



IMAGINED ANTIQUITY:  
COPTIC NUNS LIVING BETWEEN PAST IDEALS  
AND PRESENT REALITIES.



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*Monastic life for Coptic Orthodox nuns gained popularity during the 1960s and has developed into one of the strongest institutions for women in the Coptic Orthodox Church today. It provides possibilities for women to hold respected, authoritative positions within the Church. Looking for models of spirituality and holiness, the twentieth century nuns had to turn to the hagiographies of women in the early Christian. Coptic Orthodox nuns in Egypt have a long history to look back on. Their experiences derive from an environment that daily presents multiple dichotomies. For each circumstance, the nuns have to settle their framework of symbols that can apply to a wide range of experiences from daily chores to visionary experiences. Being women in Egypt they appropriate and adapt the symbols available from the Muslim-Christian environment, the male oriented church hierarchy, and the male-dominated society. Their trump card, however, remains themes and figures from pre-Islamic antiquity that can be imitated, or serve as frame of reference in times of conflict. My contribution will discuss this intersection between antiquity and the present.*

### **Introduction**

“Baba Shenouda, what can I do to prepare myself to become a monk while I am still living in the world?” “Read the sayings and stories of the desert fathers, mothers and saints. Learn the Psalms by heart... and try to get used to living without amusement and worldly distractions.” (Pope Shenouda III, public Bible study May 5, 1989).

The main requirements to become a monastic in the twenty-first century Coptic Orthodox Church seem to have changed little from those of the early Christian centuries: unconditional removal from the world in mind and body, and reliance on the fathers, mothers and saints of old. These are the same for men and women. The question that was posed to Pope Shenouda III (1971-) during his weekly public Bible study testifies of a widespread interest among Coptic young people in the call to monastic life. After a general decline of Coptic monasticism that lasted several hundred years, nowadays the desert is blooming again. Men and women, eager to devote their lives to God, flock to the convents and monasteries. This is the result of a revival within the Coptic Church that started at the beginning of the twentieth century with the Sunday School Movement and was spearheaded into a movement of reform and re-discovered Coptic identity by Patriarch Kyrillos VI (1959-1971).

Traditionally far more places were available to men than to women to pursue the contemplative life. Active vocations for women such as the deaconesses of the early Church had disappeared over time. Copts speculate that this was due to the Islamization of Egypt that prevented women from moving around freely. Inspired by the revitalization of their Church, women who wanted to pursue an active vocation, in 1965 started the community of the Daughters of St. Mary (Banat Maryam) in Beni Suef. The idea was to “find a synthesis between the rules and examples of the early church and modern life.”

The social, cultural and political environment has changed many times during the long existence of the Coptic Church, yet the early models remain the ideal for those heeding the call to devote their lives to God. As research in church history, art and archeology is steadily developing, Coptic leaders and scholars realize that due to the Arab invasion in 641, Copts have lost track of many facts and data available from those early centuries. Much of what is considered “antiquity,” in fact has been remade into Coptic tradition. But in essence, it is the spirituality of early Christianity; of the time of the saints and martyrs and their fervent love for God that Copts seek to recapture. That essence could be found in the desert. Thus it is the monastic revival that has become the heart of the church renaissance as the monasteries produce theologians, priests and bishops while the convents offer the Coptic community women who serve as spiritual guides, social counselors and provide general support especially for women.

For women, withdrawal into the desert was always deemed too dangerous and their convents were based in the city or in the vicinity of a monastery for men. Yet they equally do cling to the ideal of withdrawal into the solitude of the desert. Most monasteries were never really completely isolated from the world as monks sold their products in order to have a minimum of sustenance. The ideal of the isolated monastic, however, is reproduced until today in the advice that St. Macarius the Egyptian gave to the monks of Scetis: to leave when they would start to see trees and boys.

Nowadays physical withdrawal has become replaced by psychological, spiritual, social, and symbolic removal from the world. Modern means of communication and transportation keep the monasteries connected with the world. Nowadays monks have cell phones that allow them to communicate among their cells within the monastery, and with the Coptic community outside. The Egyptian police and army are never far. Monks and nuns cannot escape their responsibility towards the Coptic community whose members seek refuge from pressures of daily life. The Muslim environment is invasive and shapes the Coptic milieu with its standards for society in which women's sexuality and men's authority are the two main forces that influence the lives of Muslim and Christian women. During the past three decades, Copts have faced increased trends of Islamisms within Egyptian society that have required a high level of adaptation of all Copts: lay, church leaders and monastics. Not only have Islamists attacked Coptic life and goods, they also have changed the religious symbols used in society and influenced the view on woman's role and position. This development within society affects the lives of contemplative nuns as much as it does those of lay people.

In this contribution I will look at the interaction of the ancient ideals with contemporary reality. I will especially focus on how contemplative nuns place the many new configurations that have taken place in society and in their Church within the frame of a particular Coptic history that is perceived as unchanging and directly connected to a distant past before the time that Islam took hold of Egypt and pushed the Copts into a minority position. Nuns belong to the core troops of their church, embodying the Coptic ideals of asceticism and continuous prayer. At the same time they are viewed through the gender prism of the Egyptian environment.

### **Themes of society**

Within the various themes that figure prominently in the lives of the contemplative nuns three areas of struggle seem to be prominent. The first one is how to position themselves as women in a dominantly Muslim environment. Secondly they hold positions of authority within their own church that are considered questionable by many, and on the third level, increased pressure from the Muslim environment erode the nuns' freedom to organize what are considered "popular" religious events. At the same time, their presence is becoming more important for lay Coptic women who need the nuns' guidance more than ever. It is not only the Muslim surroundings that influence these themes; woven through all of them is the ongoing revival of the Coptic Orthodox Church.

Islamist ideals of women's role and behavior such as behaving with extreme modesty, segregation and veiling seem to reinforce the nuns' mode of living. As during the past twenty years Egyptian Muslims have become more religiously conservative and observant, the Copts reacted with similar trends. The nuns, however, by their sheer existence challenge the Islamist agenda. In spite of the fact that their dress and behavior dovetail with a more conservative

Muslim agenda in outward symbols, nuns represent an alternative for women that makes Islamists shiver. Contemplative nuns have created communities that in principle are self-relying and independent of male interference. Albeit, the patriarch is in charge of the nunneries in Cairo and local bishops of those in other parts of Egypt, but these male figures would never dream of entering the private quarters of women. The other male figure who dominates the world of nuns is the priest who enters the convent to hear confessions. His stay is limited in time and space; after celebrating the Eucharist he will not extend his time beyond a quick snack taken in the rooms designated for the reception of guests. According to the Islamic ideals of the Islamists, women's main role is to procreate in order to strengthen the future umma: the community of believers. In order to guard this process, men watch over women's public and private behavior and before marriage protect their virginity. In the Islamic view, nuns form independent communities of women who choose not to have children; thus they are an enigma for Islamic Egypt, while the object of great admiration within their church. The Islamic attitude towards women is deeply engrained within society and has influenced Coptic gender ideals as well. As a result of this, Coptic nuns negotiate precarious conditions related to male authority in ways similar to those used by Muslim women.

A result of increased Islamic pressure is also that the nuns are busier with the world than they ever wished to be. With the Islamization of the social environment concurrent with intensified Sunday school teachings, many lay Copts have focused on private piety of praying, fasting and taking communion to purify the heart in order to find solace in the face of threats and turmoil. Especially women play a crucial role in the preservation of this piety. They prepare the fasting foods, and urge both the children and husbands to join them to Mass. At the same time, Coptic women, as Muslim women do, have to guard their purity and modesty within and outside their community. For Coptic women this meant that they have to reorganize their physical and spiritual boundaries. This can cause great stress and many Coptic women feel under scrutiny or even attack, as their purity cannot be sealed with the outward sign of Islamic clothing. Apart from that, demands of modern life that cause lack of money and jobs, put pressure on marriages. Divorce is never an option for a Coptic marriage, which means that women whose husband is abusive have no way out. Domestic violence within the Coptic community is shrouded in deep silence yet it is well known to the nuns, as their convents have become refuges for battered women.

The second area concerns the struggle for authority between the church hierarchy and the nuns that I have extensively discussed in my book *Contemporary Coptic Nuns*. Nowadays this struggle has to be placed within two almost concurrent developments: the revival of the Coptic Orthodox Church that started during the end 1950s, and the increased activities of Islamists. Via the important vehicle of the Sunday schools, the revival has given women more information about their Christian faith than they ever had before. Women are no longer illiterate and through many years of studying at the Sunday schools, many have gained extensive knowledge of church history, theology and tradition.

Studying original sources themselves, women can now question certain decisions of the reigning clerics. At times this can lead to processes of individual decision making that override traditional voices of authority. This does not transpire in the open, but nuns, as women in many countries do subvert authority in indirect ways, sometimes leaving men with the impression of submission. At this level themes and figures taken from tradition play an important role as they are used to legitimize the nuns' actions.

In the third area there is an ongoing effort by the Church hierarchy to mainstream popular Coptic expressions of piety that are considered "popular," that is non-Orthodox. One of the visible outcomes of the church revival is that the role of the clergy has expanded beyond celebrating the daily mass and attending to the pastoral needs of people. This process, called "clericalization," was not serendipitous, but reflected a concerted effort orchestrated by Coptic clergy and devoted laity to strengthen the Coptic Orthodox identity. The process began with clergy becoming involved in activities outside the liturgy: clubs, summer camps and excursions organized by churches. A priest would organize comprehensive programs of activities to make his church into a spiritual and social sanctuary. At the same time, lay workers involved in the manifold activities, were consecrated and incorporated into the official church structure to serve as deacons, deaconesses, or become monks, priests or nuns. With the desire to create polished, "orthodox" events, we witness attempts by the clerical hierarchy to erode the nuns' positions as brokers of expressions of popular piety, for example during feasts of the saints. Some of the convents organize well-attended feasts for their patron saints. Nowadays these increasingly become considered activities for the "uneducated" and the nuns have to reconfigure the commemorations of their saints.

These are just some of the challenges that shape the way nuns lay out their tasks and strategies and try to recreate their abbeys into havens of refuge, counter-culture and resistance to both Islamic society and potential intrusions from the Church. Within their Church they share the reality with Coptic women of remaining invisible. This creates an existence filled with contrasts. As more Coptic women serve within the Church in the capacity of Sunday school teachers, youth leaders, deaconesses, nuns and other lay professionals, they do not figure into the image presented by the official Church. The majority of pictures shown in the official Church bulletin of El-Kiraza portray male church leaders of all ranks.

### **Re-inventing memories**

Since the 1950s young Copts, men and women, have moved into old monasteries in the desert and the city that were dilapidated and nearly forgotten. They revived the monastic life inspired by patterns and teachings from the fourth and fifth century. Tradition that safeguarded the Coptic identity is at the heart of the Church revival. As they reached back into their history, monastics not only recovered, but also re-defined their theological tradition.

Coptic theology was strengthened by the patristic tradition that relied on the methods of the school of Alexandria and points at the deeper meaning of Scripture. Coptic writers such as Anthony, Pachomius and Shenoute of Atripe inspired a religiosity based on spiritual experience and counseling. Another influence introduced to the Copts via Patriarch Kyrillos VI (1959-1971) was the spiritual teachings of the Syrian fathers, especially those of the seventh century Isaac of Nineveh who emphasized guarding the heart.

Women were hardly involved in this study process that was spearheaded by Father Matta el-Meskeen who rebuilt the Monastery of St. Macarius the Great in Scetis. As their numbers and education advanced, women did not join the monks in academic theological research but instead stressed the virtues of the simple, praying monastic. Referring to famous hermits of antiquity, contemplative nuns felt blessed by the fact that they could never be called back into the world to become a priest or bishop. They highlighted the virtues of the simple nun whose purity of heart is seldom witnessed as no visitor ever sees her. The result of this strategy has been that not only lay people idealize the convents, but also monks who feel overwhelmed by thousands of visitors to their monasteries speak of the nunneries as havens of solitude and quiet.

One would expect the nuns to back the ideal of the solitary nuns by models of antiquity. However, surprisingly, in spite of the availability of authentic Egyptian models such as Mary of Egypt, Sarah and Syncletica, the nuns' most prominent female "hermit" is Saint Mary, the mother of Jesus. According to the Coptic tradition she lived in the altar during childhood, and remained a virgin after giving birth to Christ forming the first community of nuns after Christ went up to heaven. The monastic handbook called *Bustan al-Ruhban* (Garden of the Monks) only mentions four female ascetics. Other models are mostly male, ancient and modern. This paucity of female models, in my interpretation is caused by several circumstances. Firstly, until recently nuns had no access to the stories of the desert mothers as far as these were represented in foreign languages. Secondly, the early church found women wandering alone in the desert problematic, especially those disguised as men. In the fourth century, the Synod of Gangra rebuked women who dressed as monks, cut their hair and followed other habits that were considered "unnatural." Nowadays, the Islamic environment disapproves of women who live alone, that is without a male protector. Also, the Islamic, Middle Eastern milieu stresses preservation of virginity to the point that an unmarried woman's life is at risk in the event she loses her purity. Mary of Egypt was a prostitute and with the high demands both Muslim and Christian ethics now place on a woman's virtue, she does not represent the current ideal of a virtuous woman, let alone a nun. While stories of converted murderers, thieves and road robbers such as Moses the Ethiopian are readily recounted, repenting fallen women have moved back stage in the Coptic collective memory.

Not only female saints are forgotten, also the martyrs have become male or at the most genderless. The Coptic Church presents itself as "built on the blood of martyrs," and

daily remembers those who sealed the witness and testimony for their Christian faith with their blood. The term “Era of Martyrs” nowadays has become more pregnant with meaning as Copts face multiple forms of harassment. The Coptic Synaxarium lists nearly two hundred commemorations of martyrs who died in the pre-Islamic era, many of whom are women. Those who shed blood for their faith under Islamic rule are considered “new martyrs.” Copts think about their count as rising as it includes those killed for merely professing the Christian faith.

According to Shapinaz-Amal Naguib, remembering the martyrs helps the Copts to “(re)actualize their historical religious narrative. Commemoration involves more than revival. It entails regeneration.” With the historical Coptic narrative in mind, one would expect that the general church revival would help uncover more women martyrs as models for today’s life. Yet, as was the case with women ascetics, there is a paucity of such figures. Two female martyrs, St. Marina and St. Dimyana and her forty virgins have gained prominence because a nunnery is in charge of their remains. This means that a booklet is written with the saint’s hagiography, glorification (*tamgid*) and recent miracles. Dimyana is the most popular and videos are produced with detailed accounts of her gruesome death. Yet these vivid illustrations miss a human dimension and do not particularly pay attention to the complex issues that arise from the fact that Dimyana was a woman. Rather than highlighting women martyrs as models for women since they once were creatures of flesh and blood who faced multiple challenges and prevailed, the majority of nuns, even those from a convent with a prominent female martyr emphasize the martyrdom of the male patron saints of their convents, especially St. George (Mari Girgis), St. Mercurius (Abu Saifein) and Amir Tadrus (Theodore Stratelates). I will provide a concrete example of the protection provided by these saints shortly.

The point here is that the stories of women still have to be rediscovered. As in the rest of the world, Coptic history is written by men. Women who want to shift the paradigm to women saints and martyrs have to do this research themselves. Few nuns are equipped to do this. And it is not their priority. Similar to monks and lay Copts, nuns believe that in modern times the revival of the era of the saints is in their spirituality, not in the mode of living of the saints from antiquity. Asceticism has replaced a violent death as a sacrifice of one’s life for Christ. According to Father Malaty, St. Athanasius called this “the martyrdom of conscience.” Every Copt who obeys God’s commandments and strives to purify the heart can be considered a martyr in life and words. This motto has led to intensified practices of prayer and fasting among all Copts.

### **Monastic ideals in the world**

A remarkable aspect of the revival has been that monastic virtues and practices are taught and applied by the lay people. For example, daily celebrations of the Eucharist, prayers of the hours and continuous prayer have always been signposts of the monastic life.

These three monastic practices were introduced to regular church members through little booklets, sermons and visits to monasteries. Bishop Athanasius of Beni Suef (d. 2000) compiled the stories of the saints in the “Garden of the Monks;” (Bustan al-Ruhban). Matta al-Meskin started his profuse publishing career with booklets about every aspect of Coptic life. The journal *Morqos*, published by the Monastery of St. Makarius, became one of the main vehicles of the Coptic spiritual revival. Bishops write spiritual reflections in the national church bulletin *Kiraza* while Patriarch Shenouda reiterates his teachings in a weekly public Bible study followed by myriads of publications with titles like “The release of the Spirit,” and “Comparative Theology.” Spiritual formation forms the core of Coptic education. Strengthening spiritual life is taught as a way of escaping human vice and the deficiencies of the world. Renewal of the spirit is considered the only answer. Hence lay people are encouraged to develop a monastic attitude in everyday life. In Sunday schools children learn the continuous prayer (as-salat ad-da’ima), and memorize the Psalms in order to “remember God all day.”

Fasting is another pillar of Coptic spiritual life. Lay Coptic women, in general, are more faithful in observing the fasts than men, and many of them fast on behalf of others, for example their children. This dovetails with the observation that in many religions fasting as a religious activity is done primarily by women.

While the whole Coptic community now follows a semi-monastic practice of frequent fasts and regular prayer, the nuns excel in these practices. Their interpretation of the early models is excessive fasting and trying to minimize contact with external influences such as visitors and newspapers. Rigorous fasting is seen as direct imitation of the early ascetics, although in reality very few survived on one meal a week. But since fasting is a central element of Coptic piety, it was this theme that became elaborated. For example, it is said of the saintly Pope Kyrillos VI that during fasts he only ate one piece of bread a day with cumin. Several of his spiritual sons have denied the story, yet its theme is powerful and has given rise to a similar rumor about Mother Irini, the abbess of Deir Abu Saifein. About her it is said that at times she lives on half a zucchini and some salt a day. This theme refers to her embodiment of the monastic life: she has reached the state of “an angel on earth” who can almost do without food while battling chronic, nearly terminal diseases, and still providing pastoral and spiritual advice.

Unfortunately, this tendency to glorify the rigorous models of the tradition has two undesirable effects. Firstly, Copts tend to disregard the work done by the active nuns, the Banat Maryam in Beni Suef, and by consecrated women (mukarrasat) who work for dioceses all over Egypt. Secondly laywomen feel lacking in their religious duties although they tend to be more faithful in maintaining their own and their families’ fasting schedules. Both active nuns and women caring for their family face heavy daily schedules with manifold duties that make ordinary fasting strenuous.

Part of the “work” of contemplative nuns is fasting and by excelling in this act they instigate a massive sense of inadequacy in all other women who live in the world.

Yet, from the contemplatives’ point of view, extra fasts in the Coptic milieu that already fasts two hundred days a year, is one of the few venues available to women that make them stand out. As Caroline Walker Bynum observed, fasting is a way for women to manipulate their environment (including “God in his majesty”), and to set the boundaries of their own self. Contemplative nuns face specific struggles with their environment and often prayer and fasting are the only weapons at their disposal. An example of such a struggle is how some groups of nuns managed to join the trend of reclaiming or building a place in the desert; the ideal abode for the monastic to find real retreat from the world.

### **Reclaiming the desert**

A visible ideal of the revival of Coptic monasticism is to reclaim the desert as the monks’ habitat. As early as 1936, five years after being ordained a priest and a monk, Father Mina who later became Patriarch Kyrillos VI requested permission from the then reigning patriarch to build a monastery adjacent to the ancient site for the pilgrimage of St. Menas at Mareotis. When his request was rejected, he retreated into a dilapidated windmill in Old Cairo to live a solitary life. In 1959, the first year of his term as patriarch, he completed the St. Menas monastery and filled it with monks, thus re-inhabiting the desert. The complex had been re-discovered in 1907 but remained unused until Kyrillos built the monastery and re-introduced the story of St. Menas to the Coptic public in the 1960s. After his death, Kyrillos’ remains were put to rest in the complex’s church where his grave and St. Menas’ continue to attract thousands of pilgrims a week. Kyrillos understood that the true revival of the Coptic Church had to start with the restoration of the monastic life, as this was its most central institution. The result was a restoration movement of monasteries all over Egypt of which the Monastery of St. Macarius under the leadership of Father Matta el-Meskeen became most renowned. The ideal was not just to reinvigorate the monastic life, but in the turmoil of densely populated Egypt, Copts needed places of exodus from the world to practice prayer, contemplation and fasting. According to Father Matta el-Meskeen the monk in the desert pursues a life-long imitation of Christ’s forty days in the wilderness. “A monk therefore does not go forth from the world, even if it appeared to be so, but he takes the world out to God.”

Initially women were not part of this movement. Nuns were confined to their convents in the midst of the hustle bustle of Cairo. This did not mean that the nuns were not active in renewing their convents. In 1959, Mother Martha had started the restoration of the church within the convent of Amir Tadrus. Mother Irini of the convent of Abu Saifein did the same in her convent. These activities were daring; for building a new church one needed special permits from the government that were hard to obtain.

Also, the nuns had to limit renovations to Cairo, as that was the place where until 1978 all the contemplative nunneries were. In that year the Convent of St. Dimyanah was opened next to the shrine of the famous saint in the northeastern Delta. The famous convents connected to the monasteries of Pachomius and Shenute were situated in the south. After the Arab invasion these remote areas were no longer deemed safe for women and convents were built next to the residences of the patriarchs that were in Old Cairo, Harat Zuweilah, Harat ar-Rum and Claude Bey before the current location in Abassiyah was opened. Projects of restoring old monasteries started in the south of Egypt as well. Bishop Ammonius of Luxor was in charge of a large group of dedicated women (*mukarrasat*) who helped him clean up and inhabit several monasteries in his diocese of Luxor, Esna and Armant. None of these projects, however, were led by women.

Influential abbesses such as Mother Irini aimed at providing nuns with equal options to withdraw into the desert. She started to search for a cheap plot of land to realize the dream of building a convent in the desert. This dream was probably also fueled by tenacious ideas among laity and monks such as the one expressed by Bishop Ammonius describing the nuns' abbeys in Cairo (that stem from between the eleventh and the eighteenth century) as: "just modern buildings in the middle of Cairo." During the same occasion the bishop referred to the abbey of the active nuns in Beni Suef as "a hotel that misses the old spirit of orthodoxy." It was time that nuns had their own desert retreats. Women building in the desert faced a daunting project in the face of the ruling opinion that they could not cope in the wilderness "due to their weak nature."

Mother Irini realized that due to prejudice concerning women's nature, Patriarch Shenouda could put a halt to this project. Building a residence cum farm in the desert also meant that official permits had to be obtained that sometimes take decades to materialize. Another obstacle was her condition as a contemplative. She could not move around freely to find land and secure all the papers needed. This meant that similar to the patterns we find when reading the lives of the early fathers and mothers, the nuns had to seek support of the patron saint of their convent, in this case, St. Abu Saifein (St. Mercurius). The story told about the miraculous intervention is reminiscent of the account Besa gives of St. Shenoute (died around 466). At the time, St. Shenoute wished to build a monastery with an adjoining church but lacked the necessary funds. Our Lord Jesus Christ appeared to him and said: "Arise, and measure out the church and the foundation of the monastery, and build a sanctuary in my name and yours." When St. Shenoute protested because there was no money for such an ambitious project, Jesus sent him into the desert where he found a "small leather bag [of gold].... Thereupon, our Lord Jesus Christ came to our father, and they went off together and laid out the foundation of the sanctuary."

When looking at the story about the construction of the desert residence of Abu Saifein's convent, we find several themes that are recurring in the stories of the desert fathers and mothers, and in Coptic tradition. One of the nuns related the story as follows:

The number of nuns grew more and more, so we started to build extra cells in our abbey in Old Cairo. Furthermore, big rooms were divided into two and the end of each corridor was transformed into a small cell. We also had to reject many potential novices. We understood that we needed an extra house, but how could we find such a place? We are contemplatives and cannot go out to look for it. So our superior [Mother Irini] decided that special prayers should be devoted to this project. She told us to pray for extra space at certain times a week, but not to give it any further thought. She did not allow us to undertake any action ourselves to find something, and forbade us to mention the project to our relatives.

Exactly one year later, during the time of these special prayers, Abuna Tekla, a priest from Alexandria, came with his wife to the convent. His wife had three times seen a vision of St. Abu Saifein. The first time this happened, Abuna Tekla and his wife thought it had been a dream. When Abu Saifein appeared again they decided to pray about this. The third time the saint instructed them to donate to the convent in Cairo a piece of land that Abuna had purchased recently to build a community house for his church [west of Alexandria].

Ummina Irini and the priest went to see the land. They inspected it for two hours and the moment it was agreed that the land suited the convent's needs, doves without wings appeared and flew over their heads.

As the building of the farm developed, Abu Saifein remained active in facilitating the process. He intervened when cases against the nuns were taken to court and thwarted bureaucratic interventions. When the nuns' title to the land was being disputed, he destroyed the accusatory papers. During the construction work he regularly appeared to both the Christian and the Muslim workers. For the Muslims this was a proof that the nuns had a legitimate claim to the land.

When scrutinizing the entire procedure, we see that Mother Irini's first step was to secure the project from interference of the patriarch. Her nuns were not allowed to inform their family members of the building plans. Within Coptic circles rumors travel at great speed, especially when they concern Mother Irini and her convent. The patriarch, Shenouda III, would know about the plan within days and most likely would forbid the nuns to move into the desert. This, more than anything else would put a halt to the project. In spite of the fact that the nuns could not go out to find land themselves, any family member would have gladly gone out and purchased it for them. Money was never a problem either. A good number of wealthy Copts would be happy to provide the funds. All these aspects, however, were secondary to forging the plans in such a way that the patriarch, who is very conservative with regards to women's roles, would not withhold his approval.

Apart from that, the nuns needed the protection of a “real” male figure apart from the saint. This was provided by the priest from Alexandria.

I am not suggesting that I doubt the stories about the apparitions and interventions of the saint. What is interesting, however, is how the saint helped the nuns to resist male authority, and at the same time secured the necessary permission of these same male authorities. This indirect way of negotiating powers has more recently been the topic of research about women in the third world. Similar to patterns used by women in other cultures, the nuns resisted power, indirectly rather than overtly, reaching their goals in the end. At the same time the nuns obtained a seal of authenticity from both the Muslims (who necessarily were among the building crew), and from the Coptic community as a whole. Stories about apparitions move like wild fire and soon all Copts knew that during a mass celebrated in the farm’s newly built chapel saints Abu Saifein, Mari Girgis (St. George), Mari Mina (St. Menas) and Mary the Mother of Jesus had appeared inside the sanctuary. Also the late Patriarch Kyrillos VI had appeared. His presence gave the nuns and their project extra legitimacy since he had been the one who had encouraged and helped Mother Irini to renew and expand her convent in Cairo. Kyrillos VI was known for his frequent visions of saints; especially saints Mary and Menas. Mother Irini shared with him this gift that is not bestowed on all. The present-day Pope, Shenouda III has not been known to have had similar apparitions. This means that Kyrillos’ presence was the final seal that all was well; the church hierarchy could be assured that Mother Irini had acted correctly. Saints and saintly patriarchs remain powerful allies of the nuns, allowing them to realize their goals without running into trouble with the Muslim or Coptic environment. Yet, in the wake of the revival, this pillar of their existence is being slowly undermined while also a drive has started to move away from “supernatural” to “rational” thinking.

### **Reorganizing the saints**

In the wake of the Church revival several trends developed within the monasteries and convents related to feasts of the patron saints. Following the example set by Patriarch Kyrillos VI, the convents started to promote their patron saints and began to hold intensive feasts to celebrate the saint’s *moulid* or feast that commemorates the day the saint “was born into eternal life.” Especially convents with popular patron saints such as Abu Saifein and Mari Girgis once a year over the course of several days continue to draw enormous crowds of devout Copts who seek the blessing of the saint. This movement is visible throughout Egypt. Due to improved means of transportation, more Copts nowadays can afford to visit a monastery. Parishes organize trips for their members to attend such events.

While in the remote deserts in the south of Egypt the old monastic sites are being restored, simultaneously there is also a move to bring those sites closer to the cities to cater to the increased numbers of Copts who have left the countryside for urban areas. Apart from that, during the 1990s, when Islamic extremists started to attack tourist busses and Copts, it became more dangerous for Copts to undertake trips to the south where the most popular pilgrimage sites are situated. Traditionally, Copts from the Nile Delta and Cairo would travel to Luxor and Assiyut in order to attend the moulids of St. George in Ruzaiqat (near Luxor, from 10-16 November), and the one for the Holy Virgin in Dronka (near Assiyut, August 7-22).

Due to the dangers of the trip to the south, and in order to serve the growing Coptic population in Cairo, new holy places have come into existence in the vicinity of Cairo. For example, on the way to Alexandria, 95 kilometers from Cairo, the monastery of St. George in Ruzaiqat built a new branch called “St. George in Khatatbah.” This new complex serves as a clear illustration of how the Church not only has encouraged Copts to seek refuge in their monasteries and convents; it also shows how the ritual of pilgrimage is slowly becoming streamlined according to the teachings of the Church. Folk aspects of these rituals are eroding and in this context Coptic clergy has started a massive drive to transform pilgrimages into formalized events.

This process of stripping the folk rituals of their meaning and replacing them with formalized rituals and texts provided by the Church is inspired by the current Coptic revival, and by the Muslim environment. In an interview with the Norwegian anthropologist Berit Thorbjørnsrud, Bishop Marcus, the bishop of Shubra el-Khema, stressed that the Coptic Church differentiates between “1) theologically based religion (*din*) and the traditions of the Church (*taqalid ik-kinisa*), and 2) the traditions of the environment (*taqalid min il-bi’ah*), which are to be abolished.” Education via the Sunday schools is seen as the antidote against what the Coptic leaders believe to be superstitious beliefs and practices. Over time, popular aspects of rituals are being eliminated to bring these in line with the Church’s teachings. Part of this process is the recent questioning of the proliferation of miracles and apparitions of saints. Traditionally, their occurrence is expected and incorporated within Coptic every day life. Many Copts whom I interviewed during the past fifteen years testified of supernatural interventions in their lives during moments of distress. With more monks having pursued graduate educations, there is nowadays a tendency to support a “modern” and “rational” approach towards religion. The miracles, observes Berit Thorbjørnsrud, “have become something of a problem for the clergy, who favor a more internally-oriented spirituality.”

Muslims have their own *moulids* that celebrate the day of a saint once a year with exuberant festivities led by the mystic fraternities (the Sufis). Similar to the Christian celebration, the high point is a visit to the grave of the saint in order to convey requests for intercession. This custom has been among the first that puritanical Muslim extremists attacked in their effort to return to the “pure Islam” of the earliest centuries. In the old days, *moulids* looked more like extravagant fairs than religious events. Both Muslims and Christians would freely

visit them, hoping for the saint's blessing.

With the Islamic resurgence, the Coptic Church felt pressed into reforming its own rituals pertaining to the saints in order not to be accused of "heresy." Traditionally, Coptic pilgrims would throng to the grave of the saint, plead for healing or other help, burn candles and write their requests on little notes that were scattered over the grave or stuck behind the saint's icon. Pilgrims would spontaneously chant songs of glorification of the saint (*tamgid*) and spend the rest of the day attending the fair set up for the *moulid*, hold picnics and stay the night on the premises in order to be in the saint's vicinity.

The *moulid* in convents has always been a more orderly event. Convents are surrounded by walls and lack the large fields around the monasteries. Hence nuns were forced to streamline their events so that a maximum number of pilgrims could benefit from the presence of the saint. The climax of the day was the singing of the saint's praise and the carrying around of the relics. After that visitors would wait in an atmosphere pregnant with expectation for the mother superior who would relate the miracles that had happened during the past year by intervention of the saint. Especially in the convent of Abu Saifein the presence of Mother Irini is always expected with electric anticipation. This used to be the moment when the saint showed her/his approval of the Mother Superior who had entertained a good relation with him or her during the past year.

In the wake of formalizing the *moulids*, the focus has shifted. Through the participation of priests and bishops, the rituals have become "high church" events with as highlight the celebration of the Eucharist. This is a shift away from the mysterious and folk aspects of the *moulid*, changing it into an official church event. Logically, Muslims have to depart here and can no longer share in the blessings of the saint. But the nuns are sidelined as well. They cannot lead the Mass and have lost control of the feast's climax. Pilgrims dutifully attend the official ceremony and the workings of the saint have to wait. The ultimate leadership of the event has traded hands from the nuns to the male clergy. Parts of the Coptic believers, the more "rational" ones, even are suspicious concerning the miracles the convent witnessed. Ultimately this means a questioning of Mother Irini's spiritual authority. As I have argued elsewhere, this is the main fortress for contemplative nuns in the Church's male hierarchy. As Sunday school lessons and sermons admonish the Copts to be more "rational," the position of the nuns as brokers of the saintly is eroding. Luckily, the saints ignore clerical directives and remain the nuns' staunchest supporters. They protect the nuns' convents, help build new ones in the desert, keep the Muslim bureaucracy at bay and in spite of "modern" developments, and are ever present in the mindset of nuns and believers. Finally, to establish themselves as truly Coptic, that is to be similar to the monks and nuns of the days of old, the nuns also focused on their rule and habit to symbolize authenticity.

### Re-claiming symbols

The final visible participation in the tradition is shown in signs such as clothing, icons, and trinkets sold to visitors. Also there is the symbol of the socially visible rule that the nuns follow. As far as the clothing is concerned, before the revival contemplative nuns dressed in the same outfits as rural and lower class women in Egypt. This was a long black garment with a long veil under which a scarf was tied into a type of skullcap. Mother Irini started a movement for the nuns to dress in clean garments that have folds and pockets discerning them from the average dress for laywomen. They now wear leather crosses, made in their convents and the skullcap is replaced by the so-called *qalansuwa* that became among the most prominent symbols of clothing for revived Coptic monasticism. It is a skullcap that is divided in two halves with six crosses embroidered on each half. The twelve crosses signify Christ's apostles. According to Coptic tradition, St. Anthony (251-356) was the first to wear this headgear. During a struggle with the devil, it was ripped off his head and torn in two halves. In order to show victory over the evil one, the two halves were sewn together and became the symbol of the monk's struggle against sin and evil. Before he became pope, Shenouda III reintroduced the use of the *qalansuwa* because over time it had become obsolete. As a pope, he decreed that all monks should wear this cap and during the 1970s he allowed the contemplative nuns to wear them under their veils as well. This is a powerful symbol that the struggle against evil is the same for men and women.

Besides clothing, the rule was another powerful symbol to underscore the nuns' position in the world of monasticism. Traditionally, Coptic monasticism does not follow a detailed system of rules such as, for example, the Benedictine rule in Catholicism. The members of Coptic monastic communities mostly follow the idiorhythmic system, which means that different patterns of religious lives ranging from hermits to small regulated communities live together in the same monastery. The spiritual guide keeps the community together and helps each monk or nun to design his or her own program and style. Furthermore, various rules and lessons have traditionally and still are transmitted orally by the spiritual guide and abbot or abbess.

Mother Irini decided that her nuns should break with this convention and follow the Pachomian system of a structured, communal life. She introduced the system in her abbey that Pachomius (292-346), who is considered the founder of the communal or coenobitic monastic system, drew up for the communities of men and women living in his monasteries. She did not write this system down, however, but passed its rules on to her nuns orally during weekly sessions. Nuns from her convent were chosen to head other abbeys in Cairo with the result that now most women follow what is perceived to be the Pachomian system. Nobody, however, knows exactly what the rule is or where it comes from.

The coenobitic system, then, stands for order, cleanliness and organization. Where the monks' monasteries can be dirty and unkept, women's abbeys are crisp and clean. Food for

guests is served on clean plates with tidy napkins rather than from the big cooking pots that monks dish out ladles of bean stew from. The message is that monks cannot excel in these areas that traditionally belong to the domain of women. Monks are not as neatly organized and chaos is their lot.

Contemplative nuns, in spite of their high religious position will always be measured according to the stereotypes that prevail in their surrounding society. Subconsciously the Coptic clergy applies to Christian women the judgments found among Muslims. When, for example, discussing the absence of leadership roles for women in the Coptic Church, leaders such as Father Matta el-Meskeen and Pope Shenouda III refer to the Bible, and to the fact that none of the twelve apostles were women and to woman's impurity during her monthly menses, which prevents her from active duties in the altar. There are actually few books available about this topic. The most sophisticated is still Father Matta El-Meskeen's *Women. Their rights and obligations in social and religious life in the early Church* (1984). What is interesting is that they never refer to the canons concerning women's restrictions issued by early Fathers such as Dionysius of Alexandria (died 264) and Timothy I (died 384). Referring to the Bible, Father Matta El-Meskeen states that women are equal to men and that through the work of Christ they received "true rights for the first time in history, and from God Himself,.. becoming equal to men in all matters related to God." The book mentions many examples of outstanding women of faith, but one of Father Matta's main points is that problems arise when women assume functions that are beyond their rights. In fact Father Matta describes these as interfering with the activities of men. For example, when women have or had a vision during church service, they should wait to the end and entrust it to the priest after all have left. They are not to speak up, neither should they stand out. Father Matta then turns to woman's real call in life: "to be a support and helper to man." He also reasons about humans' natural origins, division of tasks, and the fact that it harms future children when women take up work in noisy and polluted environments such as factories.

What is striking in this discourse is its similarity to the Islamic way of defending the fact that women cannot hold official positions within Islam. Reasoning mostly moves from the equality assigned to women by the Qur'an to women's specific tasks, especially those pertaining to childbearing. It heavily relies on scriptures and tradition, only acknowledging the negative aspect of modern day life while ignoring those that could advance a woman's position.

This means that it is not so much official rules the nuns have to negotiate, but that the social and psychological environment has a stronger influence on shaping the views of the male members of the Coptic clergy. This does not just concern just nuns, but all Coptic women. It also means that for married women who seek relief from the Muslim environment, the convents are still the most secure havens. Hence scores of laywomen seek out the nuns for spiritual advice and counseling.

### Final remarks

The irony for contemporary Coptic nuns as well as for Coptic laywomen is that women's position in their Church has strengthened and weakened at the same time. Improved education for women has resulted in their participation on all levels of Coptic society and church life at the same time that potentials for empowerment and power for women are eroding. In the case of the contemplative nuns, their nunneries are booming and they gain inroads in claiming their place in the desert and in sharing in the monastic symbols that used to be the fortress of men. But at the same time, some of their roles are now considered with more suspicion. This is not a random development, but is connected to developments within the Coptic community and with Pope Shenouda's quest to keep a hold on all types of leadership and ritual expression within the Church. Personal character and the encroachment of the Islamic environment are two of the most obvious motivations behind these developments.

As far as the laywomen are concerned, culture and convention influence the hierarchy's view on their activities. They share the fate of most Egyptian women who are partly invisible and whose work is not considered of the same level as men's. Coptic women often remark that their pope was born and raised in Assiyut; "where all the men are patriarchal." Any Church official will readily admit that the activities of laywomen are crucial for the Church's vitality. This acknowledgment, however, is seldom translated into overt recognition. As the Church is facing the challenges of the twenty-first century (Islamism, Copts in the West, a better educated laity, emancipated women, just to mention a few) it needs to pay attention to a vital part of its fundament: the women. The Patriarch is getting old and he has filled many of the new positions for bishops with men, many of whom lack a women-friendly mindset. While several bishops of an earlier generation such as Anba Musa of the Bishopric of Youth are surrounded by female assistants, most offices of the younger bishops are men-filled bastions. In spite of his numerous accomplishments, Pope Shenouda has not truly empowered women in his Church. (This remark is by no means a battle cry for women's ordination in the Coptic Orthodox Church). This condition can lead to worrisome scenarios in the future in case he is succeeded by another patriarch who equally lacks a women-minded approach in managing the affairs of the Coptic Church.

As for the nuns, they are social martyrs who have sacrificed their life in the world for an existence of worship and total dedication to the rules of the Church. Their acts of resistance have to take place in total conformity with Church policies lest they be accused of disobedience or of hubris. It is precisely the ancient Coptic tradition that provides valid ways out of this conundrum; its symbols and figures provide the nuns with strategies to obey in resistance, ultimately reaching their goals. In order to gain a stronger position, the nuns opt for male figures rather than spending (perhaps wasted) energy on the many female ascetics, saints and martyrs who equally suffered to build the fundament of the Coptic Orthodox Church. And whether or not the newly developing rational Coptic mind agrees with it, the reality of the nuns remains top heavy with the supernatural, just as they imagine it to have been in antiquity when the struggle was on against what was then a pagan environment filled with demons.

## Endnotes

1. Parts of this contribution have appeared in my article, "Discovering New Roles: Coptic Nuns and Church Revival," in: Nelly van Doorn-Harder and Kari Vogt (eds.) *Between Desert and City: The Coptic Orthodox Church Today*. (Oslo, Norway: Novus Forlag, 1997) 84-101. The entire volume deals with the methodologies and approaches used by the contemporary Copts to recapture the pre-Islamic past. I refer to this volume here because its materials are relevant to this context. The book was published in Norway from where it has not been widely distributed. In fact, it is hard to get; even I myself have trouble purchasing copies.
2. Interview with Sr. Agape, co-founder of the Banat Maryam in Beni Suef and with Bishop Athanasius, Metropolitan of Beni Suef and Bahnasa, January 9, 1992.
3. For example, see: Berit Thorbjørnsrud, *Controlling the Body to Liberate the Soul. Towards and Analysis of the Coptic Orthodox Concept of the Body*. (Oslo: University of Oslo, 1999), p. 28.
4. Derwas J. Chitty, *The Desert a City*. (Crestwood, New York: Saint Vladimir's Press, 1966) p. 66.
5. For examples of this reality see, among others: *Women and Sexuality in Muslim Societies*. Pinar Ilk-karacan (ed.) (Istanbul, Turkey: Women for Women's Human Rights; WWHR, 2000).
6. A list published by the Ibn Khaldoun Center for Development Studies shows that during the 1950's six incidences of religious violence and attacks on Copts occurred, during the 1960s there were two, during the 1970s the number rose to 49, to go up to 111 in the 1980s while 368 clashes took place during 1990 – 1993. Saad Eddin Ibrahim, *The Copts of Egypt*, Report Minority Rights Group International 95/6, p. 22.
7. Pieternella van Doorn-Harder, *Contemporary Coptic Nuns*. (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1995).
8. For illustrations of this process, see, among others: Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo & Lourdes Torres, *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991).
9. See, among others: Van Doorn-Harder, *Contemporary Coptic Nuns*, p. 24.
10. A summary of this process is provided by Samuel Rubenson, "Tradition and Renewal in Coptic Theology," in van Doorn-Harder & Vogt, *Between Desert and City*, 35-51. About Isaac of Nineveh, see: Tomas Spidlik, *The Spirituality of the Christian East*. (translated by Anthony P. Gythiel) (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1986) 15.
11. For the theories about the complex mechanisms of how collective memories work see, among others: E.J. Hobsbawm & T. Ranger (ed.) *The Invention of Tradition*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) and: K. Hastrup, "The Prophetic Condition," in E. Ardener, *The Voice of Prophecy and Other Essays*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989). For this process in minority groups see, among others: Anthony D. Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation*. (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).
12. De Lacy O'Leary, *The Saints of Egypt in the Coptic Calendar*. (Amsterdam: Philo Press, 1974 (reprint 1937)).
13. The latest casualties added to this group are the twenty-one Copts killed during Muslim-Christian riots in the village of El-Kosheh on January 2, 2000.
14. Shapinaz-Amal Naguib, "The Era of Martyrs: Texts and Contexts of Religious Memory," in: van Doorn-Harder & Vogt, *Between Desert and City*, p. 137.
15. Girgis Antuniyus, *Sirat al-Qiddisa al-Shahida Al-Mukhtara Marina*. (Life of the chosen martyr St. Marina) (Cairo, no publisher mentioned, 1988), and Amir Nasr, *Al-Qiddisa Dimyanah Al-Shahida*. (Saint Dimyanah, the martyr) (Cairo, no publisher mentioned, 1983).
16. Bishop Marcus quoted by Berit Thorbjørnsrud, *Controlling the Body*, p. 105.
17. Father Tadros Y. Malaty, *The Coptic Church as an Ascetic Church*. (Alexandria, Sporting: St. George Coptic Orthodox Church).
18. Otto Meinardus, *Christian Egypt, Ancient and Modern*. (Cairo: The American University in Egypt Press, 1977) p. 2.
19. Interview Mr. Emile Maher, April 23, 1993.

20. This observation was made by Caroline Walker Bynum in her book *Holy Feast and Holy Fast. The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*. (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London, 1987) p. 192. The author refers to the Old Testament in which fasting was almost the only act of piety for women, and to other religions such as Hinduism.
21. Lucien Regnault, *La Vie Quotidienne des Pères du Désert en Egypte au IV Siècle*. (Mesnil-sur-l'Estrée: Hachette, 1990) p. 77.
22. See: Berit Thorbjørnsrud, *Controlling the Body*, p. 223.
23. Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, p. 193, 194.
24. For example see: Wolfram Reiss, *Erneuerung in der Koptisch-Orthodoxen Kirche: die Geschichte der Koptisch-Orthodoxen Sonntagsschulbewegung und die Aufnahme ihrer Reformansätze in den Erneuerungsbewegungen der Koptisch-Orthodoxen Kirche der Gegenwart*. (Hamburg: Lit, 1998), 211.
25. Father Matta El Meskeen, *The Experience of God in a Monk's life*. (Scetis: St Macarius Monastery, undated) p. 8.
26. Interview February 15, 1989.
27. 'Abd al-Masih Salib al-Mas'udi al-Baramusi, *Kitab Tuhfa al-Sa'ilin* (The Book of the Gem for Inquirers) (Cairo: Matba'at al-Shams, 1932), p. 117.
28. David N. Bell, Introduction, Translation and Notes, *The Life of Shenoute by Besa*. (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1983), p. 51.
29. Bell, *Life of Shenoute*, p. 52.
30. This story can be found in van Doorn-Harder, "Discovering New Roles: Coptic Nuns and Church Revival."
31. See, for example: Mohanty, Russo & Torres, *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*.
32. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Cartographies of Struggle. Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism," in: Mohanty, Russo & Torres, *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, p. 38, 39.
33. Thorbjørnsrud, *Controlling the Body*, p. 129, 130.
34. For a study about the Western context and how the environment interacts with people perceived as saintly and how expectations are constructed, see: Aviad M. Kleinberg, *Prophets in their own Country. Living Saints and the Making of Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*. (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992.)
35. *Controlling the Body*, p. 130.
36. For more information about the Islamic *Moulid*, Nicolaas H. Biegan, *Egypt: Moulids, Saints and Sufis* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1990), en J.W. McPherson, *The Moulids of Egypt, Egyptian Saints' Days*, 1941).
37. See: McPherson, *The Moulids of Egypt*. (Cairo: NM Press, 1941). Catherine Mayeur-Jaouen, "The Coptic Moulids: Evolution of the Traditional Pilgrimages" in van Doorn-Harder and Vogt, *Between Desert and City*, and Gerard Viaud, *Les Pèlerinages Coptes en Egypte (d'après les notes du Qommos Jacob Muysen)*. (Cairo: Institut Français d'Archeologie Orientale, 1979).
38. Anba Mata'us, *Sumuw al-Rahbana* (The Superiority of Monasticism), (Cairo: Viktor Kirillos, 1990), p. 154.
39. *Scetis: The Monastery of St. Macarius*, English edition, 1984 (first published in Arabic 1981).
40. Matta El-Meskeen, *Women: their rights and obligations in social and religious life in the early church* (Cairo, Monastery of St. Macarius. 1984), p. 26.
41. Matta El-Meskeen, *Women*, p. 48.
42. Matta El-Meskeen, *Women*, p. 55.
43. Matta El-Meskeen, *Women*, p. 12, 13.
44. See for example: Azza M. Karam, "Women, Islamisms, and State. Dynamics of Power and Contemporary Feminisms in Egypt," in: Mahnaz Afkhami & Erika Friedl. *Muslim Women and the Politics of Participation. Implementing the Beijing Platform*. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997) p. 18-28.

