



CONTENDING RELIGIONS, IDENTITIES AND SPACE

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PAPER'S TITLE: THE ARAB SPRING AND COPTIC-MUSLIM RELATIONS WITHIN THE EGYPTIAN DIASPORA IN ITALY

ABSTRACT:

The migration of Christian Copts from Egypt to Europe is a phenomenon that rooted in the sixties and seventies as a consequence of the discriminatory policies realized by the Egyptian governments. It can be analysed in the context of struggles pertaining to economic hardships and conflict situations as well as discrimination and in some cases violence as a consequence of their Christian identity in a Muslim-majority environment. The revolt against the Mubarak regime in 2011 brought hope for a new state where Christians will get their full rights as citizens. However the transitional period has deepened the polarization between the Coptic community and the supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood. This polarization went through three different phases: the SCAF rule (Feb 2011- June 2012), the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood (June 2012- June 2013) and finally and the military intervention in July 2013 and the new political regime of Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi.

This paper seeks to understand how the Arab spring, its hopes and disappointments, have affected the Coptic- Muslim relation within the Egyptian diaspora in Italy? What was the relation between the Coptic and Muslim Egyptians before the revolt against Mubarak? How did the different phases of the transitional period affect the relation between the two religious communities? What role did the religious actors play, both the Coptic Church and the mosques?

Starting from the analysis of some theoretical categories commonly revised in the light of the main criticisms addressed by scholars – e.g., the term 'diaspora', is now acquiring wider and more complex semantic values – this paper aims to analyse the individual and community integration strategies in the 'lands of immigration' which have liberated them from some constraints associated with living in a Muslim-majority environment but has brought different challenges regarding relationship with the motherland, the church and the Muslim community living there. The research will proceed in the understanding of the history of settlement of Copts in the internal debates and dynamics of the community in the diaspora and of their engagement with and consideration by surrounding actors in countries of residence: in local neighbourhoods, in ecumenical and inter-faith cooperation, in the media, in civil society, and as citizens vis-à-vis political institutions at different levels of government, and how did the political developments in their homeland since January 2011 have affected their interaction in the diaspora.

The research will adopt an interdisciplinary approach that combines state and society, a joint perspective from the host societies and from the motherland: the standpoint of minority groups, their internal debate, political proposals, and strategies. The research will consider monographs, journal articles and in-depth field research undertaken among Christian Copts in different Italian cities based on semi-structured interviews.

AUTHOR'S SHORT BIO AND ACADEMIC PROFILE:

Alessia Melcangi is a Research Fellow in History and Institutions of Africa within the Department of Political and Social Science at the University of Catania. She is a member of the team of the PRIN - Programmi di ricerca di Rilevante Interesse Nazionale 2010/2011 - *Nation/States and minorities in Mediterranean Africa*, funded by the Italian Ministry of Education, Universities and Research. She is currently working on a research project on the debate on secularism and identity in contemporary Egypt, looking at the case of the Christian Coptic minority. Melcangi completed a stage at the *Centre d'Études et de Documentation Économiques, Juridiques et Sociales*, Cairo (2008); she collaborates with the *Centre for Studies on the*



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Contemporary Islamic World and Africa (CoSMICA) and is the head of the information sector and mailing list of the *Association of African Studies in Italy (ASAI)*. Her main research interests include contemporary history of Egypt, religious and ethnic minorities in Egypt.

Georges Fahmi is an El-Erian fellow at the *Carnegie Middle East Center*, where his research focuses on religious actors in democratic transition, the interplay between state and religion in Egypt and Tunisia, and religious minorities and citizenship in Egypt and Syria. Fahmi is also a researcher at the *Arab Forum for Alternatives* in Cairo, where he works on political parties and youth movements in Egypt. He lectured at Boğaziçi University in Turkey in 2010.