quotes.

According to Scott, most Copts do not support Wassatyia intellectuals and are in favor of a secular state. However, like Scott, some Copts believe that there may be some convergence between the Copts' own demands and the Wassatyia concept of Islamic citizenship. Scott argues that the Copts are themselves a religious community and that they would not prefer, necessarily, to live in a secular state. She asserts that the Copts simply want the same autonomy granted to other religious groups under Sharia. She argues that the Copts may be able to negotiate for a construct of citizenship within an Islamic Egypt that would guarantee them self rule in personal status matters (an issue the Copts refuse to give up). Additionally, she says, they may be able to negotiate more political and social participation in the State.

With the current political situation and the collapse of the Mubarak regime and the revision of the Egyptian Constitution, including Article Two, which pertains to Sharia as a main source of legislation, the Copts are mainly concerned about the application of Sharia at this time. Even if a secular state is established, the Muslim Brotherhood has managed to Islamize Egypt, and, therefore, the application of the law will disfavor Christian values in favor of Muslim principles. At the same time, if Sharia becomes the source of legislation, the Copts may be permitted self-rule in family affairs but will simultaneously have to face Islamic penal laws and fear gross discrimination in the application of such laws to Christians. Still, the Coptic Church is encouraging the Copts to participate in the political process so that they may be able to secure some say in shaping their political future in Egypt.

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