

Graham K. Cannon

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HIST 104

Ochwada

Christianity and Islam in Egypt

Religion has been one of the most important cause of conflicts in history, from the Crusades to the modern harsh climate in the Middle-East today. In Africa, there seems to be no region or country that has studied in a historical context than Egypt, from the pyramids and the Rosetta Stone to the modern overthrowing of the modern government. Egypt always seemed to have a religious identity from it early days, they believed in multiple gods that commanded the ways of every aspect of life. They built monuments that commanded the gods wrath or to praise those gods. But in Egypt Abrahamic religions changed the fabric of the region, from Moses crossing the Red Sea in his Exodus to the modern infiltration of believed ISIS agents. But the current religious identity of Northern Africa being connected to the Middle East region and Islam. The Christian and Muslim identities in Egypt were different, in which the Muslim identity seemed to have a larger impact than the Christian one, especially in Egypt. Within John Iliffe's *Africans: The History of a Continent* there seemed to be a lot research that was done on the region and the religions impact on it. In his research, Iliffe seemed to cover more of the Islamic identity in Egypt rather than the Christian. Through research on additional sources, there was more information that was found about Christianity than in the book by Iliffe. The Christians and Muslim identities in Egypt were different, with Islam having more of an impact on the region. Within the sources, Iliffe seemed to cover more of the Islamic side than the Christian side, and

compared to the supplementary sources provided by the class, Iliffe still seemed to focus on Islam more.

The identities of the Abrahamic religious identities are extremely important to the more modern history of Egypt. The identities of the religions are fairly similar compared to how they came into Egypt and their identities were similar to this. Christian and Muslim identity was important to the region, but Islam has been the lasting religion. Christianity came first to the region and it was very important to the area and even a new church sprouted up. The first evidence of Christianity in Egypt comes from the early second century and there seemed to be some controversy between the Jews and the new believers. The Coptics (the new Christians) saw Christ as a great teacher in a traditional Greek sense. They also had their first leader, Origen, who taught them they should “elevate himself towards god through his wisdom and teachings.”¹ This Christian ideology was important to the fabric of a new identity of every Christian in the area. They seemed very peaceful, almost exactly like how they came into the region, not forcing themselves onto the region, but sprouting up and spreading the word of god. It really set up what was important to the early Christian, especially since the Jews had been in charge of the region for a long time. The Coptic Church was the first church in the area and its impact was immediate especially since there was not another major church like the Catholic Church was around. “By 325 Egypt had fifty-one known bishoprics (an area controlled by a bishop) and the Bible was widely available in the vernacular Coptic language (ancient Egyptian written in Greek script).² The Egyptian Christian followed scripture more or less to the letter as law, giving up certain

¹ Iliffe, John. *Africans: The History of a Continent*. 2nd ed. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2007, (37).

² *Ibid*, (37).

foods, like meats on Fridays, and following scripture.”³ The Christians were persecuted by the Jews and the Romans who lived in the region, but in the early 300’s Constantine I, the first Christian Caesar of Rome, ended the prejudice on the Christians. They lived in religious freedom under the next couple of leaders of Rome, until it fell in the early 6th century. Then they had some more persecution that was less than before, they were able to turn Jews into Christians, and many Jews did not think that was fair, mainly because the Christians placed fear into their people.⁴ The Muslim identity in Egypt started with the Muslim invasion of Egypt by the Arabs in 693 AD.⁵ Right around this era, the Muslims were seen extremely devout and followed only the certain rules, just like early Coptic Christians. They had changes in diet, especially against pork, like the Jews, and alcohol, even though beer and wine was the main liquid in the area due to the sickness from the drinking water. The Muslim identity in Egypt was fairly aggressive and disciplined, like how they came into Egypt. They forced themselves into the region and took over, instead of being peaceful like the Christians. They would pray five times a day and clean their feet and hands before doing so, it was fairly similar to the orthodox traditions of the Coptics.⁶ But the Christians were not as aggressive as the Muslims, the Christians seemed very peaceful in their expansion of the area, whereas the Muslims would take areas by force, through the Turkish empire.⁷ The Muslims that took over Egypt seemed to want more and more territory

³ “Egyptian Coptic History.” Encyclopedia Coptica: The Christian Coptic Orthodox Church Of Egypt. Accessed July 21, 2017. <http://www.coptic.net/EncyclopediaCoptica/>.

⁴ Bowman, Alan Keir. *Egypt After the Pharaohs: 332 BC–AD 642; From Alexander to the Arab Conquest*. 2nd ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996. (183-186)

⁵ Iliffe, John. *Africans: The History of a Continent*. 2nd ed. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2007, (42).

⁶ Ibid, (43).

⁷ Ibid, (43).

and it was not too long before the Muslims took over a large section of land. The Muslims took over the areas of the Mediterranean, through the Turkish empire known as the Ottomans, and the Egyptians did get away from Turkish rule in the middle of the 10th century.⁸ The Jewish merchants actually flourished with the new trade that came in, they seemed to be welcome, unlike when the Christians tried to force them to change religions.⁹ The Muslim Egypt was in charge of the country even through the Black Death in the fourteenth century and the consequential outbreaks of the disease throughout the coming centuries.¹⁰ Islamic identity through Egypt was important to Egypt mainly because it lasted so long. The differences between the two religions are fairly similar in their approach to life, but Islam was more aggressive in its spread and more strict with its rules. It lasted a lot longer than Christianity did in the region, mainly because the imperial ties that Islam had in the region. In fact Islam is still the major religion in the area, over a thousand years later, it is still engrained in the culture of Egypt. Christian and Islamic identity both were impactful in early Egypt, but Muslim identity was more impactful, mainly because Islam is still the main religion in the area.

Christian and Islamic identities that are evident in Egypt were covered within John Iliffe's *Africans*, even though there seems to be more history on Islam. Iliffe talks about the Christian identity in Egypt as different as another region because Christianity was so new and when it hit Egypt and North Africa, there were very few other places outside of Jerusalem that actually

⁸ Iliffe, John. *Africans: The History of a Continent*. 2nd ed. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2007, (45).

⁹ Ibid, (45).

¹⁰Ibid, (49).

practiced the religion.¹¹ It is very interesting to find out that Christianity was spread through Africa before Europe, even though it does seem as if Europe, especially in the modern sense, is the epicenter of Christianity.¹² Iliffe does a good job of explaining some of the historical events that may have impacted the religious identity of a Coptic Christian in the early stages of the religion. Iliffe does a great job of writing about the Muslim identity in early north Africa, mainly because it was there for so long and it still is. Egypt's relationship with Islam is so well documented, and who was in charge of the region like the Turks or the Egyptians freedom from them impacted their identity because it made them seem more free and that the religion is fairly important. Iliffe does a good job of writing about both, but in his writing he does seem to write about one more about the other.

John Iliffe obviously did a lot of research for his history of the African continent, and there are very few reasons as to why his research should be criticized, but he seemed to focus more on one religion than the other for a good reason. Christianity first came to the area and it is very interesting how Iliffe covers the early history of the religion. Ochwada's lectures on Christianity seem to give more of an insiders journey into early Christianity, and it does seem as though there was more to learn in the lectures than Iliffe's book. Christianity in the book seems to be fairly short, three pages in fact, compared to the extensive writing on Islam in northern Africa. There is close to seven pages of information on Islam in north Africa covered in the book and there is about the same amount of information in the lectures, but just as with the Christian lecture, there is some extra information. Iliffe did seem to place more of an emphasis on Islam

¹¹ Ibid, (37).

¹² Ochwada, Hannington. *Early Christianity in Africa Part 1*. Lecture, University of Kansas. June 2017

and its impact for a good reason. Christianity, as the main identity of Egypt, was not around for very long and there was not a lot of historical events that happened during its time as the main religion. The history of Islam in North Africa in Iliffe's book is full of interesting historical moments. The Arabs coming over to Egypt, then the expansion of Islam throughout the Mediterranean, and how long it has been in control of the area. The lectures both had two sections on both religions and treated it equally, which is really needed for a class. But Islam had a larger impact on the region than Christianity did, especially in the earlier times of Egypt. Iliffe did not treat the religions differently, he just had more historical events to cover in Islam, and the supplementary sources from the class cover both religions equally.

Christianity and Islam are two of the most popular religions in the world, but in Egypt the main religion was and is currently Islam. Eighty five percent of people in Egypt currently define themselves as a Muslim or follow the rules within the religion.¹³ John Iliffe covered both religions in their early stages as they both came into Egypt, in which he does a great job of setting up two the religions impacted the region and their identities. But he does not cover the Christian identity as well as the Muslim, mainly because there is more to cover during the Muslim's reign in Egypt. There is more to study and write about when it comes to Islam in the region and its reign over the country for over 1000 years. The sources that were provided by Ochwada and other sources provided by the class talked about both religions equally instead of the book, where Iliffe covered more of Islam. Islam and Christianity are two of the most popular religions, but their identities are somewhat similar to their entrance into Egypt.

Word Count: 1797

¹³ "Egypt from "The World Factbook". American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). 4 September 2008.