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## Copts in the Context of Perfect Faith

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### Abstract:

Nelly van Doorn-Harder's edited volume *Copts in Context Negotiating Identity, Tradition, and Modernity* utilizes various analytical tools to investigate Coptic Christianity. The authors of this multi-disciplinary volume show how identity, traditions, and diaspora are three ways through which the political, theological, and socioeconomic history and everydayness of the largest minority in the Middle East can be negotiated. To make sense of the complexities entangled with these three dimensions, the book mainly studies the attempts of Coptic Christians to solve the challenges that stand against the 'visibility' and the 'stability' of their faith. The book adequately emphasizes the ambiguity of the unfixed boundaries that define the meaning of and the belonging to an imagined Coptic community.

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van Doorn-Harder, Nelly: *Copts in Context: Negotiating Identity, Tradition, and Modernity*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2017. 296 pages, 54.99 USD. ISBN: 978-1-61117-784-8.

### Abstract:

Nelly van Doorn-Harder's edited volume *Copts in Context Negotiating Identity, Tradition, and Modernity* utilizes various analytical tools to investigate Coptic Christianity. The authors of this multi-disciplinary volume show how identity, traditions, and diaspora are three ways through which the political, theological, and socioeconomic history and everydayness of the largest minority in the Middle East can be negotiated. To make sense of the complexities entangled with these three dimensions, the book mainly studies the attempts of Coptic Christians to solve the challenges that stand against the 'visibility' and the 'stability' of their faith. The book adequately emphasizes the ambiguity of the unfixed boundaries that define the meaning of and the belonging to an imagined Coptic community.

Who are the Copts? How should we study them? Similar to other relevant academic writings, these questions are central to Nelly van Doorn Harder's edited volume *Copts in Context: Negotiating Identity, Tradition, and Modernity*. The distinctive feature of this work is that it provides three interrelated answers to such inquiries. Taking advantage of the multidisciplinary interests of its authors, the book is divided into three parts related to the themes of Coptic identity, diaspora, and tradition, respectively. By relying on the fluidity of identity as the primary "guiding principle" (p. 3) on which experiences of the Copts in the diaspora as well as the 'rediscovery' of old Coptic traditions are based, the book is specifically concerned with the contradictions that hinder the smooth production of a 'pure' version of 'Copticness.'

It should be noted, however, that the analytical foundations of some chapters are not clear. Since the book's three themes overlap and interrelate, the structure of the volume might change depending on how the readers understand its concepts and their relatedness to each of the essays. For instance, the first part mostly refers to the challenges that Coptic Christians have been facing following the

January 2011 uprisings in Egypt. With the exception of Séverine Gabry-Thienpont's piece, this part demonstrates how the ousting of President Mubarak has been a critical moment for new horizons for the 'visibility' of debates about the shaping of the Coptic identity. In this vein, Sebastian Elsässer elaborates on the street activism of the Copts that, although it existed before 2011, has intensified among the younger population during the interim military rule that followed Mubarak's regime. Elsässer points out that during this time, street activists were torn between the "defense of Coptic rights and interest" on one hand, and others who are "members and supporters of [secular] leftist and liberal parties and youth movements" on the other hand (p. 25).

Within the same context, Mariz Tadros tells the story of the Coptic Christian *Zabbalin* (rubbish collectors), who are based in Cairo, and how their post-2011 demonstrations are ambiguous with respect to their aim to secure multilayered and complex rights for a severely poor segment that is simultaneously part of a minoritized religious group. Quite beyond street activism, Angie Heo and Gaétan du Roy reflect on alternative ways of being Christian in post-revolutionary Egypt. They point to the increasing importance of the Internet and satellite TV channels amid the 2011 uprisings by emphasizing how this contributed to Copts cultivating different understandings of their faith while challenging influential existing representations of their everyday needs and demands.

The second part embraces chapters that refer less to the consequences of the 2011 uprisings than to how Copts aim to solve the identity problems resulting from their presence in the diaspora. Following up on the complexities of part one, Coptic Christians' identity has to be adapted to the changing of the 'original' site of faith, that is, Egypt. To begin with, Carolyn Ramzy studies how Copts in Canada employ spiritual songs in the streets of Canada not only to challenge the marginalization of their Coptic identity in a predominantly Muslim 'homeland', but also to claim a stronger position in a 'foreign,' yet 'Christian' country. Similarly, Ghada Botros and Rachel Loewen show the efforts of the Coptic Orthodox Church in Toronto to stabilize the faith of its congregants by turning from "a church of immigrants to a church of citizens" (p. 119). Botros "seeks to capture a moment in the adaptation process of migrant churches to accommodate the different roles mandated by the migration experience" (p. 108). Correspondingly, Loewen traces the strategies managed by the Church of being a "comforter" for both its Egyptian and Canadian believers alike (p. 126).

The contribution by Nora Stene in the last chapter of Part 2 as well as the piece by Gabry-Thienpont in Part 1 can be discussed in relation to the chapters of the third part of the book. This is because they also seem to trace the meanings by which Coptic rituals and traditions have been transferred and revived across space and time. It is worth mentioning that these pieces present interesting case studies of how current Coptic lives are connected to religious practices from previous generations

and centuries. For instance, they ask how Copts have managed to keep traditional monastic ‘ideals’ together with ‘true’ versions of the Coptic language, hymns, and hagiographies through till current times. This is in addition to the transmission of the ‘right’ socialization process of the Coptic clerical leaders, youth, and children.

In short, *Copts in Context* delivers a rich account about the identity construction and tradition production of the Copts both in Egypt and in the diaspora. The volume is useful for scholars who do not want to be limited to their disciplines by effectively utilizing wider theoretical concepts and methodological frameworks in their projects. One thing this book (and also the literature about Copts in general) could have benefited from is to move the analysis beyond the issue of faith and the contradictions connected to the achievement of its ‘pure’ image. In doing so, one would have been able to acknowledge how faith might not be a priority for some Egyptian Christians, or that some others might not be primarily concerned with the ‘visibility’ of their ‘Copticness’ inside and outside Egypt. Additionally, one could think about situations in which people develop heterogeneous aspects of ‘goodness’ beyond being and becoming ‘ideal’ subjects of the structural minoritization and differentiation of their religious affiliation. In doing so, for example, Coptic studies should include the lifeworlds of ‘negated’ Copts who have lost faith in God together with the institutions and the ‘alternative’ social movements that claim their ‘protection’ and/or ‘representation’ of such faith. The entire field of research could profit from scholarship about the ‘atheist’ and the ‘sinful’ Copts whose ‘weak/absent’ faith would exclude them from claiming a position in the making of the ‘perfect’ Coptic community.

**German Abstract:**

**Kopten im Kontext eines perfekten Glaubens**

Der von Nelly van Doorn-Harders herausgegebene Band *Copts in Context: Negotiating Identity, Tradition, and Modernity* bietet verschiedene analytische Werkzeuge an, um das koptische Christentum zu untersuchen. Die Autor\_innen dieser multidisziplinären Herausgeberschaft zeigen auf, wie durch den Fokus auf Identität, Tradition und Diaspora, die politische, theologische und sozioökonomische Geschichte und der Alltag der größten Minderheit im Nahen Osten erörtert werden kann. Um die mit diesen drei Dimensionen verknüpften Komplexitäten zu verstehen, untersucht das Buch hauptsächlich die Versuche koptischer Christen, jene Hindernisse zu überwinden, die der „Sichtbarkeit“ und der „Stabilität“ ihres Glaubens entgegenstehen. Das Buch betont zu Recht die Mehrdeutigkeit der ohnehin losen Grenzlinien, die die Bedeutung und die Zugehörigkeit zu einer angenommenen koptischen Gemeinschaft definieren.

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