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Images as Messengers of Coptic Identity

An Example from Contemporary Egypt[*]

Introduction

During the past thirty years the production of two-dimensional images designed to be used in religion has flourished in the Coptic Orthodox Church of Egypt. After generations with little or negligible activity, enterprising ateliers can today be found all over the country.[1] Many of them are strategically placed in influential convents and monasteries and at important educational institutions. In this production of art, the Section of Coptic Art at the Higher Institute of Coptic Studies in Abbasiya in Cairo occupies a leading position. Under the direction of Professor Isaac Fanous Youssef the section is attempting to develop a Coptic iconography and style — which the Coptic Orthodox Church does not have. Images of Christ, Mary, and the saints are central in Coptic cultic life, but there is a traditional openness to all kinds of styles and the dominant ones are European and Byzantinesque, well-known in both Western and Eastern Christianity. Also other artists are engaged in developing an especially Coptic iconography and style, but Isaac Fanous and his pupils have received the greater attention and also have the support of official church authorities.

The primary aim given for images in Coptic religion is that of being tools for communicating with and partaking of the Holy World.[2] But my interest lies in the usages and functions which the images have in Coptic life, in

[1] The movement is presented in Meinardus 1987a: 61–67; Meinardus 1987b: 21–27; Meinardus 1987–1988: 11–27.

[2] "For the Coptic icons are part of this redeemed Creation, which, together with other material objects such as relics, are given to the Church as a way for believers to reach God". Fanous 1991: 2.

particular how they serve the construction of ethnic consciousness and co-
hesion of the Copts. Coptic identity is an important issue for the Copts. The
images in question are included in a conscious effort to formulate and me-
diate who the Copts are. Through choice of themes, composition of motifs,
and style, the images impart Coptic self-conceptions. In my approach to
this transmittance I shall focus on intended meanings. As vehicles of social
communication images can have both intended and unintended meanings.
Pictorial communication is a complicated process. Both sender and receiver
partake of the meaning-creating operation and various circumstantial fac-
tors condition and influence it. Communication can be governed directly
through explicit verbal expositions of how the images are to be read and
interpreted according to the intentions of artists or employers. Such verbal
expositions — written and oral — are given for the images we are studying.
Indirectly, communication is governed through the contexts of conceptual
traditions and usage, and through conventions of perception and interpre-
tation.

I shall present significant features of the particular messages concerning
Coptic identity which are mediated through the images under considera-
tion. I shall also discuss some general properties of pictorial language, in
an attempt to throw light on the sensitive relationship between the exclu-
sively ethnic and the universally religious (Christian) components of Coptic
identity.[3]

Before proceeding with these tasks, I have a few words on the Copts. The
Copts are Egyptian Christians. Ca. 95% of them belong to the Coptic Or-
thodox Church, the rest belongs to other Christian Churches. They are a
minority in Egypt, where the majority are Muslims.[4] The relationship be-
tween Copts and Muslims exhibits classical minority-majority features.
Throughout history, harmony and disharmony have alternated. The Copts
are integrated in all areas of social activity but they have often been under
pressure and restriction and have frequently felt discriminated against (cf.
Pennington 1982; Vogt 1986a: 27–43; Vogt 1986b: 44–69).

There are conflict areas where violent confrontations have occurred, also
during recent decades. However, the relationship between Copts and Mus-
lims is more ambiguous and multifaceted than the reports of militant al-
ienation indicate when taken alone. Even if Copts and Muslims may regard

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[3] The word "identity" is here not used to denote a clearly delineated entity, but rather a
given cluster of values, some of which are consciously stressed, while others are con-
ventionally taken for granted

[4] There is dissension concerning the numbers of Copts, but they are generally ranged
from 12%, i.e. 7.8 million, to 20% of the total population, i.e. 13 million.

each other with mistrust, they share basic cultural traditions — language, customs, even important religious traditions.[5] In values and habits of every-day living, the Copts are more attuned to their Muslim fellow countrymen than to Western Christians. So, with regard to actual life in its broad spectrum the question of identity has great complexity and should be differentiated. The Copts have a Coptic identity but also a national identity shared with other Egyptians. A number of factors decide when the one or the other of these identities come into prominence: the situation in question, social class, place of residence, education, sex, age, personal disposition.

But it is not only vis-à-vis other Egyptians that the Copts feel that it is imperative to profile who they are. The Coptic Orthodox Church is a minority among Christian Churches. Contacts with Western Churches have been slight during the centuries, but since 1954, when the Coptic Church became a member of the World Council of Churches, there has been a markedly extended dialogue. This fact has created a need to accentuate distinctively Coptic characteristics as a Christian Church. It is primarily this border line which the images we are studying imply, but as we shall see, a demarcation in relation to Muslim Egyptians is involved.

Concluding this excursus with an eye on our topic, it can be said that religion is at the core of Coptic identity.[6] The choice of images in religion as vehicles for formulating and transmitting messages of ethnic identity is a natural one.

I. Significant Features of the Pictorial Messages Concerning Coptic Identity

a) Suggestive motifs

Motifs that allude to the theme of Egypt's role in the formation of Christianity strike a vibrant cord in the Copts. Examples are St. Mark, whom the Copts regard as the founder of the Church in Egypt, and the Fathers of the Desert, the initiators of monasticism. (ill.s 1, 2, 3, 4, 5). But the most highly charged motifs in contemporary religious art are those which refer

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[5] In particular connected with the dead, the tombs and the saints' cults.

[6] Emphasizing the need for strengthening Coptic identity is the fact that the Copts can only survive as a religious group through their children: missionary activities are prohibited and every year Christians convert to Islam, in 1982, ca. 8500, according to *World Christian Encyclopedia*, Nairobi 1982.

to the flight of the Holy Family into Egypt. (ill.s 6, 7, 8, 9, 10) The wealth of literature centring around this theme gives an indication of its significance: apocryphic childhood gospels, medieval legends and homilies[7], and their modern re-interpretations and re-applications.[8] This literature presents stories about the visit to Egypt by the child Jesus and his Mother who, together with Joseph and the midwife Salome, travelled through the country. The theme has crystallized into clear-cut pictorial motifs, easily recognizable for all Copts. Deciphered within their thematic context, the motifs communicate that the Copts have played a decisive role in the genesis of Christianity: the people of Egypt were the first to recognize and welcome the Mother and her Son. Thus the Copts are no insignificant minority living on the outskirts of Christendom, on the contrary, they hosted its cradle. This message is not (and cannot) be read directly out of the images, it is rather released by them — created through an act of interpretation in which the pictorial motifs act like emblems of this generally shared and cherished self-conception.

These motifs distinguish the Copts primarily from other Christians, not from Egyptian Muslims. Egyptian Muslims, too, claim that Jesus spent his childhood in Egypt. Muslim traditions go even further: it was in Ehnas, ancient Herakleopolis, that the palm grew, under which Mary gave birth to her child, according to the Quran, sura 19 (Maspero and Wiet 1919: 28). However, when we expand our conceptual field of reference for the reading of the motifs, an implicit line of demarcation vis-à-vis Muslims can be discerned. Both the attempts of Copts to formulate a special group identity, and the attempts of state authorities to formulate a common national identity, direct attention to the glorious, ancient Egyptian culture — of which all Egyptians are proud. But the Copts tend towards the opinion that they in particular have reasons to be proud, as Egyptians were Christians before Islam came to Egypt and they had inherited important ancient Egyptian religious-cultural traditions. Most Copts also hold the view that

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[7] Armenian and Arabic childhood gospels, the Latin Pseudo Matthew (Graf 1944; Hennecke 1959); Abu Salih 1969: 217–251; the Homily of Zachariah, bishop of Sakha (Graf 1955: 228 f.); the Vision of Theophilus (Mingana 1929); The Coptic Synaxarium. See also, Fabri 1975; Tafur 1926.

[8] Alluded to in sermons and hymns, the legends are kept alive through the regular church cult. They are also referred to in exceptional situations, such as the famous apparitions of Mary at Zeitun in 1968, which have been interpreted as signs that the Mother of God has not forgotten how she was received by the Egyptians, see Zaki 1977: 103; El Masri 1978: 558; Nelson 1972: 98–102; Nelson 1973: 5–11.

they are racially more genuine descendants of the ancient Egyptians than are the Muslims[9].

This self-conception and the interpretation of history involved are connoted by the popular theme of the Flight into Egypt and the pictorial motifs alluding to it. The world-famous pyramids and temples on the banks of the Nile identify the landscape in which the Mother and her Son moved. (ill.s 6, 8) Their journey through this ancient, celebrated territory lends authority to the Coptic conception of themselves as its heirs: Egypt is being "conquered" by the Son of God; his journey through the land implies a taking over and a re-sacralization. The motif of his sailing on the Nile[10] is reminiscent of the new pharao who, like Horus, comes sailing victoriously on the Nile, vanquishing his enemies[11] and taking possession of his kingdom.[12] Written and oral traditions relate that Jesus and his Mother founded sacred wells and trees all over Egypt, and that the first Christian church in the world was erected in the "middle of" Egypt.[13] In tune with this idea of a Christian re-sacralization of Egypt, the entire landscape can be pictorially presented as a church — with palms and papyri formed in the shapes of columns and arches. (ill.s 9, 10) Coptic identity is at home in a sacred territory. A deep sense of belonging to Egypt has been expressed in Egyptian religion through thousands of years. It can be seen in these recent pictorial expressions of Coptic identity. The close attachment to the land of Egypt is explicitly mentioned by two leading artists, Boudour Latif

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[9] E.g., Shenouda Hanna, Coptic Orthodox priest, "The genuine Egyptians of today are the Christian Copts who alone trace direct descent from the ancient Egyptian races" (1967: 3); Verghese 1973: 56. — The view is naturally provocative to the majority of Egyptian Muslims, who reply that their ancestors were Copts.

[10] According to oral tradition, Jesus and his Mother embarked at Maadi, across the river opposite to ancient Memfis, and sailed southwards. Meinardus 1986: 41.

[11] It is a standard piece of information in the literature about the journey that the old gods crumbled at his arrival. It is referred to by Iris Habib el Masri, professor of Coptic Church History at the Higher Institute for Coptic Studies in Cairo, in her presentantion of the history of the Copts. El Masri 1978: 11.

[12] The concept of Christ as the New King is an old, universally Christian tradition, and is reflected in the NT stories about his childhood, e.g. Matthew: 1–2.

[13] According to the medieval pseudo-epigraphic Vision of Theophilus, immediately after the resurrection a luminous cloud brought Christ, his Mother, Salome, Mary Magdalene, the apostles, the angels Gabriel and Michael to a place near Qusiya, where the present Deir el Muharraq is situated, to consecrate the first church in the world. Mingana 1929: 420.

and Youssef Nassif, as having influenced both ancient Egyptian and Coptic art[14].

The view that the Copts are the authentic heirs of ancient Egyptian land and culture implies a view that ancient Egyptian religious traditions have been continued, or rather, brought to their completion by the Copts. The two most popular motifs in Coptic iconography are understood within this perspective of continuity: Mary with the child Jesus on her knee, and the rider saint (Girgis, Tadros, Botros, Abu Sefein) killing a dragon or another representation of evil power. (ill.s 11, 12) These motifs are traced to the well-known ancient Egyptian iconography of sacred kingship: the pharaoh depicted as the god Horus sitting as a child on the knee of his mother Isis, queen of the sky, or as piercing crocodiles and hippopotami or other representations of evil (ill. 13). Coptic artists and iconographers point out the role played by these ancient motifs in the process of assimilation which produced Christian art.[15]

This evaluation of Coptic religious traditions has the approval of influential theologians and church historians in the Coptic Church[16]. It is an accepted view that ancient Egyptian religion prepared the ground for Christianity, the former religion being regarded as a kind of proto-gospel: the ancient Egyptians were the first people to receive the Saviour, because they were led by their religion to understand his evangelium.[17] It was not a co-

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[14] «Nos premières oevres sont très marquées par l'influence de la nature qui se manifeste surtout dans la force et la couleur de ces oevres. Il me semble, en effet, que la nature et l'homme reçoivent la vie grâce au même fleuve qui irrige la terre et l'ésprit de l'homme. C'est pourquoi, il existe une continuité entre l'art de l'Égypte pharaonique et l'art égyptien de l'icône, tous deux marqués par un cadre commun et porteurs d'une empreinte profondément et typiquement égyptienne», Latif and Nassif 1991: 45.

[15] In this explanation of the roots of the motifs, Coptic artists and iconographers are influenced by the history research of the 19th and 20th centuries.

[16] E.g., Tadros Malaty: "Scott Moncrief states that 'origin of the Icon of St. George and the Dragon, is to be found in the Egyptian representations of the fight between Horus and Seth'", Malaty 1982: 408. In the following passage from his popular book Malaty brings in the ethnic aspect of Coptic art: "The native group found in the new faith, that is Christianity, the essential elements of their ancient Egyptian religion, such as the Trinity (Horas, Osiris and Isis), and the life to come. Naturally, the Egyptians earnestly embraced Christianity, while many of the Greeks in Egypt persisted, for the most part, in their paganism, so that until the fourth century one could with good reason call the Greeks in Egypt pagans and the Copts Christians", Malaty 1982: 384.

[17] Iris Habib el Masri, "In Egypt, the people were given countless gods and goddesses to revert to for different needs, yet the priests and sages expressed their faith in one God, and spoke of the coming redeemer. They conceived of a triad of gods, and they worshipped the Mother Isis suckling the Child Horus. They, therefore, glimpsed the Light

incidence that Egypt was the land of the Saviour's childhood; it was part of God's long-term soteriological plan. Inherent in this interpretation of history is the view that illustrious Fathers of the Church, like Athanasius, were taught by the ancient Egyptian priests, widely known for their deep religious thought (El Masri 1978: 114).

The images give no explicit endorsement of this assessment of the ancient Egyptian religion; pictorial language is suggestive rather than precise; the motifs communicate the message indirectly, by alluding to knowledge and points of view which many Copts have today.

Ancient Egyptian pictorial motifs can also be repeated and adapted by Muslim artists, but Muslims have no possibility of interpreting these traditions as belonging to a prestage of Islam.[18] Islam has no Egyptian aura for Egyptian Muslims, the way Christianity has for Copts. The Egyptian identity of Egyptian Muslims has no religious sounding-board and lacks the strong backing given by religious authorization. When Muslim artists handle ancient Egyptian motifs, these motifs refer to an all-Egyptian — or even to a universally human — identity. (ill. 14)

b) Suggestive stylistic elements

During his iconographical studies with Léonide Ouspensky in Paris, Isaac Fanous made the resolve to create a Coptic style, different from European and Byzantine styles. The procedure adopted was to revert to the oldest Coptic images that have survived, dating from the 6th – 9th centuries, and to develop their distinguishing features as regards colours and outline of forms, into a synthesis with modern art.[19] (ill. 15, cf. ill. 16) Where European and Byzantine images display brilliant colours and elongated, soaring figures, the neo-Coptic ones distinguish themselves by their sober and solid simplicity. Their colours are earthen — yellow and red ochre, indigo, green out of ochre and blue. Thus a pupil of Isaac Fanous points out that while Italian images paint the Virgin's garment in bright, light blue, Coptic images paint it in brown and indigo[20]. These colours are said to have been preferred by the earliest Coptic painters, and even by the ancient Egyptian

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of Christianity beforehand, and many of their writings run parallel with those of the Hebrew prophets". "Their spiritual unfoldment across the ages led to their acceptance of the New Faith". El Masri 1978: 10 f.

[18] Apart from that, the Koranic view of the ancient pharaohs is negative, cf., suras 28,3 and 26,9.

[19] His art programme is presented i.a. in Fanous 1991.

[20] Jackie Ascott. Personal communication 10.12.1987.

painters. The figures are heavily outlined and give an almost severe impression: "typically Coptic faces are drawn with round faces, thick nose, protruding forehead and cheekbones, large eyes, thick eyebrows. The bodies are sturdy, thick-set, down-to-earth".[21] Again, these are features which artists adhering to neo-Coptic art extensively regard as characteristic of the earliest Christian images in Egypt.[22] Some of the stereotypes used by neo-Coptic art go even further back. Thus the water of the Nile can be drawn in the manner of the ancient Egyptians. (ill. 17)

The extensive and long-lasting influence of Byzantine art on icons used in Coptic churches is generally regarded by these contemporary artists as a degeneration from the original, Coptic style. By re-applying the allegedly Coptic features in their own images, the artists paint images heavily laden with "Egyptianness".[23] One of the representatives of neo-Coptic art gives this explication of the stylistic differences with regard to correlated characteristics of mentality: Coptic iconography is more earthly, concrete, quiet, solemn, since Coptic mentality is more down-to-earth, and this is reflected in the sturdy, thick-set figures which do not have the elongated spirituality of Byzantine figures.[24] According to this appraisal, neo-Coptic art repeats stylistic features which communicate that the Copts are Egyptians in mind and body.

II. The Reception of the Message

a) The role played by the context of usage

According to current theory of pictorial communication the context of usage has a hand in the production of a given message. The context of usage also influences its acceptance. In particular, religious usage, is influential in preparing the ground for its acceptance by the beholders. Images representing the characters of the Holy World are extensively used in Coptic

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[21] Jackie Ascott. Personal communication 10.12.1987.

[22] As a concept of the history of art, *Coptic* is problematic. It is a matter of debate how exclusively Egyptian the styles of the earliest images actually were, and also, how representative of Christian art in Egypt they were. Important contributors to the discussion of early Coptic art include, Ebers 1892; Gayet 1902; Strzygowski 1904; du Bourguet 1967; Drioton 1937; Wessel 1963; Effenberger 1975; Thomas 1989.

[23] Jackie Ascott, pupil of Isaac Fanous, gives the following summary characteristic of neo-Coptic art: «Art égyptien, art sacré, il incarne la foi ancestrale des Coptes, l'histoire de cette foi et l'exprime dans un contexte artistique contemporain". Ascott 1991: 15.

[24] Jackie Ascott. Personal communication 10.12.1987.

devotion. Images of Christ, Mary and the saints are central in church as well as in the more unpretentious "extra-mural" religious life. The Copts enjoy images of holy persons, and have a simple, uncomplicated appreciation of them. Images of all forms and sizes are found in church, at home, at work, in books, in wallets, glued as small stickers to all kinds of objects; they serve a variety of needs and purposes and are integrated into everyday life, in a natural, taken-for-granted way. This position of images is unparallelled in Islamic piety. They are thus an obvious choice as vehicles for the communication of Coptic self-conceptions. The message is not given in a dry lecture but is conveyed through a medium which is loved and close at heart, and the medium functions in contexts of usage that are exclusively Christian.

There are additional circumstances that enhance the suitability of this medium, such as the fact that the images are used by all types of Copts; the use of images transgresses age, sex, education, and other social lines of demarcation. The images are really a unifying medium: they can express a common identity.

Another favourable circumstance is the fact that there is a generally shared conventional code for identifying the iconographical signs, which enables artists and beholders to decipher this language in much the same way on important points. This is not to say that the heterogenity of the actors partaking of this process of transmission is of no concern. Actually, it plays a considerable part in all pictorial communication. Artists as well as beholders are socially differentiated; the images are experienced within various frames of interpretation. In this article, however, I focus on a particular collection of pictorial stereotypes and on a particular section of their semantic range — officially explicated in ways that are accessible for common Copts and generally shared by them.

Finally, a special conception of images used in veneration stresses the importance of the message communicated. Such images — *icons* in the narrower sense — are conceived as containing the presence of the holy persons depicted. This capacity, attributed to visual representation, is most clearly demonstrated with images used in church. Images in church are supposed to have undergone a rite of consecration, during which the Holy Spirit is blown into them through the bishop's mouth.[25] It is the same Holy Spirit that is present in the holy person depicted.[26] Copts prefer to reserve the

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[25] Malaty 1982: 298 ff.

[26] The theological premise for this view is the Incarnation, which according to Coptic orthodox thought "made it possible for materials to receive Him. The icon is a material

term "icon" for these consecrated images. But according to reports, any image that is venerated can, under given circumstances, be experienced as effectuating the presence of the holy power depicted. This conception of image lends seriousness and authority to the messages about identity and strengthens their credibility.

b) The response by the users

Religious image traditions are imparted to Copts from earliest childhood. Together with associated traditions of beliefs and knowledge, they play an important role in the shaping of the Coptic world. Images that represent religious traditions in themes, motifs, and usage, can be said to belong to the basic cultural traditions that constitute and maintain the community of individual Copts. Consequently, the neo-Coptic images are in a very favourable position with regard to becoming an important medium for communicating and supporting the discussed Coptic self-conceptions.

However, in actual life unforeseen realities abound. The neo-Coptic images are not particularly popular. Their style creates a barrier; it still tends to be perceived by the great masses as unfamiliar. The stylized figures and postures, the lack of facial expressions, the economy of details and colours, can be found "unnatural" and artificial. Correlated with this opinion, there is a tendency to apprehend the popular images as being more *beautiful* than the neo-Coptic ones. (ill.s 11, 18, 19, 20)

Aesthetics have undeservedly been in the background when pictorial communication is analyzed. The style of the images we are studying not only has an Egyptian-Coptic aspect, it also has an aesthetical aspect which can be decisive in determining whether the message gets through. The aesthetical side is important for both sender and receiver in our case of study. However, they obviously do not agree on aesthetical norms. While the large group of users prefer the European and Byzantinesque images, and find them the more satisfying images aesthetically, artists adhering to the neo-Coptic style regard many of the popularly preferred images as banale, sentimental, gaudy, cheap — and the often glaring clashes of styles as witnesses to a lack of artistic discrimination.[27] But not only do they find the popular images aesthetically inadequate, they can even hold the opinion

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object which in reference to the Church, is part of the New, redeemed, Creation" (Malaty 1991: 76).

[27] The lively *pot-pourri* of styles might be taken as symptomatic of the free and uncomplicated relationship which Copts usually have to images.

that the worst specimens are not worthy for use in religious veneration; in short, aesthetical norms are given *religious* values.

Aesthetical norms are an interesting topic for the historian of religions. The experience of beauty is variously estimated in religion. In Christianity there has been a markedly ambivalent attitude to it; beauty has been regarded as a revelation of God but also as an illusion created by the devil. There is a long tradition in Christianity connecting beauty with the Holy World. In Eastern Orthodox Churches, there is a focus on the beauty that can be seen, for instance, in icons. From various quarters, however, there have through the centuries been warnings against the trappings of beauty. A critical stance has frequently been taken especially in Western Churches: beauty can lead away from truth, or, more conciliatorily, is only a decorative shell clothing truth; truth is inside it, or behind it, not in it. "To beautify reality" is a common Western idiom, implying, "not wanting to see reality as it truly is". Also authoritative Copts may warn against giving a religious significance to the beauty of images used in veneration.[28] However, there is no doubt that the majority of Copts experience an intimate connexion between aesthetical satisfaction and the truthfulness of the representation. The Holy World is beautiful[29]; if the image of the Holy World does not communicate this quality, it has a drawback and may not be readily embraced as a convincing representation of the Holy World.

Theoretically, the neo-Coptic images have the best of terms for being a successful means of communicating Coptic self-conceptions. They are authorized by the highest religious authorities; they have influencial positions in educational institutions; they are suggestive — their motifs and style are laden with "Copticness"; their language can be deciphered by everybody. The actual lack of broad success seems to be connected with their lack of popular aesthetic appeal. The favourable terms mentioned have not counteracted this disadvantage. Aesthetical appeal, then, is not something which one can overlook in the communication process. It is the images

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[28] E.g., Tadros Malaty, "Due to the fact that the pagan world of that time was beauty-oriented, some Fathers were hesitant not only in painting Christ, but also in proclaiming the beauty of His countenance lest it should wrongly be related to the Lord's divinity in the minds of the simple"; Matta el Meskyn, «Lorsqu'on regarde une icône, on ne doit pas s'arrêter à sa valeur artistique, ni au choix des couleurs ou à la beauté de la composition: l'icône est, en effet, bien autre chose» (El Meskyn 1991: 61).

[29] Malaty refers to St. Augustine who "praises the art of painting as an action assisted by the divine grace, as he says (Confession 10:34), 'The beautiful things transmitted through the souls of artists to their hands, come from that Beauty which is above all souls, that Beauty for which my soul sighs day and night'" (Malaty 1982: 354).

which are found to be most pleasing that will interest the great mass of users.

We are dealing with matters of taste, and taste is apt to change. The neo-Coptic images may perhaps some day be perceived as more beautiful than the European ones by the great majority of beholders. Habit plays a role in such transitions. But an aesthetical re-assessment is not solely a change of taste. It is also a change of perceptual conventions for identifying reality, which will affect the capacity of these images to represent the Holy World truthfully.

c) Pictorial vocabulary and normative religion

The images of Isaac Fanous and his pupils have obtained a footing in the Coptic Orthodox Church. They are accepted and supported by official Church authorities. Not all modern Coptic artists re-formulating Christian religious motifs with a view to the ancient Egyptian heritage have had such an acceptance; George Onsy, for instance, has not. We shall take a closer look at this artist's images, in an attempt to answer the question of why some images are officially approbated, while others are discarded.

The most striking feature of Onsy's images is their daunting combinations of Christian and ancient Egyptian motifs[30], as is demonstrated in three images[31] presenting nuclear events in the Christian story of salvation. One of the images depicts three ancient Egyptian gods paying homage to the child Jesus Christ. The scene is clearly a re-formulation of the adoration of the magi who, led by their wisdom, find the New King. (ill. 21) They present him with gifts: Horus gives him kingship, Amon gives him the function of mediator, the priestly office, and Anubis gives him suffering and death — the road to victory. Thus the scene alludes to two widely accepted ideas concerning the relationship between ancient Egyptian religion and Christianity, namely, that the deep insight of the ancient religion leads to the birth place of the new religion, and that ancient Egyptian religion has contributed to Christianity.

The second image carries pre-Christian and Christian elements a step further into a synthesis articulating a particular interpretation of the death of Christ. Christ is depicted riding on Anubis, the god for crossing the boundary between life and death. (ill. 22) The road is lined with ears of

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[30] Unlike Isaac Fanous, George Onsy does not emphasize style as an element of continuity.

[31] Published by courtesy of the artist. The images were first made known to a wider public by Otto Meinardus (Meinardus 1987a: 61–66).

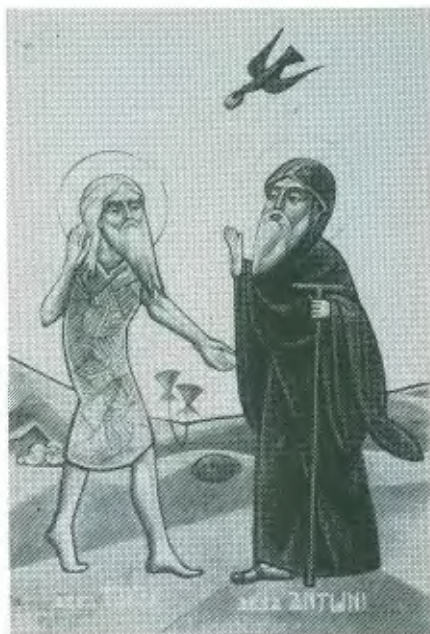Fig. 1. St. Marc in Alexandria. Isaac Fanous.

Fig. 2. St. Paul and St. Anthony. Isaac Fanous.

Fig. 3. St. Marc in Alexandria. Isaac Fanous.

Fig. 4. St. Pachom. Isaac Fanous.　　　　Fig. 5. Athanasius. Isaac Fanous.

Fig. 6. Isaac Fanous. Photo: Solveig Greve.

Fig. 7. Boudour Latif and Youssef Nassif.

Fig. 8. Isaac Fanous.

Fig. 9. Isaac Fanous.

Fig. 10. Isaac Fanous.

Fig. 11.

Fig. 12. Isaac Fanous.

Fig. 13. Horus spearing a crocodile;
5th century. Musée du Louvre.

Fig. 14. Mohamed Abla. Photo: Solveig Greve.

Fig. 15. Boudour Latif and Youssef Nassif.

Fig. 16. Fresco from the monastery of Bawit; 7th century. The Coptic Museum, Cairo. Photo: Ragnhild Bjerre Finnestad.

Fig. 17. Photo: Solveig Greve.

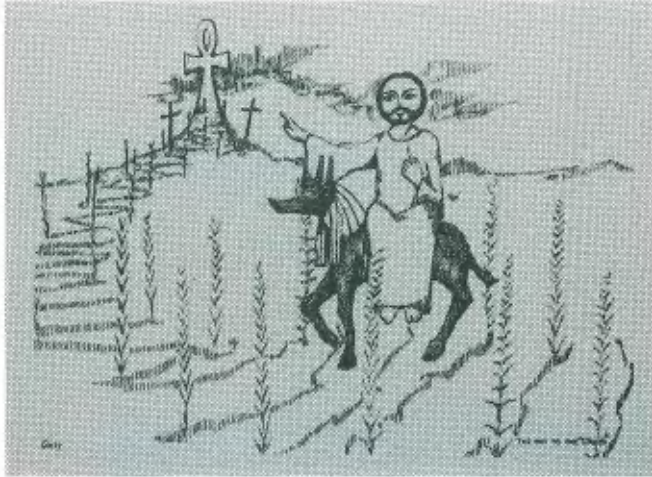Fig. 18.

Fig. 19.

Fig. 20.

Fig. 21.

Fig. 22.

Fig. 23. The Coptic Museum, Cairo.
Photo: Ragnhild Bjerre Finnestad.

Fig. 24. The Coptic Museum, Cairo.
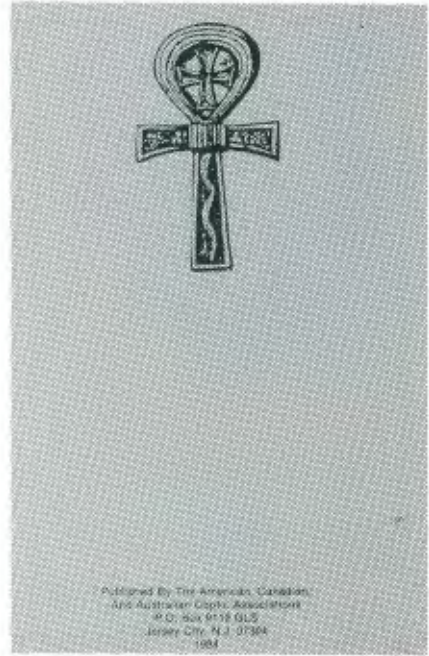Photo: Ragnhild Bjerre Finnestad.

Fig. 25. Modern periodical; frontispiece.

Fig. 26.

corn. They refer to an idea that is found both in Osirian traditions and in the New Testament, namely, that new life arises out of death. In both traditions the idea has been expressed through the symbol of sprouting grains lying buried in the earth. The road leads to Golgatha, on which is placed the ancient Egyptian sign and symbol[32] for life, *ankh*. Even on this point the artist is in agreement with traditional Coptic symbolism. The Christian cross is a symbol with two poles of meaning: life and death. Which pole is emphasized varies with form and religious context; thus a crucifix stresses the meaning of death, as does Good Friday, while a naked cross stresses resurrected life, as does Easter Sunday. The other pole of meaning is always implied; it is a matter of shifts of accents. It is also a matter of general preferences. In the Coptic Church there are few crucifixes; Coptic crosses tend to focus on the meaning of resurrected life. In line with this tendency the Copts, relatively early, took over the *ankh* as a suitable Egyptian variant of the cross, used alone, or in a combination with other cross-forms.[33] (ill. 23, 24) Today the early Coptic *ankh* -variants have had a renaissance in certain milieus (ill. 25). Not only the form of the cross, however, but the entire pictorial vocabulary used in Onsy's depiction of Christ on the road to Golgatha articulates conceptual traditions that are deeply rooted in Coptic soteriology and are in accordance with officially accepted theology.

Also the third image presents the crucifixion the "Coptic way", i.e., stressing the meaning of resurrected life. (ill. 26) It outlines the cross in the shape of the *ankh*. The Golgatha drama is conceived as a cosmic event, another conception that is firmly established in orthodox Coptic expositions of the implications of the Ressurrection.[34] But the artist expresses this orthodox cosmological soteriology through an ancient Egyptian pictorial language, by positing the ancient Egyptian *ogdoad* of pre-cosmic creative powers around the cross, in the conventional place of the closest members of family and friends of Jesus Christ. Christ himself is in their midst as the ninth member of the group. This is the place of the ancient creator god, and the position of Christ indicates his cosmogonical position — again an idea

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[32] In my terminology, a *sign* is univalent and its meaning is closed and fixed, while a *symbol* is multivalent and semantically open: new meanings are added to old ones by association and the semantic accent is labile. A given graphic figure can function both as a sign and as a symbol, i.e., have more meanings than it denotes.

[33] See, Cramer: 1955.

[34] In the Eastern Orthodox Churches there is an emphasis on the idea that the Ressurrection initiates a transfiguration of the whole work of creation.

in agreement with traditional Christology.[35] Christ's face is drawn as a white circle, eliminating the individual, human features of the saviour and, striking another connection with Egyptian cosmogony, the face suggests the sun disk rising on the hill; this is the ancient symbol of the solar creator having vanquished the power of chaos.[36] Through these connoted meanings, ressurrection is anticipated; the crucifixion scene is drawn in a way which connects it with the victoriously coming out of death.

In these three images, ancient Egyptian motifs do not merely exhibit a view on the roots of Coptic religious thought, and explicate the contribution of the ancient Egyptians to Christian theology, but even expose central points of Coptic dogma. Onsy keeps to accepted evaluations of pre-Christian symbols. Nevertheless, his images are commonly regarded as being too extreme; they create uneasiness. What is the reason for this reaction? The question is complex and can be approached from various angles. There is the immediate explanation of the role played by habit. It is not unreasonable to assume that the reaction is conditioned to some extent by the almost canonical status that particular ways of depicting these sacred events have received through the years. The historical framework given to the events presumably helps cement the accepted formal treatment; the events are believed to have actually happened, not only figuratively, and this seems to imply that one should not depict them "as one wishes". But in addition to these answers, I want to take two further circumstances into account. The one has to do with the characteristic properties of pictorial language in general; the other has to do with the functions of images in religion.

Differences and similarities between verbal and pictorial language have long been the object of lively discussion. I want to extract from this discussion some insights concerning our issue. Pictorial language has its shortcomings and its strength. On the one hand, it cannot match the ability of verbal language to make clear, precise, stringent statements; explicity is not the *forte* of pictorial language. Nor does it present its message in a step-by-step argumentive way and thus cannot be used for discursive expositions. It should be added that without the support of verbal texts, and detached from the governing contexts of established usage, images cannot

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[35] John 1,3.

[36] In various parts of the Roman Empire there are early instances of a transfer of sun symbolism to Christ, a famous pictorial example is the 3rd century mosaic in the mortuary chapel found underneath the church of St. Peter in the Vatican, which presents Christ as *Sol Salutis*.

be used as carriers of intended messages. Left to itself, the image can mean anything.

On the other hand, pictorial language has great connotative power. Images can associate a conglomerate of meanings in addition to the primary ones; their contents of meaning are labile and expanding. Images can easily connote meanings that are not intended. Words can also connote a conglomerate of meanings. But the capacity of words to make explicit statements has the consequence that they are given tasks in religion which images cannot perform. For dogmatic expositions, words are chosen; they can define contents of belief clearly, sharply, unambiguously. Confronted with this kind of message pictorial language has both its obvious limitations and its dangerous sides in the eyes of the guardians of religious doctrines. There are certain areas of Christian dogma that simply cannot be satisfactorily formulated in pictorial language; for example, Christian artists have always had difficulty visualizing basic doctrines like those of the Trinity[37] and the two natures of Christ. George Onsy steps into these sensitive areas of Christian thought. He has put before the eyes of the beholder not only the figure of Christ, but even the forms of alien gods; they are *there,* together with Christ, in the most sacred areas of dogmatic imagination. The highly suggestive constellations of iconographical forms associate strongly with ancient Egyptian religion, and the numerous connotations running in this direction create a fear that the religious messages of the images do not intend to remain orthodox. In actual fact, the meanings generated through his choice and composition of forms may be difficult to control, because the images are not beheld in institutional contexts.

Added to this, there is the powerful representational power of images to be considered. In religious usage, images of holy persons represent a *presence*, and this function makes images in religion into something more than "mere images", and makes their forms into something more than "mere formalities". It should be remembered that the religious significance of beholding images of the Holy World does not primarily lie in identifying signs and reading a message, but in the fact that it is a *vision* of the Holy World. In this vision, a fusion between reference and referee can take place — and is in the context of veneration "programmed" to take place. In visual expressions generally, the distance between reference and referee can be small, but it is especially close in veneration, where beholding the person depicted is meant to be an act of communication. The representation can be experienced as live presence. An intense emotional appeal to the holy per-

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[37] See Grabar 1969: 122–146.

son depicted may trigger off the paradoxical experience that the image is "alive": its eyes, or its hand, or its mouth move, the image bleeds, sweats.[38] This is common knowledge among people who are accustomed from childhood to appeal to saints through icons. Even if the images of Onsy are not icons in this sense, their themes and motifs automatically connect them with images that are credited with the power to evoke the presence of the holy persons depicted. This function of pictorial representation in religious veneration makes the mere act of seeing the anthropomorphic representations of the ancient gods surrounding Christ into a heavily significant act — bordering on a verification of their presence. Even if no Copt "believes in" them, the pictorial suggestion of their having existence on a par with Christ is so strong that it provokes a negative reaction. The orthodox believer (i.e., the majority of Copts) feels called upon to take a stand against the suggestion. The images of the school of Isaac Fanous content themselves with alluding to the pre-Christian gods obliquely, and never through anthropomorphic representations. Take for instance the image of the Flight into Egypt as painted by Stéphane René, a pupil of Fanous.[39] It contains a representation of Thot, which the artist interprets as the principle of reason and equates with Logos. But the form of the god is theriomorphical; he is depicted as the ibis, and rather small, having a normal bird size, not the exaggerated ones that the ibis may have in ancient Egyptian images of Thot. Moreover, the artist avoids repeating the ancient conventional shape of the ibis; his bird is reshaped. It strikes no associations with an alien god. There is no doubt about who are the holy persons present in the image. The artist explains in his commentary to the image that he has depicted Thot flapping his wings for joy at the sight of "God, the Only One, in Egypt".[40] Thus he tries verbally to fend off the possibility that the bird might connote non-Christian contents of belief and suggest an iconic presence that challenges the monotheism of Christianity.

Closing Remarks

Despite their important position in religious praxis and reflection, images have generally been disregarded by historians of religions. This negligence is regrettable. When the images are left out, a valuable source of informa-

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[38] Meinardus 1970: 269–279. When asked, people will readily give examples.

[39] The image is published in René 1991: 28.

[40] "D'Égypte j'ai appelé mon fils". René 1991: 29.

tion emphasizing or complementing the information given by verbal sources is overlooked. Especially when studying a religion in which images are central, as is the case with Coptic Christianity, iconographical traditions and image usages should be included as a methodological matter of course.

The material we have studied offers various kinds of information. For closer study we have singled out information concerning the construction of Coptic identity. Regarded from this point of view, the images guide our attention to a selection of Coptic self-conceptions of particular importance for this identity. The images also make us aware of its composite character. The Copts are a group of people who belong both to oriental Egypt and to global Christianity. This duality is reflected in our images. Moreover, our material witnesses the attempt at joining these two aspects of Coptic identity. As Egyptians, the Copts define themselves as the rightful heirs of a revered territory and a glorious culture; as Christians, they define themselves as one of the oldest and most influential of the Churches — precisely in their capacity of being Egyptians. The deep sense of belonging to the land and history of Egypt is the pivot of both self-conceptions. These are not sharply separated, but are major components of a Coptic identity that fluctuates between exclusiveness and universality. Finally, our material reflects some of the theological dilemmas of this encompassing identity and gives a hint as to the heavy demands made on the artists who try to express it through their pictorial art. Their attempt is a project that requires attentive and careful maneuvring through a veritable field of stumbling iconographical blocks.

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