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Book Reviews

A Reading of 'The Church and The State'

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A Reading of 'The Church and The State':

A book by Tariq al-Bishri

Alaa' Bayyoumi

This is an important book that deserves reading, discussing, and responding to for more than one reason, the most important of which are the prominence of its author, the timing of its release, and its subject matter, which has been occupying the minds of many Egyptians. These are reasons that must be analyzed before delving into the content of the book, the author's prose, his main argument, and my evaluation of the thoughts presented.

The importance of the book

Firstly, the author, Tariq al-Bishri, is a renowned Egyptian judge, historian, and scholar, and is considered one of the catalysts of the intellectual movement currently gaining momentum in Egypt. Perhaps his greatest achievement, though, is a book published in 1999 by Dar Al-Shorouk, the Egyptian publishing house, which contains speeches and research papers presented at a symposium in 1998 that was held in his honor upon retirement from his judicial career after reaching the legal retirement age.¹

The aforementioned book contains several research papers focusing on Bishri's biography, writings, and thought, as well as testimonials from prominent people on the current political and intellectual scenes in Egypt. One such testimonial is from Dr. Hasan Nafa'ah, a political science professor, in which he describes Bishri's intellectual significance as follows: "Perhaps no one can achieve Tariq al-Bishri's position in which he can come to the University (of Cairo) to discuss a PhD dissertation in political science, a PhD dissertation in history, as well as a PhD dissertation in philosophy, with the same ability, excellence, and competence."²

In the early part of this year, Bishri has been appointed as chairman of the constitutional amendment committee by Egypt's Supreme Council of the Armed Forces after the January 25 revolution, and tasked with introducing amendments to the Egyptian Constitution – which the revolution voided – in preparation for the post-revolution era. The changes proposed by the

¹Ibrahim Al-Bayoumi Ghanem et al., Tariq al-Bishri: The intellectual judge, the speeches and research papers presented at the civil intellectual symposium to celebrate the judge of the Egyptian State Council Tariq al-Bishri on the occasion of the end of his judicial mandate, (Arabic), First Edition (Cairo, Dar Al-Shorouk, 1999).

²Ibid, p. 51.

committee have caused widespread controversy, which has led many to consider Bishri one of the architects of this post-revolution period, especially after these constitutional amendments gained majority support from Egyptians in the March 2011 referendum.

For the most part, Bishri does not, in any shape or form, bear all the responsibility for the constitutional amendments that have shaped the current political atmosphere in Egypt in a major way. However, his chairmanship of the constitutional amendment committee put him and his writings in a political and media spotlight, with many forming the assumption that he belongs to the Islamist political trend, and that his leadership of the council was an indication of a rise in this trend that would control Egypt's political future after the revolution.

The second reason for this book's significance is its subject matter, which centers on the integration of Christian Egyptians. This is an extremely important topic because it relates to a large religious minority in Egypt and the Arab world, but also because it relates to matters of religion, and the relationship between Muslims and Christians – a relationship that frequently heightens sensitivities, which makes writing about it so difficult. To add to that, there is the daily debate in the Egyptian press regarding the Church's political role, the Church leaders' stance regarding the previous regime, and the relationship between Muslims and Christians in a post-revolution era which has witnessed a rise in Salafism, several incidents of sectarian violence, and large protests by Christian Egyptians. There is no denying the rise in sectarian tension in Egypt. These are all reasons that make the research in this book extremely timely.

Moreover, the nature of the book itself adds to its significance, for we are not regarding a research paper, a report, or even a book on political science or history. We are contemplating an intellectual, political, and historical argument presented by Bishri with great ability, using the methodology adopted by prominent historians and other thinkers. The book's deceptively small size (a mere 103 pages) is not commensurate to the strategic nature of writing therein, for it is quickly apparent to the reader that its author is a man of great vision and deep insight when it comes to Egypt's history, its people, and its future. He is not interested in producing a book in line with other political research papers written by political scientists, but instead offers up a tome that deals with several main points relating to the stance of church leaders towards the Egyptian state.

His thoughts flow sequentially and in a rational order, constantly referring back to strong logical arguments, all of which point to the clear and dangerous existence of a problem in the relationship among Church leaders, the Egyptian state, and the Egyptian national group. It is a problem that has been in existence for more than three decades and has multiple facets. Throughout the book, Bishri refers continuously to a multitude of significant events, facts, and dates that illustrate his idea and makes the reader aware of the credibility of the book and its

strong argument, especially considering that the language of the book is different from that which is currently prevalent when discussing the Muslim-Christian relationship. What is more, his unique vision and insight into Egypt's history and the future of its people are not something easily found in other writings.

Bishri's discourse

Perhaps what is most appealing to the reader throughout this book is the language, or the discourse, that Bishri uses. This is not to a reference to his choice of terms or the style of his prose, although Bishri's wording is different from the ubiquitous discourse of the Egyptian press. To some extent, his legal language is elegant and grand, flowing like the writings of Egypt's prominent writers from the first half of the 20th century.

Instead, what I refer to here is Bishri's political and intellectual discourse, for he does not write this book from the perspective of a Muslim scholar or an Islamist addressing Egyptian Christians. Instead, he addresses the meaning of Egyptian patriotism from the perspective of an Egyptian intellectual. In other words, Bishri upholds Egyptian patriotism while referring his readers back to an idea that is seemingly non-existent (or, at best, rare) in the current Egyptian media discourse. It is the idea of Egyptian patriotism and the importance of building a large political movement that includes all Egyptians and is based on common ground.

This is an idea that preoccupies Bishri, one about which he has written many books. One such book is "Towards a Major Current for the Nation." In it, he says:

When we speak of a major current and how to frame it, we do not mean one single political organization, and I thank God since I never called for it – because diversity and pluralism are the foundations upon which a movement finds balance – without them, we face stagnancy.

What is meant here by a major current is the unifying framework for the community forces, a framework fostering all these forces and assembling them while preserving their diversity and pluralism. It refers to the common element that is shared by the nation's communities, its sects, and its social and political components. The major political current is what defines the unity of a community in terms of the broad outlines of their general intellectual component, in terms of being aware of the community's general interest without hindering its own diversity and pluralism.

The framework of this political current does not negate the possibility of disagreements or potential conflicts between its components. In fact, this framework is mobile as it controls these

disagreements and conflicts on the one hand, and changes according to their outcomes on the other. This in itself is what has been referred to in the past few years as the national project.³

It is evident that Bishri is preoccupied with the notion of a unifying Egyptian national project that would bond all Egyptians, based on common interests, under one independent nation that is strong in the face of external and internal challenges. This is why he discusses the integration of Christians in "The Church and The State", and he rejects their isolation from Egyptian historic patriotic leadership, and their mutual concern for Egyptian unity. He says:

When Muslims converse with the Copts in Egypt, they must look for common ground, which means a unifying identity for both, namely the Egyptian identity. We must make this identity the focus of commitment in their relationships with each other, as the common identity itself binds them all together. In it being their unifier, it becomes the focus of their commitment to their mutual relationships, forming a common interest for them which will be the basis on which they will be held accountable.⁴

In another instance, he dedicates his book to "whomever among the Egyptian audience reads it, whether Muslim or Coptic," and says that he considers himself "within the framework of the national group that is responsible for integrating the Egyptian people as a whole." He also says that when referring to an Egyptian state he does not mean "its president or an individual in it" but rather the state that Egyptians have built over the course of many years: "It is the result of cumulative cultural and fundamental building efforts that have been in the making for two decades."⁵

This is why Bishri constantly refers back to history in his book, and to the first half of the 20th century refers in particular, for he compares the conditions of the Egyptian people in those times to those today and sees them as similar. He notes that Egyptian independence remains incomplete, with obvious external meddling, while Egyptian leaders throughout history, whether they were Muslim or Copt, have faced similar circumstances to what the Egyptian people are facing now. They contributed important answers as well as a patriotic project and it should be a national effort for contemporary Egyptians to learn from their example.

Thus, Bishri moves past the constrictions of this current debate about Muslim-Coptic relations, which is a topic that usually deals with issues such as Islamists, sectarian tension, the former Egyptian regime's stance, the rights of the minorities, and the international powers' stances on

³Al-Bishri, Tariq. *Towards a Major Current for the Nation*. (Arabic), 1st Ed., Doha: Al-Jazeera Center for Studies, 2008, pp 32-33.

⁴Al-Bishri, Tariq. *The Church and the State*. 1st Ed. Cairo: Dar Al-Shorok, 2011. pp. 86-87.

⁵Ibid, pp. 34-35

these matters. Bishri's project seems to go beyond this, for he is preoccupied with an old national project of integration. He goes on to mention, many times, that Egyptians' ancestors – Muslim and Christian – put forth a national project to be adopted by their grandchildren, and that those Christian ancestors understood Islam and its heritage with accuracy and appreciated it, while some Muslims were not Islamist, but they were only patriotic Muslims and nothing more.

The crisis facing Church leaders in Egypt

We are not talking about the Egyptian Copt citizens, when Egyptians deal with each other in all facets of coexistence; they share businesses and are colleagues in different professions, crafts and commerce, they walk together in market places, they socialize with each other, and are buried next to each other. We do not speak of the Coptic church as an institution with religious significance for the Copts, but we address the church administration, i.e. those who cling to the top positions in the church's hierarchy and make the decisions that affect the behavior of Copts and the way they deal with other citizens – and even then we do not speak about all of them – for, naturally, they belong to many trends which do not affect their sacred religious and sectarian beliefs, but rather we are speaking in specific about the prevalent trend within the church's administration in recent years, which has been more evident during the term of the current Patriarch, and the growing influence of what is known as the Coptic Diaspora in the last few decades.⁶

These lines effectively summarize an important argument in the book, especially when it relates to Bishri's main point. The book does not discuss the behavior of Christian Egyptians; instead, it deals with the leadership of the Church in Egypt and its prevalent current, as well as the stance of the current pope. The book points to a problem that seems to arise from the behavior of the Church's leadership.

Throughout its pages, the book discusses the Church's search for authority and the role it wants to play beyond its religious one. It wants to make itself a mediator between the state and the Christian Egyptian people, and to make this goal a reality, it sought to deepen its hold on Christian Egyptians and to isolate them from their Egyptian surroundings, and even to represent and speak for them religiously and politically. In other words, the Church sought the position of political mediator between the state and the Christians, especially under the former presidency of Hosni Mubarak. The book states that this political role caused a pronounced isolation of the Christians in Egypt from Egyptian national group, and a closing in of the community upon itself has led to a shattering of the Egyptian state and a rift within Egyptian society. The isolation of a key component of the Egyptian national group such as the Egyptian Christian minority will not

⁶ Ibid, p. 47

result in anything but deepening the chasm in the structure of the Egyptian state and its ability to face both internal and external challenges.

Bishri states that this orientation of the Church has increased under the leadership of the present pope, becoming more evident over the past three decades. Needless to say, the Mubarak regime's poor management of political life of Egypt and its running of Muslim-Christian relations have contributed to this. Matters have been made worse by the rising influence of Copts in the Diaspora and by increased international interference, especially US interference, when it comes to the "rights of minorities" in Egypt.

Here, Bishri uses strong wording to criticize the positions taken by some of the Copts of the Diaspora:

If we suffer today from a Zionist-American attack on all of our actions by all military, economic, cultural, and media means, then we find in parallel the movement of the Diaspora Copts, and their attacks against us, while the Coptic church was feeling forceful about it; and this cannot be mistaken by any observer of Egyptian affairs in the past few years with the Coptic laymen's being silent. This silence ranges from weakness and humiliation to silent support, except for the very few. Should we repeat what was said at the Egyptian Conference in 1911 and the words of Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyed⁷, in which he faulted those who take the Copts' demands as an excuse to reach through a deal with the Christian UK a sovereignty right in Egypt – while being the weak minority – over the great Muslim majority?"

Bishri adds a warning:

The matters relating to the National Group should not be looked upon within the framework of political situations relating to short-term victory or defeat, but from a perspective of long-term sustainability. We still invoke the Crusader wars 1,000 years ago, and the French occupation 200 years ago, and we measure history according to positions and impacts that we are still feeling today. We also still remember General Jacob, whom the French used against his own Egyptian people.

Evidences and direction

To prove his previous point, Bishri recalls several recent facts, like Patriarch Shenouda's and the Orthodox Church's refusal to implement a binding ruling issued by the Supreme Administrative Court in March 2008 that requires the Church and the patriarch to permit a divorced Christian to

⁷ Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid (1872-1963) was an [Egyptian](#) intellectual, anti-colonial activist, the first director of [Cairo University](#). He was an influential person in the Egyptian Nationalist movement and probably the most systemic exponent of Islamic liberalism and Egyptian secularism. He was fondly known as *the Professor of the Generation*.

remarry. This is a situation that Bishri describes as “overriding the state judicially and legally since it is a representation of the national group.”⁸

He also publishes the statements of bishops that prove the Church had been asking Christian youth to produce an electoral registration card before the completion of marriage procedures. These actions, according to Bishri, have “clear political motivations,” namely the patriarch’s attempt to gain the majority vote from the Coptic community without any other competitor having the opportunity to gain their votes, to ultimately gain electoral power that makes him gain more influence over presidential or legislative elections.”⁹

Bishri goes on to examine the Church’s public stance regarding Christian women who had converted to Islam, and the crimes committed by the Church in convents, as well as the pope’s statements regarding the number of Christians in Egypt, in which he has stated that he does not consider the official published number important. These positions, according to Bishri, demonstrate that the Church’s current leadership is superseding its religious role as well as those of Egyptian state institutions, by trying to perform the legal roles, the security tasks, and the statistical work of those institutions, and by attempting to forge a political role for itself at the expense of the Egyptian state authorities – which were weak under Mubarak’s regime – and without appreciating the Egyptian national group’s interests, which go beyond the Mubarak era, in preserving the Egyptian state and its institutions.

Bishri also provides other pieces of evidence, including an organization with growing numbers called the “Coptic Orthodox Youth Association”, as well as the increase in educational, social, and entertainment facilities implemented by the Church, all of which have increased the isolation of Coptic youth. There is, in addition, the Church’s deliberate bypassing of state apparatuses – such as the police, the judiciary and other local and national institutions – in controversial issues to address directly the head of state, as though the Church’s patriarch were the people’s (the Copts’) president within the whole of the Egyptian community (which is Muslim), as though the former president of the republic (Mubarak) were his counterpart.

Bishri states that these incidents call for further public discussion of the Church’s political role, but not its religious role. He reiterates, throughout his book, that he is not discussing religion or the Church’s religious role; rather, he is discussing the political role of the Church’s administration and its attitude when it comes to cases of integration within the Egyptian national group. He fears the Church would forsake its religious role for the political one, and that it will push for the isolation of Egyptian Copts while weakening their integration within Egyptian

⁸ Al-Bishri, Tariq. *The Church and the State*, p. 12

⁹ Ibid, p. 17

society. He adds that Egyptian Muslims have worked very hard to understand the concept of the Egyptian national group, which is an understanding that equates Muslims and Christians and their rights, based on Islamic Sharia law. It seems apparent that the Church would like Egyptians to regress. In that context, Bishri points to statements made by Church leaders which make it clear that Christians are living side by side with their “Muslim neighbors,” while Bishri sees the situation in reverse, i.e. as one in which “Muslims in Egypt are living next to their Christian brothers.” He also criticizes the repeated insinuation of a “Muslim and Arab invasion” of Egypt in Christian writings.

We have fought a historic battle – alongside both our Muslims and Christians– during the 19th and 20th centuries, so that we might surpass the Mullah regime [Islamic communal system] and form an Egyptian national group that has a state which treats everybody equally, whether in personal or public affairs. Those of us who are Muslim have fought hard to renew Islamic jurisprudence to include the concept of the national group and the total equality for all, regardless of religion, in private and public mandates as well as in opportunities.

After stabilizing this new situation as a fundamental tenet in prevalent political thought among those elites that portray the effective public opinion with their preponderant thought, we were surprised to find the people in charge of the Church administration wanting to go back to the Mullah regime while supporting it by Islamic foundations.¹⁰

Therefore, Bishri calls for further public discussion of the Church’s political role, while pressing the need to equate it to Muslim religious institutions and currents that get their share of discussion and public debate by Egyptian public opinion. He also asks that the Church be treated the same as other religious entities in terms of financial and legal auditing.

To conclude his book, he cautions the Church – as well as the secular Egyptian elite – to seek understanding of Muslim heritage and its different stances, like their Egyptian ancestors, Muslim and Christian alike, did. He adds that they also need to understand that Egypt possesses a clear majority with Muslim identity, and that Muslim identity is a source of power, not weakness, and it is a necessity for the achievement of cultural independence, which is as important as economic or political independence. He also states that this identity requires Egyptians to seek solutions to their contemporary problems through Islamic teachings first and foremost, before seeking solutions outside of them. Finding these solutions will enhance the cohesion of the national group instead of weakening it, through supporting Islamic political jurisprudence.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 27

Critique and evaluation

The book's meager 103 pages are both its curse and its saving grace. It is easy to read, which makes it accessible to many; however, it leaves the reader with many unanswered questions, such as the author's insights into the future and proposed solutions, as well as practical and political suggestions to overcome the current tumultuous circumstances.

It also leaves the reader feeling the need for more information about the important issues with which the book deals, including the nature of the Egyptian Church itself, its internal administrative structure, its relationships with other Christian sects, and its relations with Islamic and secular currents in Egypt, as well as the Copts in the Diaspora and the nature of their orientations and influence. These are all questions related to issues raised in the book, yet it does not discuss them in appropriate detail. It is evident that Bishri has written several other books on the same topic –which I have, unfortunately, not had the chance to read before writing this review – in which he may have gone into more detail on this topic and answered the aforementioned questions.

Some would say that the book lacks, or even avoids, a discussion of the Islamic religious currents that have extreme stances against Christian Egyptians and the Egyptian Church, and of how those have affected and perhaps even caused the very actions of the Church that this book criticizes.

It is also clear that part of the book was written before the Egyptian Revolution that saw the ouster of the now former President Mubarak, so its insight into a post-January 25 era is clearly lacking – insight that might try to move beyond the problems of the former regime.

Based on my reading of the book, it is clear that we can conclude the following:

1. The importance of getting past the Muslim-Christian duality by strengthening the Egyptian national group and making its principles and rulings binding on all Egyptian political currents and groups.
2. The importance of a deeper understanding by Egyptians of their own historical and national heritage, for it is impossible for an Egyptian to have a negative position regarding Islamic legislation (Sharia) and its stance towards Coptic Egyptians without conscientiously studying the situation from all perspectives. This is a rule we should apply to many contemporary political phenomena. It is also important to point out that the book contains a chapter about Article 2 of the constitution and the role of Islamic Sharia as a source of legislation in the Egyptian Constitution. The chapter contains many important thoughts on Egypt's Islamic identity, its meaning, its relation to the constitution, and its being – in its current phrasing – a guarantee

rather than a deprecation of the rights of Christian Egyptians. This is an issue that deserves independent study and follow-up.

3. There remains the need for more transparency of information that relates to the Egyptian state's stance on various institutions and groups, their nature, their size, and their positions. The continuing vagueness and lack of information only go to further fears and doubts.

4. The building of a strong, democratic, and just Egyptian state that exerts its power over everybody, equally and without discrimination, will be beneficial to all.