Habib Jirjis: Reformer of Religious Education in the Coptic Orthodox Church

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ABSTRACT

In the ancient history of Christianity, the Coptic Orthodox Church protected against heresy and preserved the essential doctrines of the Christian faith. Then, as if being buried under the very sands of Egypt and suffering under various and numerous persecutions and occupations, the Church struggled to regain its earlier relevancy for over 1000 years. The Church may not have survived in its present resurrected state if it were not for the scholarly work and inspired leadership of a single layperson. This paper examines the life, writings, sermons and vision of Habib Jirjis as he sought to drag his church—sometimes protesting, sometimes acquiescing and somewhat hesitant—into the twentieth century through educational and structural reform.

Habib Girgis’ (Jirjis) struggle for reform was not always accepted and occasionally ended in an apparent deadlock... But the spirit of Habib Girgis (Jirjis) was beyond defeat, despair, or even death. He was the champion of faith, hope and renaissance. He dreamed of a better future and taught us how to dream with him.”

--Saad Michael Saad

Introduction

Modern reform in the Coptic Church began with Pope Cyril IV in the middle of the nineteenth century. Paul Sedra, a scholar into nineteenth century Copts states that, “Cyril’s accession to the Patriarchal seat in 1854 would prove a milestone in the history of the Coptic Orthodox Church and … the history of Egyptian education.”1 Cyril set the foundation for modern reform and education was key to its success. According to Sedra, “Schools generally were an integral part of the program of reform with which Cyril sought to ‘revive’ Church and community, and thereby fashion a modern Coptic political identity.”2

Cyril IV foresaw the importance of publishing as a means of disseminating knowledge, and so he purchased from Austria the first non-governmental press. Upon the arrival of the press at the train station, he requested a great celebration and procession to take place; hence, clergy and deacons led the press from the train station to the Patriarchate. Cyril said that if he were present in Cairo at the time he would have danced in front of it as David the prophet danced before the Ark of the Covenant.3 Such was his conviction that this printing press could transform the lives of his parishioners. He considered literacy as a vital part of his educational reform. Notwithstanding all of the determinations of Cyril to prove to his people the importance of ‘modern education’ to maintain their Coptic identity and advance their cause, he was not successful during his papacy in convincing them.4

2 Ibid. 106
3 Ibid. 112
4 Ibid. 127
The Times of Archdeacon Habib Jirjis

Archdeacon Habib Jirjis (1876-1951) was born at a time of great darkness, ignorance, and apathy in the life of the Coptic Orthodox Church. It was a period of turmoil and great struggle both inwardly and externally. Within the Church, conflict existed between the hierarchy and the laity of the Church and, externally, Protestant and Catholic missionaries from Britain and the United States challenged the intellectual and demographic hold of the Coptic Orthodox Church. There were also the pressures brought upon the Church from the rulers of the land. These pressures came from Sā īd and ‘Abbās II, into this Egypt, Jirjis was born.

An Abridged Biography of Habib Jirjis

Habib Jirjis was born in 1876 in Cairo. Jirjis’ father passed away in 1882 when Jirjis was six years old. His mother continued the mission of raising him along with his other siblings in a Christian manner and enrolled him in the Great Coptic School at which he excelled.

Jirjis was among the first to join the Theological College since its re-establishment in 1893 when Yusuf Bek Manqarius was the dean. Being at the top of his class, Jirjis was chosen to teach at the Theological College while in his final year as a student, because there were few teachers to teach theology. He graduated in 1898, and was appointed to teach full time on 17 March 1898 that same year; later, he became the dean of the College in 1918. He was an archdeacon but not ordained as a priest. Pope Cyril V trusted him and appointed him as his personal deacon and disciple. He also worked closely with Pope Yuannis XIX (1928-42), Pope Macarius III (1942-45), and Pope Yusab II (1946-56).

As chief editor, Jirjis published The Vine (al-Karma)—a religious, moral, and historical journal. The first issue was published on 11 September 1904, and he went on to publish more than thirty religious, theological, educational, and historical books along with many sermons and educational studies. In 1900, after Cyril V issued a papal decree in 1899 concerning religious education, he established Sunday Schools as a formal type of religious education for the first time in Egypt. He was chosen to be a member of the General Sunday School Committee, established in 1918, and in 1927 he was chosen as the general secretary of the same committee. Elected several times with the highest number of votes to the Lay Council (Majlis Milli), Jirjis was nominated to the papacy after the repose of Cyril V in 1928. During that time he was also nominated as bishop. However, the Church was not yet ready for such a reformer. He was among the most important participants in the first conference for Sunday School teachers in 1941 during the papacy of Pope Yusab II. He also participated in the second such conference in 1949. Both Copts and Muslims were deeply affected by his death on Wednesday evening 21 August 1951. The Church had lost one of its most revered sons—an eloquent teacher, a visionary, an educational pioneer, a reformer, and a loyal servant of the Coptic Orthodox Church.

Habib Jirjis’ Educational Reform

In the introduction of one of his most influential books, The Practical Means Toward Coptic Reform: Hopes and Dreams (1942), Jirjis begins to contemplate on a summer’s night before dawn, feeling that he could fly with his spirit over the whole See of Saint Mark and

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could hear everything being said without anyone seeing him. He flew in an instant from Alexandria to Sudan in the south and from there to Ethiopia and Eritrea. During his journey he passed by every diocese, monastery, church, school, society, Coptic family, and overall could see everything concerning his Coptic nation. He then says with deep sadness, “Immediately I envisioned how great and glorious my Church was in previous eras. How the Coptic people were strong in their faith, determination and knowledge. Then I encountered where we were, and what we have become. So I became sad, in pain and my hurt increased, since I spent all of my past life in suffering, and struggled as much as I was capable of, to do what was required for the good of my people.”

Along his journey he listened to what both the pastors and congregation were saying until he said, “I did not find one among those of whom I came close to who was accepting of the general state of the Church, but all of them desired and wanted their affairs to be reformed and to move along with wide steps forward towards advancement and perfection.” Jirjis was overjoyed to hear everyone calling for reform and desiring a unified Church led by a unified spirit and having one faith. He expressed this joy by saying, “I was happy to see these feelings, for it is the first sign of success towards reform. The life of the nations is built upon their religious and social desires and feelings and the desires of men is the measure of their abilities. Who are the reformers other than creative men to their desires, replacing one desire for another.”

One of the main obstacles to reform that Jirjis speaks about is the alienation that was present between the clergy and the laity. There was a great misunderstanding between the lay educated reformers and the uneducated clergy. The question was: If the religious leaders are weak, then how can they lead those who were more advanced in education and knowledge? This caused the reform movement to freeze due to misunderstanding between the two sides. The lay reformers saw that the clergy did not have the skills for reform, and the clergy believed that the congregation encroached upon their rights and their priestly authority, which should be respected and appreciated.

Jirjis took a three-pronged approach to his educational reform. He concentrated on establishing and developing the Sunday School movement, producing literature and improving theological education. Through this philosophy, Jirjis could cater for the educational needs of all Copts and guide them to regaining their identity as Egyptian Christians. He not only gave importance to the religious education of children, but also youth, adult education and the education of those in remote villages in the countryside. It was an educational philosophy that did not differentiate between the various social structures but in fact encompassed all. A report around 1953 from the General Sunday School Committee sent to the Majlis Milli (Lay Clerical Council) states that, “It is not a secret to the men of reform in the Church the effect of Sunday Schools on Coptic society. Its efforts have covered young and old and its teachings have reached homes and schools, it has covered in its care

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6 Habib Jirjis, The Practical Means Towards Coptic Reform: Hopes and Dreams, 1st ed. (Cairo: Self-Published, 1942). 1
7 Ibid. 2
8 Ibid. 2
9 Ibid. 24
10 Magdi Guirguis and Nelly van Doorn-Harder, The emergence of the modern Coptic papacy : the Egyptian Church and its leadership from the Ottoman period to the present, The popes of Egypt (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2011). 58
the worker, the farmer, the student and the employees in the cities and villages of Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia.”

It was not only education however but also Coptic involvement in the political movement for independence that also played an important role in reclaiming that Coptic identity. Nelly Van Doorn-Harder clarifies this by stating that, “Joining the nationalist movement represented a new stage in the development of a modern Coptic self-image – one that saw them reclaim their identity as specifically Egyptian Christians, the cultural descendants of the pharaohs.” Jirjis formed his reform policy with the view that the forces surrounding the Coptic people could lead to the loss of the Coptic identity. These forces whether it were the government or the Muslims, or the missionaries, or the British occupation or even the internal tension within the Church were all tearing away at the very fabric of the principal meaning of being Coptic.

**The Village as a Centre for Educational Reform**

I want to concentrate on one aspect of Jirjis’ educational reform and that is his work in the villages in particular in Upper Egypt. I will discuss other aspects of Jirjis’ reform in my presentation at the REA Annual Meeting in Atlanta. At the turn of the twentieth century Jirjis had seen the attempts of Western missionaries to convert the Copts to Catholicism and Protestantism. His fear that this rich tradition would disappear in Egypt led him in 1900 to travel to Upper Egypt and give a series of lectures. The churches he chose for the lectures were in the dioceses of Minya, Assiut, and Qina, where he spoke on comparative theology and gave a defense of Orthodox doctrine. These lectures were later published in June 1948 in a book titled, *The Orthodox Rock*. In the preface Jirjis states, “The apostles and martyrs presented the deposit of faith intact and hence our fathers and grandfathers received it and protected it whilst shedding their blood. They accepted torture and death, wishing for this faith to reach us without blemish and without decrease or increase”

Hidden underneath St. Mark Cathedral in Cairo are the Patriarchal archives where, by mere chance, I stumbled upon a treasure trove of documents concerning the work of Habib Jirjis, over five thousand pages! Amongst these documents is a booklet titled, *General Visitations to the Village*. This document written near then end of Jirjis’ life in 1948 shows his prowess and meticulousness in caring for every soul in the village. It shows how Jirjis’ educational reform could transform the village, enlighten the family and fortify it from external forces. The village in Jirjis’ time was central to life in Upper Egypt, it was only decades later that many Egyptians moved from village life into the cities as modernisation grew rapidly. Jirjis felt that the village people were in need to be rescued and it needed to be done promptly.

Jirjis had an extremely well prepared approach to this ministry. He expected the trained Sunday School teacher coming from the city to visit each household in the village and to deliver the message of the Church in the following manner. The teacher is to:

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11 Sept. 1953?, 4-1/30 Project For Organising Sunday School Grants
A report from the Higher Sunday School Committee presented to the Lay Clerical Council
12 Guirguis and Doorn-Harder, *The emergence of the modern Coptic papacy: the Egyptian Church and its leadership from the Ottoman period to the present*, 58
14 ———, *General Visitations to the Village*, 2nd. ed. (Cairo: The Coptic Orthodox Church Higher Committee for Sunday Schools, 1948). 3
1. Plan and pray.
2. Discuss the situation of the village with colleagues and invite them to join him to visit the village during the summer.
3. They are to receive the blessing of the bishop and parish priest before beginning and receive a letter of blessing.
4. Contact The Higher Committee of Sunday Schools to seek their advice and gain their support and benefit from their publications and experience.
5. Attend a daily nightly meeting for one week in the ministry centre in order to pray and seek God’s guidance, to study the methods of visiting households and to prepare the ministry timetables.
6. Fast and pray to know the seriousness of the work he is about to embark upon and to learn chapters of the Scriptures, most importantly the Sermon on the Mount, the ten commandments, some psalms, parts of the prayers of the saints, sections from St James epistle, the first epistle of St. John. He should also read the four gospels and the Acts of the apostles before beginning his ministry. This is in order to benefit those who will listen to him with the teachings of Christ and His disciples.
7. He should have purchased the census book for the governorate or city in order to know how many families must be visited. Also a map of the region in order to know the location of the villages and what transport is available. He must also have the necessary forms to fill in the information of each family and prepare the religious pictures to be given out.\footnote{Ibid. 4-6}

Jirjis wanted to make sure that no household missed out on receiving religious instruction and felt that it was his duty to be as comprehensive as possible. Each two teachers would take one transport line and follow it so that no one would be missed. The whole region would be mapped out carefully. He expected each group of two teachers to visit between 400 and 500 persons each week from Sunday till Thursday. Each diocese is divided up into regions and hence it could be calculated how many weeks are necessary to finish the project of visiting each household. A few people would remain in the Ministry Centre to receive the forms and organize them, study them and prepare the necessities for the various groups of teachers and search for solutions to problems that appear during the visitations. The teachers would preach every evening in the village and get to know one of the Coptic families that would guide him to the rest of the families. The teachers are not to differentiate between the poor and those who are better off. The teacher is to be stringent in delivering the message of the Church to every household no matter how big or small. Religious education was to be delivered free without prejudice to every soul.\footnote{Ibid. 9-10}

Jirjis’ philosophy was to engage the whole village in discussion, women would meet at the water well and discuss a new idea they heard from the teacher and the men would gather at the local coffee shop and do likewise. The youth were encouraged to read and study, they would come to the youth meeting and feel they are ready to fully integrate into the community. Jirjis’ idea was to create a buzz in the village that would ignite a sense of awe and wonder. The villagers would begin to unpack the stories of the Gospels and relate them to their own lives and situations. This in turn gave meaning to their own struggles and inspired them to look within for the meanings of their lives and to think of what is beyond.
During the visit the teacher would teach the family a hymn to show the love of Christ, pray a simple prayer and conclude with the Lord’s prayer. He would read a chapter from the gospels and explain it in a clear simple language and give practical examples suitable to the village environment. The family is to be asked if they own a Bible and read it. If not then one of the gospels is to be given to them to read every night. The teacher is not to repeat the same lesson twice, so that when members of the village meet they can discuss and share what they have learnt. The importance of the form to be filled out is explained along with attendance at Church, taking their children to Sunday School, fasting and partaking of Holy Communion. The teacher invites the family to the nightly meeting before departing. The teacher also gathers all the youth in the village for a youth meeting, since its among the youth that will come the future Sunday School teachers.

As dean of the Theological Seminary in Cairo from 1918 till his death in 1951 Jirjis fought hard to see this institution reach international standards. He believed that no person should be ordained into the priesthood or serve in the church as a teacher without completing a degree at the seminary. Nelly van Doorn-Harder tells us that, “Graduates of the Seminary had a profound influence on the life of the Coptic Church and community. Not only the educational level of priests improved, but due to the tireless efforts of Habib Girgis (Jirjis), who is considered one of the most influential theologians and preachers of his time, its alumni also became involved in teaching youth and children.”

This was the vision of Jirjis – to reform his community and to form a distinct Coptic identity through religious education for young and old. He also lobbied to introduce Christian education in public schools and urged churches to instruct their young people. Habib Jirjis was indeed a light in the midst of darkness. As one of Jirjis’ famous students, the late Pope Shenouda III spoke of him saying, “Our teacher Archdeacon Habib Jirjis, pioneer of religious education in our generation, started his life in an age which was almost void of religious education and knowledge… The earth was without form, and void, and darkness was on the face of the deep, as the Book of Genesis describes. Then, God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light. And the light was Habib Jirjis.”

Bibliography


17 Ibid. 11-16

18 Guirguis and Doorn-Harder, *The emergence of the modern Coptic papacy : the Egyptian Church and its leadership from the Ottoman period to the present*. 96

19 Ibid. 96