

Cairo's Mugamma' al-Adyan Complex: A Message of Peace for Egyptians and Beyond

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Despite media reports of division, a walk in Cairo reveals how Egypt's history of interfaith coexistence is still alive.

The sayings “religion is for God and the nation is for all,” and “God created us to worship Him and cultivate the land” are ones we hear often in Egypt and other Middle Eastern countries. These statements are meant to indicate that the nation belongs to all without exception, whether Muslim, Christian, or Jewish, and that religion is the worship of God. However, it remains a question whether this expression applies to reality.

In approaching the question of Egypt's interfaith history and culture, I did not want to present a political, religious, historical narrative. I am not a religious scholar, nor a specialist in history. If the discussion turns into politics, it will lose its simple significance. Rather, I want to simply and honestly present an international audience with a living picture of Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Egypt, one too often hidden by reports of tensions and a loss of Egypt's historical richness, still visible in the country's architecture and great cultural figures.

In reality, Egyptians—young and old—live side by side at schools, universities, and work, in many cases without discrimination; if you wander in the streets of Egypt you will not be able to differentiate between those who practice different religions: everyone is Egyptian.

As a child, I used to go to buy some sweets and drinks from a shop owner. I did not know he was Coptic, and it did not make any difference to me when I found out. My Coptic friend helped me get my first professional training after I graduated from university, and religion did not constitute any kind of barriers to our relationship. Once, as I walked by his house at the time of the Ramadan Iftar, he came out to encourage me to eat food at his family's house. This is the image of a shared daily life of religious syncretism that can go missing from discussions on religion in Egypt.

Egypt: Cradle of Religions and Cultures

Egypt is known by Egyptians as “the mother of the world,” as one of the world's oldest nations and a history

stretching back to the beginning of recorded history. The country provides a remarkable syncretism and features in the very fabric of Abrahamic religions; after all, Moses was born and raised in Egypt, and Jesus's visit to Egypt is considered a momentous event in Egyptian history, traces of which are still present to this day in all the places he graced.

Finally, Islam entered Egypt in the seventh century during the Arab conquests, and Islamic leaders declared that they would protect and care for Jews and Copts as they would Muslims. Thus, Egypt unites three different revealed religions which all urged people to cooperate for the greater good, to cultivate the earth, and to spread tolerance and peace.

Historically, Egypt has consisted of one people assembled from among these three religions. Egypt's Christians make up approximately 10 percent of the country's total population, split between Catholics and Copts, or Egypt's Orthodox. It is notable that Egypt's Christians live across the country's social sectors, from garbage collectors to intensely wealthy families. Most notable is the billionaire businessman Naguib Sawiris and his family—one of the richest families in the Middle East. In addition, Christians like ambassador Nabila Makram, Minister of Immigration and Egyptian Expatriate Affairs, are also part of the political fabric of the country, serving as ministers and officials in different agencies of the state and the Parliament.

Jewish citizens numbered 80,000 in the first half of the twentieth century, a period now considered the golden age of Judaism in Egypt (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/03/27/what-happened-to-the-jews-of-egypt/>). However, the mass emigration of Jews from Arab lands to Israel in the mid-twentieth century has led to a great reduction in this number; now only a handful of Jewish citizens still live in Egypt, most of whom are over the age of 60.

Nonetheless, this handful remains present in society, occasionally appearing in newspapers and the media where they talk about their old memories of Egypt and the state of the country's Jewish community today. ()

The country's architecture provides an even clearer picture of syncretism. Touring the historical areas of Egypt, a visitor might be surprised by how they contain numerous sacred sites of all three religions. There are dozens of well known Islamic sites (), the most famous of which are the Great Mosque of Muhammad Ali Pasha, the mosque of Amr ibn al-As, Al-Azhar mosque, and Al-Muizz li-Din Allah al-Fatimi street and its ancient Islamic artifacts. Additionally, there are twenty-two Coptic sites, the most prominent being the Abu Mena complex in the Western Desert, the monasteries of the Syrians and of Saint Pishoy, the monastery of Saint Demiana, the Church of the Virgin Mary and the Martyr Abanoub, and Saint Catherine's monastery.

This is in addition to eleven synagogues, such as the synagogue of Eliyahu Hanavi, the Ashkenazi Jew, Ben Ezra, the Sha'ar Hashamayim synagogue, and Moses ben Maimon (Maimonides). And despite the small numbers of Jewish citizens, the Egyptian government has recently made efforts to restore the Jewish cemetery in El Basatin and the Eliyahu Hanavi synagogue in the Alexandria governate. It is no secret that the matter saw a lot of debate (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/23/world/middleeast/a-bittersweet-homecoming-for-egypts-jews.html>) on social media, and some tried to politicize the issue, making out interest in this authentic Egyptian heritage to be political action. This is what a number of young, educated, conscious Egyptians confronted by blocking the road, as they were certain that this Jewish heritage is of Egyptian origin, and its restoration is a new win for Egypt that suits the country's historical position.

Even so, the notion of separating Egyptians by "Muslim, Christian, Jewish" had not been a significant topic of popular discussion or even journalism, especially during the period of the early twentieth century. With Jewish Egyptian artists, the word "Jewish" did not precede their names in any newspaper or even on tongues of most Egyptian citizens, regardless of class or religion. I personally did not know that the famous Egyptian actress Leila Mourad was Jewish until recently, or the religion of other great Jewish Egyptian figures who influenced Egyptian cultural, artistic, and economic life during this period.

Even today, these Egyptians are part of the fabric of national heritage: Yaqub Sanu—who played a critical role in the development of Egyptian theatre in the 1870s—director Togo Mizrahi, the artist Nagwa Salem, the celebrated dancer Katy who rose to fame appearing in films aside Egyptian star Ismail Yassine, or the famous composer Dawood Hosni, now buried in the Jewish cemetery in El Basatin in Cairo.

Similarly, I only realized the religious background of the notable actor Youssef Dawoud—most prominently appearing in the television series *Wanees's Days*—after reading about his death. It is likewise the case with the famous actor Hany Ramzy; most younger Egyptians are likely unaware that he was Coptic. Even the religion of the great Egyptian artist Naguib el-Rihani, nicknamed “the father of Egyptian comedy,” was not widely known until a few years ago, despite his death more than half a century ago. Then there is Sir Magdi Yacoub, the world-famous surgeon—who founded a philanthropic organization supporting heart surgery in Egypt and was responsible, along with his medical team, for saving thousands of Egyptian children from dying of heart diseases. Egyptian social media strongly attacked one bigot after he claimed that (<https://egyptindependent.com/egypts-dar-al-iftaa-slams-controversy-over-magdi-yacoubs-religious-beliefs/>) Yacoub would not enter heaven because of his Christian faith—especially as the remarks were presumed to have an unstated political motive.

Aside from cultural contributions, the prominent business families of Egypt have also been historically pluralistic: the Sawiris family is Coptic, while Jewish businessmen—such as the Mosseri family, responsible for several notable movie theaters and hotels in Alexandria—made significant contributions to the national economy. The brands Cicurel, Sednaoui, Rivoli, Benzion, Omar Effendi, and Hannaux, whose store signs are still visible despite the businesses' liquidation, were exceedingly common in Egyptian households. No one refrained from buying them on account of their owners being Jewish. Everyone worked, played sports, created art, and participated in the economy side by side without any sensitivity or a single dispute.

The Heart of Modern Tensions

Unfortunately, his image of coexistence does contrast with the periodic (<https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2012/0216/After-surviving-sectarian-mob-Egyptian-Christians-expelled-from-village>) contemporary reporting of sectarian strife between Muslims and Copts, with some villages in the south of the country described as “on edge.” But it is here that the real source of tensions arises: the presence of rumors, misinformation, and ignorance that can transform simple personal disputes into violence within communities of Copts and Muslims.

The strangest incident occurred on July 2016, when a citizen began to build on a piece of his land. A rumor arose stating that he wanted to build a church there—resulting in huge altercations and the burning of four homes of uninvolved citizens. It is strange that this incident happened after one of the service buildings belonging to the Church of the Virgin Mary in the village of Al Bayda to the west of Alexandria was subject to attacks by protestors because of another unplayable rumor about the intention to convert the building into another church.

Simple personal disputes can become inflammatory with the help of these mysterious rumors, disputes, and incidents of violence. Ignorance and illiteracy (around 25 percent (<https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/77697/Illiteracy-in-Egypt-decreases-but-number-still-high-official>) of Egypt's population is illiterate) are therefore likely to blame for visible tensions, along with the absence of a culture of dialogue and tolerance. More dangerous still are the economic conditions that exhaust many Egyptians, victims to false information or fake news, sparking the fires of and redirecting an extant anger.

The Symbolism of Mugamma' al-Adyan

Instead, Egyptians should learn history from the spaces in Egypt that continue to evoke the sense of harmony between religions. Several days ago, I decided to pay a visit to “the Mugamma’ al-Adyan” in the older part of Cairo, at the Mar Girgis stop. After exiting the station, I found myself on a closed off street with some pedestrians, some sitting on the sidewalk as if on a picnic, eating some light food and chatting. With a friend, I began to explore the area. We started our tour by visiting St. George’s alley, a small alley that links a number of Coptic churches and a Jewish synagogue. Even in this alley, entirely filled with Coptic Egyptians, I caught sight of Islamic books like *The Fatimid Caliphate in Egypt*, *The Umayyad Caliphate*, and books on Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi and other great figures in Islam, much to my surprise.

The tour continued with Umm Kulthum’s voice emanating into the alley, and my friend and I went in to visit the Hanging Church, after which we headed to the Church of St. George’s and then to the Church of Abu Serga. My friend, wearing a hijab, did not encounter any stares or whispers as we went into most of the churches in the Mugamma’ al-Adyan—a response that pleasantly surprised me. I did not even hear anyone direct any comments or questions at us as a young Muslim man and woman about our desire to enter the churches or walk around inside them.

Aside from the historical and religious information we discovered, my happiness grew in seeing Muslims visiting the complex and touring its different religious landmarks, with the goal of getting to know the historical sites of their nation, happy and taking turns to take pictures. We also wanted to head to the Ben Ezra synagogue, named for Ezra the Scribe, one of the greatest Jewish priests, but Coronavirus prevented us as they informed us the synagogue had been closed for eight months in response to the pandemic.

At a distance of less than 50 meters from the synagogue is the mosque of Amr ibn al-As, one of Cairo’s oldest mosques and quite possibly the first Islamic structure in Egypt. Unfortunately, though the mosque is open for performing the five prayers, the guard at the gate informed us that walking around inside to see the famous historical features is also forbidden because of coronavirus.

Even so, while walking next to the synagogue, it reminded me of the statements (<https://egyptianstreets.com/2017/07/19/only-in-egypt-jewish-mother-catholic-father-and-two-muslim-daughters-under-one-roof/>) of media personality Magda Haroun, head of the Jewish community in Egypt, who said “I was married to a Muslim man when I had my two Muslim daughters, after that my second marriage was to a Catholic man.” In her family, “they celebrate all the religious occasions. We celebrate the Jewish occasions with my mother. We attend prayer at church on December 24, Christmas Eve, and we celebrate Ramadan as well.” Thus, we see at least one Egyptian household combining all three religions together.

Like much of Egypt’s history, “the Mugamma’ al-Adyan” is an ancient archaeological complex that has been able to unite structures for all three religions in peace and tolerance for hundreds of years. It exists as a testament to Egypt’s shared religious past rather than a modern structure constructed to bring together sacred religious sites for tourism purposes ⁰. Rather, I think the complex can be considered a symbol for today’s Egypt: that God created the three religions to spread tolerance and love without differentiation, and it is up to us to live together like these sacred sites. Though this complex sadly does not get the local or international media coverage it deserves, it should be taken as a symbol for peace; both for Egyptians, and for the wider world. ❖

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