Tolba, Nasser; Wermke, Michael

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Nasser Tolba/Michael Wermke

Abstract

The current study examines how Coptic religious revival shaped religious education. It uses historical method to gather and analyze both primary and secondary sources. Key results include the rise of the Sunday School Movement and the reform of theological education. The study also finds that religious education became integrated into formal school environments. Coptic Christian education underwent a change by adopting a parallel approach to revival. This was guided by a strong doctrinal fidelity, which preserved a unique Coptic identity and resisted foreign proselytization. At the same time, the Church developed divergent paths through strategically adapting Western educational models. Finally, internal revival dynamics also led to different divergent spiritual and pedagogical emphases resulting in a heterogeneous landscape of religious education

Keywords: religious education, religious revival, Coptic Orthodox Church, Sunday school movement, Western missionaries, modernization.

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Zusammenfassung

In der vorliegenden Studie wird der Einfluss der koptisch-christlichen Erneuerungsbewegung auf den Religionsunterricht untersucht. Auf der Grundlage historischer Analysen von Primär- und Sekundärquellen zeigt sich, dass die Bewegung den Aufstieg der Sonntagsschulen und eine Reform der theologischen Ausbildung bewirkte. Der Religionsunterricht wurde zunehmend in das formale Schulsystem integriert. Getragen von starker Glaubenstreue bewahrte dieses Modell die koptische Identität und wehrte Missionierungsversuche ab, während es sich zugleich strategisch an westliche Bildungsformen anpasste. Innere Erweckungsdynamiken führten zu unterschiedlichen spirituellen und pädagogischen Akzenten – insbesondere in Shubrā und Giza – und formten eine heterogene Landschaft religiöser Bildung.

Schlagwörter: Religionspädagogik, religiöse Erneuerung, koptisch-orthodoxe Kirche, Sonntagsschulbewegung, westliche Missionare, Modernisierung.

1 Introduction

Reading the history of religions reveals that temporal regeneration is inherent in human nature and autonomously manifests in moments of crisis and threats. There are also periods of dynamic change or phases of religion in transition (Cragun/Sumerau, 2020; Gärtner, 2019). Religious revival is a mechanism for this change as a diverse and complex phenomenon in modern societies. It essentially refers to a renewed interest in religion, often accompanied by increased religious adherence, reaffirming traditional values and identities, and extreme interpretations of faith. It also represents a new trend or movement that often goes against the existing mainstream or invigorates current ones (Belzen, 1998; Matthes, 1992). Religious revival thus seeks to restore commitment and attachment to the communal group, a fundamental social aspect of religious traditions (Murvar, 1975; Stolz/Novak, 2023). Almost all religions have experienced revival movements that have completely revitalized their basic principles, beliefs, and doctrinal structures, leading to a reshaping of the religious landscape (McLoughlin, 1978; Fogel, 2000).

The Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria, traditionally seen as founded by Saint Mark the Evangelist in the mid-first century, stands as one of the world's oldest surviving Christian traditions and has undergone profound revivalist transformations in the modern era (Hasan, 2003; Murqus, 2002; Reiss, 1998). The distinctive identity of the church was significantly shaped by theological differences from other branches of Christianity after the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD (Atiya, 1968; Henderson, 2005). This historical trajectory has, therefore, developed a unique Coptic character marked by strong doctrinal constancy and persistent endurance in the face of centuries of persecution, brutality, and religious conquests (Pennington, 1982).

This shared history of suffering and perseverance lends the concept of revival 'renewal' in the Coptic context, a deeper meaning, one of reassertion and continuity, rather than merely a spiritual awakening. The Coptic religious revival *al-Iḥyāʾ al-dīnī al-Qibṭī*, which began in the mid-nineteenth century and continued into the twentieth century, was characterized by deep spirituality, strengthened main church institutions, and a growing sense of collective identity (Afifi, 2001; Hasan, 2003). This resurgence of the Coptic Orthodox faith was prompted by a combination of acute internal challenges, including perceived theological illiteracy, stagnation, and corruption within the church, as well as constant external pressures, including the effective and energetic efforts of Western missions and broader socio-political transformations in Egypt (Ibrahim, 2013). The Coptic revival was largely a strategic response. Its main goal was not only internal spiritual renewal, but also the defence of Coptic identity against external proselytization and internal decline (Chaillot, 2005). As a consequence of this dynamic process, the church's position in society was strengthened and its role was transformed from a purely spiritual institution that focused solely on faith and religious issues to a significant social and political player not only within the denominational boundaries of the Coptic community but also within broader Egyptian society.

In a challenging environment, Coptic Christian education was the aim and instrument of this renewal. It had undergone a profound transformation in its scope, methodology, and accessibility to Copts. Therefore, religious education in the context of revival evolved beyond narrowed theological instruction to become a critical mechanism for cultural transmission, identity formation, and communal resilience against internal and external obstacles and pressures (Nasīm, 1995). Therefore, this conscious and deliberate shift, along with the expansion of novel methodologies in religious education, has led to a

growing awareness and a deeper need to cultivate the Coptic identity rather than passively instilling it in children's minds. This article then examines the multifaceted religious revival within the Coptic Orthodox Church, exploring its historical roots and its impact on the paths and components of religious education. The study, therefore, raises two main questions: How did religious revival impact Coptic Christian education? Moreover, what are the effects of this influence on objectives, curricula, and teachers of Coptic Christian education?

2 Conceptual Framework: Religious Revival and Modernization

Earlier theories, particularly secularization, predicted the decline of religion in modern societies as a result of modernization, which increases the complexity of society through technological advancements, institutionalization, and cultural shifts (Stolz/Tanner, 2019; Ruiter/Van Tubergen, 2010). This process, in turn, leads to laicization. Enlightenment ideas and a scientific worldview—known as 'cultural modernization'—become widely accepted. Consequently, secular options tend to replace religious ones in all societal issues. Nevertheless, recent studies have increasingly questioned these linear interpretations of religion's inevitable decline. Recent scholarship offers a different view: modernization can both challenge and stimulate religious revival (Rehman, 2023; Stolz/Gugushvili/Molteni et al., 2023). In response to critiques of linear secularization, researchers have studied revivalism in various contexts, presenting many theories and classifications about its causes and effects (Hall, 2024; Murvar, 1975; Williams, 1952; West, 2001). Major typologies include the church-sect typology, which distinguishes established churches from more protest-oriented denominations; the cult typology, which describes small, unconventional religious groups; and new religious movements (NRM), which also refers to newly formed faith groups. These sociological perspectives differ completely from the theological view of revival, which considers it as a heavenly event and an outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Paulissen, 2022). While the sociological view based on the work of Weber and Durkheim, describes revival as a shared reaction to social change that helps build social cohesion and identity. Revival often places the church at the centre of community events (Wallace, 2003).

This study argues that the Coptic religious revival is best understood through the framework developed by Stolz and Voas (2023), which identifies five main factors shaping revival in any religious institution: crisis, reaction, transition, state intervention, and composition (Figure 1). While revival does not require all five factors to be present, applying this model clarifies how the Coptic revival emerged in response to challenges of modernity and the backlash against it. Each factor, especially crisis and reaction, offers insight into why and how the Coptic community experienced renewal during the modernization period.
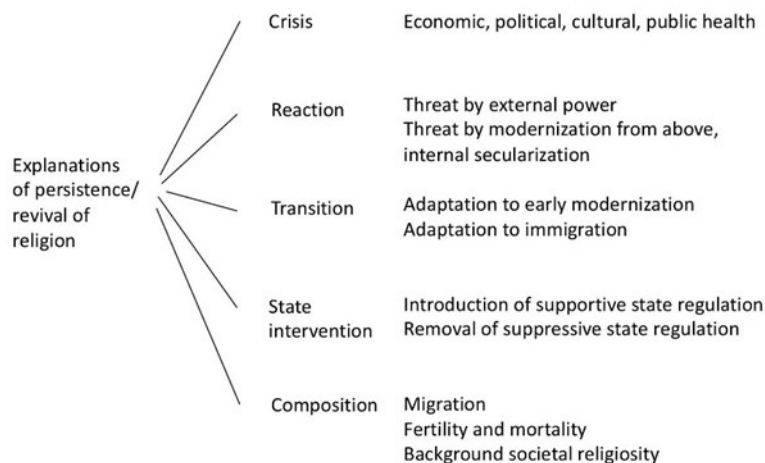
Fig. 1: Mechanisms of religious revival (Stolz/Voas, 2023, 4)

Accordingly, these five mechanisms, as outlined by Stolz and Voas (2023), serve as an effective analytical lens for studying the Coptic revival during the 19th and 20th centuries. The first mechanism involves a religious reaction to modernization, which is typically a form of cultural defence or preservation of religious and communal identity against perceived threats. The Coptic revival and subsequent educational reforms emerged in response to Western missionary activity, serving as a means of strengthening communal identity. For instance, Ḥabīb Jirjis framed Sunday schools as a defence of Orthodox identity in response to the threats posed by foreign protestant and catholic groups in Egypt.

Another mechanism is a temporary retreat in times of crisis, such as war or economic collapse. These situations create conditions where religious solutions regain relevance. For example, periods of political instability during British colonialism, as well as the arrival of foreign missionaries, constituted a crisis in the Coptic context. Attendance and membership in the Coptic Orthodox Church increased, as did belief in God and self-identification as a religious group. This crisis affected the church's educational efforts. It led to increased engagement with church education during national turmoil. The tangible growth in commitment and participation during these lessons illustrates the period's impact on church education.

Finally, state intervention through governmental policies directly or indirectly encourages religious revival. In some cases, state regulation supports, promotes, or even requires adherence to religious beliefs. For example, the state may remove obstacles to belief and practice. In the Coptic context, Muḥammad 'Alī and his dynasty supported the Coptic Church. They provided logistical and financial support. Therefore, state policies have impacted Coptic revival and then education in Coptic schools, as evident in the 1908 law that allowed Christian religious instruction in Egyptian public schools ('Abd al-Karīm, 1950). This intervention promoted the integration of religious education into all public and private school programs.

3 Method

The study employed a historical design, focusing on primary and secondary sources to examine the Coptic revival, its causes, outcomes, and impact on religious education (Morrison/Rantala, 2025; Scharg, 2021). Primary sources included archival materials (papal decrees and meetings of the General Committee for Coptic Orthodox Sunday School),

personal narratives (writings of Ḥabīb Jirjis, who was central to the educational revival), and periodicals (Sunday School Magazine from the 1940s, which offer contemporary insights into the movement's goals and challenges). Secondary sources included scholarly works (academic books and journal articles) that provide context on 19th and 20th-century Egypt, the Coptic community, and the broader religious revival.

The analysis critically examined chronology, identified key figures, and determined causes. The shift from pre-revival kuttāb to modern Sunday Schools and institutes has been traced. The analysis also explored how European pressure and missionary efforts changed Coptic education in the 19th century. Researchers critically assessed sources to address issues of representation and bias. They aimed to reflect the diverse perspectives and internal disagreements within the Coptic community. To minimize bias, they carefully evaluated sources and included voices from community members and Western scholars whenever possible.

4 Historical Overview of Coptic Christian Education in the Pre-Revival Era

Coptic Christian education is historically linked to the legacy of the Alexandrian Catechetical school[1] *Madrasat al-Iskandarīyah al-Lāhūtīyah*, the oldest institution of theological learning in early Christian times ('Ṭāāllh, 1947, 25; al-Nashār, 1995, 86). The school was initially established to educate new converts to Christianity and later developed into a theological institute (el-Souriany, 1958, 66). Shortly after the Christian population in Egypt increased, many schools attached to churches were established to teach children the fundamentals of Orthodox faith.

The historian Eusebius, in the 4th century AD, mentioned that it was customary for Christians to establish schools wherever they lived. According to Coptic scholars, religious education, its associated strategies, practical methods, and philosophical foundations witnessed successive developments throughout the extended history of Christianity in Egypt in response to the requirements of each era and the struggles faced by the Copts (el-Souriany, 1955; Nasīm, 1995). Under the persecution of the pagan Roman era and the sectarian violence of the Byzantine era, the content of religious education prepared individuals for martyrdom and entry into the kingdom of Heaven. However, after these circumstances changed and the situation regarding Christianity stabilized, people's adherence to their new religion increased. The aims and content of religious education shifted from preparation for martyrdom to conformity in the Orthodox faith, as opposed to the doctrine of the Melchites (Nasīm, 1989, 122).

In the late Middle Ages, the church unofficially adopted the Islamic Kuttāb to provide education for Coptic children. Churches in various locations in Upper and Lower Egypt ran these small educational institutions that taught both secular topics (usually simple knowledge of Arithmetic operations, Manners, and fundamental literacy in both Arabic and Coptic languages) and religious subjects *Religious Tenets* (Langohr, 2005, 6; Nasīm, 1995, 45). Teachers were often unqualified to teach, as many of them were blind and relied solely on memory when delivering lessons. Thus, the kuttāb system has proven to be largely ineffective, relying primarily on rote memorization of stories, verses, and praises, with little to no emphasis on actually understanding theological concepts (Sedra, 2010).

The inadequate and low-quality religious education of the time contributed to the church's decline into what is often referred to as *centuries of darkness*. Consequently, the vast majority of clergy and congregation were theologically illiterate (Atiya, 1968; Hasan,

2003). Moreover, a linguistic shift occurred when Arabic gradually replaced Coptic as the sole language of government and administration, becoming the lingua franca of the Coptic elite, which ultimately exacerbated this decline (Shākir, 2000, 76). Despite efforts to preserve the Coptic language, its limited access to the majority of people meant that only clerics and educated cantors understood worship services held in Coptic.

Through this historical depiction, a deep causal relationship becomes clear. It represents the cumulative effect of deep-rooted historical challenges, coupled with the decline of religious institution and its educational structures, and the shift away from the Coptic language, which directly led to the spread of theological illiteracy among the Coptic community. Consequently, the deterioration and institutional weakness of the Coptic Church prompted the proselytization efforts of Western missions in Egypt during the nineteenth century. This was not only a consequence but also a prerequisite for the subsequent revival. Hence, it became clear that merely having institutions for religious education was insufficient. Rather, there was an urgent need for a new modernized model of religious education to steer with this complex situation and address this obvious decline. The Coptic reformers strongly rejected the kuttāb system as the sole educational institute for religious education at that time. They adopted inclusive models during the Renaissance that contributed to a decisive shift in the church's approach to religious education. Thus, they gave paramount importance to the issues of the quality of pedagogical methodologies and their alignment with the theological goals of the church.

5 Coptic evival al-Iḥyā' al-dīnī al-Qibṭī: Catalysts, Sources, and Theological Imperatives

Historians documented a significant spiritual awakening within the Coptic Church over the past two centuries (Afifi, 1999; Hasan, 2003; Ibrahim, 2013; Reiss, 1998). Two major movements constituted the revival, aiming to renew faith by emphasizing religious learning, liturgical practices, and church affairs. The motives for this revival were multifaceted. It emerged from internal theological imperatives and the leadership characteristics of patriarchs and reformers, as well as external pressures from Catholic and Protestant missions and socio-political conditions in Egypt (Nasīm, 1995; Van Doorn-Harder, 2017).

As for internal factors, Western and Coptic scholars have emphasized the spread of theological illiteracy among Clergy and laypeople in the nineteenth century (Atiya, 1968; Ibrahim, 2013; Rubenson, 1997; Sharkey, 2015). A possible explanation for this ignorance is the theological split between the Coptic Church and other Chalcedonian Western and Eastern churches, which adversely impacted the development of Coptic theological thought, causing it to become more defensive and conservative (Hasan, 2003, 29; Rubenson, 1997, 36). This consequently led to a marked decline in the quality of religious education within the Coptic Church, causing the spread of theological ignorance. Another essential internal factor was the characteristics of the reformers, which were remarkably stimulated and fueled the church revival. The enlightened and charismatic personalities of Pope Cyril IV, *al-Bābā Kīrullus al-rābi,'* and Archdeacon Ḥabīb Jirjis[2] had a profoundly positive influence on the revival and, consequently, on the development of theological and religious education within the Coptic Church.

A significant external force was the arrival of Western missions, "Catholic and Protestant groups" to Egypt (Atiya, 1968; Hasan, 2003). The missionaries held negative perceptions of Coptic Orthodox Christians, labelling them as backward and ignorant; they even described the Coptic Church as a mummified entity (Maḥmūd, 2021, 349;

Sharkey, 2015, 19). They noticed un-Christian practices among the clergy and congregation, such as constant fasting, excessive veneration of Mary, and the worship of saints (Sedra, 2010, 50; Sharkey, 2015, 21). The missionaries attempted to correct these behaviours through educational and pastoral efforts. Consequently, they strategically targeted younger generations, establishing schools (which numbered 168 schools in the year 1897), providing Arabic translation of the Bible, and employing modern methods of teaching and learning that were more attractive to Coptic children than the traditional education in kuttāb and public schools. As a result of these active efforts, a large number of Coptic children, including 11,014 in the year 1897, enrolled in these schools, posing a significant threat to the continuity of the Coptic Church across generations (Shafīq, 2019; Sedera, 2010; Chaillot, 2005).

Another external force that motivated the Coptic revival was the modernization agenda adopted by Muḥammad ʿAlī and his dynasty. The church was not isolated from the waves of modernization that swept Egypt when he seized power (Hasan, 2003; Ibrahim, 2013). A modern lifestyle emerged in Egyptian society, focusing primarily on promoting education, scientific justification and reasoning, and new forms of civic and political engagement. The church had to respond to this movement quickly and effectively. On the one hand, it emphasized its traditional religious values, communal solidarity, and a sense of identity. On the other hand, it established schools and adopted a more democratic approach to church administration. The creation of the Communal Council *al-Majlis almly* is a good example, reflecting its response to the modernization movement (Sevenaer, 1997, 25).

In response to these enormous internal and external challenges, revivalists have begun a series of comprehensive reforms to rectify the church's internal structures and combat the influence of Western missions throughout Egypt (Atiya, 1968, 139). In the early revival (first phase), Pope Cyril IV, *al-Bābā Kīrullus al-rābiʿ* (1854-1861), laid the foundation for the modern reform completed by his successor Pope Cyril V, *al-Bābā Kīrullus al-khāmis* (1874-1927), through three main pillars: a) Education, both religious and formal; b) Church administration and affairs; c) Institutionalization of the clerical body through enhancing the status, education, and salaries of the clergy. These three categories represented the revival philosophy of the time, which aimed to renew the church (Ibrahim, 2013). Since then, intensive efforts have been made to achieve these targets. For instance, weekly theological seminars have been held in and around Cairo to improve clerical formation. The theological college and a new Seminary School for monks were established in Helwan. The Church also established many Coptic schools similar to modern Western missionary schools, which taught both secular and religious subjects. Furthermore, the church imported a printing press from Austria to disseminate religious texts among the Coptic community, thus facilitating access to liturgical texts (el-Gendi, 2021, 116). The vision was to revive the church and community, using education to shape a modern Coptic identity.

Within the framework of the educational and theological development mentioned above, the second wave of revival began in the early twentieth century and continued until the 1970s. It all started with the efforts of Ḥabīb Jirjis. Then, the religious figures took over, especially when graduates of the Sunday School Movement became integral to the church hierarchy. The revival centered on various other pillars, as Nelly Van Doorn-Harder (2017) notes, which are: a) Monasticism, extending monastic life and reviving the writings and heritage of the early church Fathers. It is also represented in providing theological interpretations of major Coptic textbooks according to the perceptions of fathers and

saints; b) Pastoral care, represented in providing spiritual and social services to the community, and c) Pedagogy, represented in expanding religious education in Sunday and in public schools as well.

The role of the Coptic laity was crucial in providing education, healthcare services, and establishing numerous philanthropic organizations, particularly during and after the initial wave of revival. The wealthy landed Coptic nobility established numerous charitable societies, i.e., the Coptic Association for Education, *Jamʿīyat āyāt alnshʾ al-Qibṭīyah*, the Coptic Faith Central Association, *Jamʿīyat āyāt al-īmān al-Qibṭīyah al-Markazīyah*, and the Association of the Friends of the Holy Book, *Jamʿīyat Aṣdiqāʾ al-Kitāb al-Muqaddas*. The aim was to assist people experiencing poverty, establish schools, orphanages, and hospitals, and offer philanthropic aid and services to the Coptic community. These organizations contributed to the development of a deeper religious life and a new social role inspired by the Orthodox faith. Laypeople also called for the inauguration of democratic governance in the church's main administrative bodies (Chaillot, 2005; el-Khawaga, 1997). Despite the laity promoting a spirit of sacrifice and playing an active role in the Coptic community, they were largely absent from the scene in the second wave of revival, which was led and dominated entirely by the church's religious leaders.

6 Landscape of Coptic Christian Education during and after Revival

The Coptic revival, since its first reform movement, radically restructured and expanded the church's vision and educational mission by introducing foundational elements. As a result, Coptic Christian education experienced major institutional and structural changes, evident in three main educational initiatives

6.1 The Coptic Model of Sunday Schools

The Sunday School Movement, *Ḥarakat Madāris al-Aḥad*, was a significant development in the path of Coptic Christian education and had a profound impact on the Coptic Church as a whole in modern times (Hasan, 2003; Ibrahim, 2012; Nasīm, 1995). The movement began in the 1900s with informal gatherings of children in Cairo churches, such as the Saint Mary Church, *Kanīsat al-Sayyidah al-ʿAdhrāʾ Maryam,* and the Charity Association of al-Maḥabbah, *Jamʿīyat āyāt al-Maḥabbah al-Khayrīyah*. After the church formally recognized Sunday schools, the vision developed to raise children according to the Christian teachings of the Bible (Luka, 1947, 8) and to install faithful patriotism (Nasīm, 1995, 91). The movement rapidly flourished. Many branches were soon established throughout Egypt, as well as in Sudan and Ethiopia. This rapid growth resulted in the formation of a General Committee of the Sunday Schools in 1918. The committee oversaw religious education in both state and church schools, undertook administrative tasks related to the program of study, designed curricula, and provided teachers. The movement was soon regarded as the cornerstone of the Coptic revival in the twentieth century and beyond.

Regarding curricula, their content has been significantly changed, unlike that in kuttāb. The focus was clearly on the Orthodox faith and Coptic heritage. Teaching and learning significantly shifted from rote memorization to emphasize a deeper understanding of the Bible. It became more dynamic than it had been in kuttāb, and the study's plan included subjects related to the Bible, Church history, Coptic rites, and lives of saints (Hasan, 2003, 74). The Doctrines of the Coptic Orthodox Faith: A Foundational Synopsis, *Khulāṣat*

al-uṣūl al-īmānīyah fī Muʿtaqadāt al-Kanīsah al-Qibṭīyah al-Urthūdhuksīyah, was the first Coptic catechism book designed for public and Sunday Schools (Nasīm, 1995). However, there was flexibility in using other educational textbooks in various branches of the movement. There is a logical connection between the Coptic and Western mission Sunday Schools. While Coptic Sunday schools adapted educational materials from Protestant Schools for catechism due to the lack of prepared children's media, the content was distinctly Coptic (Sedra, 2010). Later, in 1948, a unified general curriculum was implemented in all Sunday Schools in Egypt (Chaillot, 2005, 63). The new curriculum was designed around psychologically based themes for each age group, covering scripture, dogma, spirituality, Coptic rituals, and ethics. It was designed to be based on the church calendar, drawing heavily from patristic studies (the teachings of the church fathers) and on practical and contemporary issues, ensuring its relevance to Coptic life (Salib, 2021).

Educated middle-class citizens (especially college graduates) became active volunteers teaching in Sunday Schools. They constituted a profound movement called *Khaddām*, which means servants. These dedicated teachers were widely credited with fueling the modern Coptic revival, with many subsequently entering the clergy and monastic life and eventually ascending to the highest ranks of the church hierarchy, including the episcopate and the papacy (Hasan, 2003, 80; Pennington, 1982, 162; Reiss, 1998, 174). The training of these volunteers "teachers" on pedagogical methods was organized and structured. Teacher training began on a more systematic basis when the church launched the Institute of Education and Pastoral Care in 1974.

Within the framework of the Khaddām Movement, two distinct and influential pedagogical and philosophical approaches emerged: the Shubra Group *Majmūʿah Shubrā* and the Giza Group *Majmūʿah al-Jīzah*. The first group Shubra[3], based at the Great Saint Anthony Church *Kanīsat al-Qiddīs al-ʿAẓīm al-Anbā Anṭūniyūs*, focused on returning to the spiritual roots of early patristic and monastic tradition, with an emphasis on prayer, fasting, meditation, and personal spirituality. In contrast, the Giza[4] Group based on Saint Mark Coptic Orthodox Church *Kanīsat al-Qiddīs Murqus al-Qibṭīyah al-Urthūdhuksīyah*, emphasized social and pastoral services, addressing the prevalent poor pastoral care in villages and training priests for this crucial role. This approach was, in fact, more innovative, flexible, and modern at that time, because it emphasized learning by doing through active participation in village ministry, social services, and ecumenical engagement (Hasan, 2003, 77; Salib, 2021, 261).

6.2 The Re-establishment of Theological Institutions

When the Coptic Theological College *al-Kullīyah al-Iklīrīkīyah* in Cairo reopened in 1893, following its closure because of limited resources and low academic results, it signaled a major step toward reforming clerical education. The seminary quickly became central to training a new generation of educated priests (el-Gendi, 2021). It represented a new beacon of the Orthodox faith and actively worked to protect it from foreign influences. However, the establishment of the Coptic Theological College is seen as a renewal of the third-century Catechistic School of Alexandria; its modern structure reflects the influence of Western missions in Egypt. An example of this influence is Ḥabīb Jirjis's reliance on curricula of other Christian institutions in England, Greece, Italy, and the United States in developing the college's first structured curriculum (Nasīm, 1995, 89). Although the seminary evolved to incorporate modern academic learning and an intellectual approach to

theological training, its emphasis on patristic studies and church history reflects a profound influence of revivalist theology.

The duration of the seminary's study program was initially five years for candidates aiming to become clergy. Thereafter, the college offered an evening program to attract outstanding young university graduates. The curriculum at the seminary was designed to provide a sound Orthodox Christian education as the study program included courses such as Church History, Orthodox Theology, and Liturgy with a wide range of general and cultural subjects, i.e. History, Geography, Mathematics, Philosophy, Church Rhyme, and languages: Arabic, Coptic, English, Greek, and Hebrew (Jirjis, 1938, 34). Subsequent developments in the study plan and courses occurred, and the seminary offered a comprehensive range of subjects, including detailed studies of New and Old Testament, Church History, Early and Medieval Eastern Thought, Modern Orthodox Theology, and Orthodox Eucharistic and Liturgical Theology. However, there was no sign of an ecumenical curriculum at the Theological College at that time.

Lecturers at the theological college were often dedicated to the Orthodox faith and came from diverse academic backgrounds. Most of them, at that time, were from outside the church, referred to as laymen, except for those who taught religious subjects. An obvious example was the appointment of Israel Wilkinson and Mayer Dahan from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem as lecturers to teach Hebrew (Guirgis, 1938, 36). However, the seminary needed experienced professors to teach contemporary theological subjects that were crucial for the comprehensive preparation of clerics. The college leadership was notably opposed to sending Coptic theologians to study in Western Seminaries or even appointing Anglican priests to teach in the Coptic Seminary, in order to ensure the preservation of Orthodox teachings. Professors at the college are now clergymen and monks with advanced postgraduate education. Today, the institutional growth of theological seminaries continues to be significant not only in Egypt but also around the globe (Khoroshko, 2022; Nasīm, 1995).

6.3 Coptic Christian Education in Public Schools

Coptic Christian education was completely neglected in public schools during the nineteenth century. Coptic students graduated from schools with no prior knowledge of religion. However, religious lectures were given to them outside school buildings by laypeople. In 1908, Coptic Christian education was officially introduced into public schools and the Khedivial Teachers College, following persistent demands from the Coptic elite, especially Buṭrus Ghālī and Murqus Simaykah Bāshā (Majallat Madāris al-Aḥad, 1949, 3).

The curriculum, initially, was the same as that used in Sunday Schools. Later, the church was jointly responsible for designing the curriculum for public schools with the Ministry of Education. Two experts from both the Ministry of Education and the Coptic Orthodox Church "Bishops" prepared a curriculum for each educational stage: primary, middle, and secondary ('Abd al-Karīm, 1950). Both Coptic and Islamic religious lessons were held simultaneously, but in separate classes at the same school.

Teachers were initially graduates of the Coptic Theological College in Cairo and then of the Khedivial Teachers College. However, today's teachers in public schools are no longer specialized in teaching Coptic religious education. They are Christian teachers of other subjects, such as Geography, English, and Biology, and are responsible for teaching Coptic religious education. The logical explanation for this is the small number of Christian students in many public schools, which forces the school principal to assign the

responsibility of teaching Christian religious education to non-specialized Christian teachers within the school, as permitted by school law.

7 Analysis of Parallel and Divergent Paths of Coptic Christian Education

Before starting to analyse these trajectories, it is worth noting that the church's educational response during and after the revival represents a compelling case study and a valuable resource for understanding the complexities of religious education for a Christian minority within a Muslim-majority society. It also demonstrates how a religious institution navigates internal and external pressures through a dynamic interplay of strategic adaptation and steadfast affirmation of its identity over an extended period. A thorough investigation and critical analysis of this response, considering the socio-political and cultural context of Egypt at that time, would be beneficial in clarifying which approach (parallel or divergent) Coptic Christian education took during and after the revival.

7.1 Parallel Paths: Commitment to Orthodox Faith and Affirmation of Coptic Identity

In their efforts to renovate theological and religious education in both schools and seminaries, the reformers focused on deep and unique Coptic theological notions, which represented the backbone of their pedagogical approach and seemed to parallel the revival.

First, the emphasis on traditional Monophysite Coptic doctrine was clear and prevalent. The Coptic theological position, distinct from the Chalcedonian understanding, was implicitly and explicitly reinforced through revival-era education. It provided a robust intellectual and spiritual foundation for educational initiatives. This actually demonstrates a commitment to doctrinal fidelity and the affirmation of a distinct Coptic identity.

Second, the reassertion of patristic writings was another area for this parallel approach. The Vine Magazine, *Majallat al-Karma*, was specifically aimed at fostering a revive of patristic studies, demonstrating a conscious effort to reconnect with the Church Fathers (Van Doorn-Harder, 2017). Therefore, curriculum and teaching emphasized the distinct Orthodox theology and heritage, reflecting the unique Coptic theological underpinnings. This included the church's unique Christological doctrine, its rich ascetic and monastic tradition, and its long history of martyrdom, which shaped a core value of bravery and faith, integrated into the curriculum through the lives of saints and martyrs (Nasīm, 1995). We can see that the emphasis on patristic studies and the explicit assertion of Monophysite doctrine were more than just academic theological points in the content of curricula; they were a powerful way to ground the Coptic identity in its own ancient, authentic tradition, rather than being defined by external critiques.

Third, anti-colonial and anti-Western sentiment represents another parallel path. The Coptic revival was firmly founded on both anti-Western and anti-imperial sentiments simultaneously. This was reflected in a conscious effort to carve out their own Egyptian form of Christianity, and in some ways, further isolate themselves from the rest of the Christian world, thereby maintaining their distinctiveness (Atiya, 1968). Fourth, persistent efforts to revive the Coptic language and hymnology were another area that aligned with the revival. The Sunday School Movement has actively supported this by focusing on the revival of the Coptic language and hymns, thus promoting cultural and linguistic heritage alongside theological instruction.

Finally, the emergence of distinct internal pedagogical philosophies within the Sunday School Movement itself represents an important internal parallel and, in some ways, a counter-trend. The first group, "Shubrā" emphasised ascetic spirituality and prioritized individual-spiritual formation, as well as strict adherence to church life. This, in fact, represents a path that has established a deep spiritual discipline rooted in the Coptic heritage. While the Giza Group focused on pastoral ministries, learning through practical experiences in social services, village ministry, and ecumenical participation (Salib, 2021). This significantly represented a path that emphasized outward, communal engagement, and the practical application of Orthodox faith. At the same time, the emergence of the two intellectual groups within the Coptic Sunday School Movement reveals varied internal perspectives on how the revival manifested and shaped religious education (Hasan, 2003). Both groups played a crucial role during the revival. However, they represented different philosophical and pedagogical interpretations of what revitalization meant for the church's educational mission; this active and dynamic internal process led to a multifaceted and perhaps fragmented approach to religious education.

7.2 Divergent Paths: Strategic Adaptation and Shared Methodologies and Tools

Despite the church adopting parallel approaches compatible with the revival philosophy, it simultaneously implemented organizational and pedagogical approaches distinct and often opposite to the revival. These paths were driven primarily by the need to modernize religious education institutions and to employ effective educational methodologies in the same way in schools at Western Protestant and Catholic missions. For example, the adoption of the Western Sunday School model is clear evidence of this divergent approach. This also includes adopting the concept of structured and regular classes for children outside of formal liturgy, which represented a departure from the traditional kuttāb system in the pre-revival era (Sedra, 2010; Sharkey, 2015). Hence, the educational process became more organised than ever.

The emphasis on modern teaching, curricula, resources, and qualified teachers was also clear. These mirrored approaches are found in Western Protestant and Catholic missions. The Sunday School Movement promoted systematic and pedagogical methods. It also promoted extracurricular activities such as camps and field visits (Nasīm, 1995). Additional teaching techniques included the use of picture books, drawings, and a question-and-answer style. These were common in Western mission schools and adopted directly into Coptic Christian education (Hasan, 2003, 75). These methods led to the development of standardized curricula, textbooks, and learning resources in Coptic Sunday schools. The revival introduced religious education in public schools, inspired by Western models. Protestant and Catholic missionary schools combined secular and religious subjects. Training and qualification of religious leaders took a completely "divergent path" from the previously informal and often weak training for clergy. This shows that the reformers recognized how important it was for religious leaders and clergy to have solid academic training to face modern challenges. Printing more theological books and religious textbooks made these resources available to more people in the Coptic community across Egypt. This was similar to developments in the West, where greater access to religious knowledge became possible. The change encouraged educational projects and led to more publishing. This was a key part of the Coptic revival. Although the church aimed to combat proselytization and address illiteracy among clergy and the community, it

opted to employ Western educational methods. Yet, it still had strong anti-Western feelings. This shows that the "divergent path" was not about ideology but about strategy. The church employed valid pedagogical tools in its pursuit of preserving Coptic identity and Orthodox faith. The selective adoption of foreign methods resulted in similarities in form but profound differences in purpose. Table 1 directly compares the parallel and opposite paths. It classifies specific aspects of Coptic religious education during and after the revival, highlighting internal differences.

Aspect of Education	Parallel / Divergent / Missing	Description / Reason
Organizational model (Sunday School)	divergent	The Coptic Church explicitly adopted the Sunday School and seminary model from Western missionaries, recognizing its effectiveness in reaching and educating children and clergy.
Pedagogical tools (structured lessons, textbooks)	divergent	Both Coptic and Western models focused on structured teaching, curriculum development, and the creation of learning resources, such as catechism books and illustrated materials.
Underlying motivation	parallel	The Coptic revival was a direct response to the threats of evangelism, aiming to combat foreign influence and preserve the distinct Coptic identity.
Theological content/emphasis	parallel	Coptic education focused on the unique metaphysical doctrine of Christ, a rich ascetic/monastic tradition, the history of martyrdom, and sacred theology, which was affirmed during the revival.
Teachers	divergent	Teachers of Sunday schools were more educated and pedagogical qualified than those in Kuttab.
Language of teaching	parallel	Coptic religious education focused on preserving the Coptic language for liturgical use and incorporating Arabic for teaching in Sunday schools and theological seminaries. This reflects the impact of revival.
Spiritual formation goal (internal Coptic divergence)	parallel/divergent	Within the framework of the Coptic revival, the Shubra Group emphasized personal ascetic spirituality. At the same time, the Giza Group focused on external social and pastoral service, representing distinct philosophical approaches to Coptic Christian formation.
Foundational educational philosophy	missing	Habib Girgis prioritized the pedagogical implementation of Orthodox education over articulating a comprehensive and unified theology, leading to a pragmatic yet less integrated approach compared to a more theoretically grounded Western model.

Tab.1: Parallel versus divergent aspects of Coptic Christian education during and after revival

Apart from parallel and contrasting paths, the absence of a defined Coptic educational theology[5] has been a major gap in Coptic religious education since the post-revival era. The Sunday School Movement expanded religious education within the Coptic community, reaching children and students from public schools. However, by concentrating chiefly on pedagogical techniques rather than a strong theological foundation, the movement limited the development of Coptic Christian education. While Sunday Schools quickly met immediate needs, they did not provide a unified theological foundation. Later, some called for a more theologically grounded approach. Although Sunday Schools succeeded in many ways, they often operated independently of formal theological teaching, which had lasting effects. Over time, this model struggled to fully align with Orthodox educational principles.

8 Conclusion and Recommendations

This article is an attempt to investigate the close and strong relationship between the Coptic revival and the development of Coptic Christian Education, particularly in light of the growing interest in the current role of this kind of education in shaping identity and thus influencing Copts' civic engagement, not only in Egypt but also in the diaspora. The process of religious renewal in the Coptic Orthodox Church reshaped its educational landscape through dynamic and complex changes, involving parallel and divergent strategies. Reformers strategically adopted Western educational methods –such as Sunday Schools, seminaries, religious education in public schools, and religious printing presses –while maintaining a curriculum deeply rooted in Coptic tradition and monastic heritage. This revival addressed a crisis in the Coptic Church of Alexandria by establishing new organizational and pedagogical models.

The development of a strong and vibrant Coptic religious education model, which has continued to shape Coptic religious life and identity, is a clear result of the Coptic revival. The ongoing vitality of Sunday Schools and seminaries illustrates the enduring impact of these reforms. However, current debates about curricula and calls for a multidimensional approach highlight unresolved tensions that stem from the revival of the original reforms.

The findings suggest further research is needed on religious education and the Coptic revival. For example, new studies could use realist evaluation to test and expand this article's arguments. Further studies seem crucial to explore how the Coptic laity began informal religious education in such a complex colonial and religiously tense environment. It is worth examining the curricula from the early revival critically, and the time of Cyril VI, *al-Bābā Kīrullus al-sādis*, would be particularly beneficial, as this period witnessed a notable religious revival. Further research on the influence of post-revival on diaspora education is also necessary.

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Dr. Nasser Tolba, Research Associate and Member of the Diaspora Research Studies Network (FNDS) of the Faculty of Theology at Friedrich Schiller University Jena, and Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Education, Fayoum University (Egypt).

Prof. Dr. Michael Wermke, Holder of the Chair of Religious Education and Director of the Research Center of Religion and Education (FZRB), Dean of the Faculty of Theology, Friedrich Schiller University Jena.

[1] The Catechetical School of Alexandria is different from the Philosophical School of Alexandria. The latter was a beacon for modern secular knowledge and a hub for Hellenic culture. It was also world-renowned institute for philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, and history.

[2] Ḥabīb Jirjis was the leader and founder of the Sunday school movement in the Coptic Church. He made significant efforts in developing and spreading religious and clerical education among Copts. He was also the Dean of the Theological College and authored several theological books that are considered landmarks in the path of Coptic religious education. The Coptic Church has recently declared him a saint.

[3] Shubrā is Cairo's populous middle-class district with a Christian majority and a Muslim minority.

[4] Giza is a densely populated governorate close to Cairo, but it contains many rural areas consisting of villages and hamlets.

[5] Orthodox educational theology blends spiritual and liturgical growth with strong academic study. This helps students serve the church and participate in society. It encourages spiritual growth through worship and community, builds knowledge of Scripture and Church teachings—especially the Holy Trinity—and motivates an evangelistic outlook to address challenges such as secularization. The goal is to prepare individuals who can remain steadfast in their faith while engaging thoughtfully with today's issues.