

Pope Shenouda, the Arab World's most influential Christian leader has passed away

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Article summary:

Egyptian Christians are mourning the death of Coptic Orthodox Pope and Patriarch Shenouda III, who passed away on Saturday at the age of 88. Pope Shenouda (August 3, 1923 - March 17, 2012) was extremely popular among millions of common Christians. A charismatic reformer and an advocate of Christian rights and interests in a predominantly Muslim country, many considered him as their father. Common Muslims liked him for his critical stance towards Israel, but both Christian and Muslim intellectuals were critical of his mixing politics with religion. No doubt he was the most influential Christian leader in 20th century Egypt. He was co-founder and editor-in-chief of the Sunday School Magazine in 1947, was consecrated as monk in 1954, became Bishop of Education in 1962, and Pope in 1971.



Coptic Orthodox Patriarch Shenouda III and Ahmed al-Tayeb, the Grand Imam of al-Azhar

Metropolitan Bishoi, secretary of the Synod since 1985, described in 2002 the dramatic changes during Pope Shenouda's reign. The number of monks, priests, bishops, church servants, and churches dramatically increased. Monasteries expanded as never before since the arrival of Islam in Egypt. During Pope Shenouda's rule, the emigration of Copts increased tremendously as a consequence of better economic perspectives and a search for greater freedoms outside Egypt. Pope Shenouda responded to this trend by building hundreds of churches outside Egypt, whereby most (if not all) were personally consecrated by him.

Early years

Pope Shenouda's church career started in the Coptic Orthodox Sunday School movement in the 1940s, when a group of laymen sought to reform the church, which had become a bastion of traditionalism. The Sunday School movement then described its role as liberating the church from all powers, clergy, and laymen whose interests lay only in money, power, and influence. The practices of simony were publicly rejected and the servants called for the right of lay people to choose their pastors.

Many youth in the Sunday School movement of those years were closely linked to the Umma al-Qibtiya, a group of political activists that opposed the then widespread corruption in the Coptic Orthodox Church under the leadership of Pope Yousab II. Members of the Umma al-Qibtiya kidnapped their own pope in 1954 and forced him to sign his abdication. Nazir Gayed (who later became Pope Shenouda), then editor-in-chief of the Sunday school magazine, did not criticize the kidnapping, but devoted the magazine to arguments that his successor

should not come from the circle of bishops, but from among the monks. Dr. Wolfram Reiss sees this as an indirect support for this kidnapping (Reiss, p. 168).

Immediately following, Nazir Gayed became monk with the name of Father Antonios (only monks can be elected to the papacy). Egyptian police freed Pope Yousab, but his image was severely damaged. Three bishops ruled the church until the pope passed away in 1956. Father Antonios became one of the candidates to succeed Pope Yousab as head of the Coptic Orthodox Church. The bishops of those days did not want to see a Sunday School activist on the papal throne and a struggle for succession followed, leaving the papal chair empty for three years. The struggle yielded new conditions for the eligibility to be elected as pope: a monk would need to have a monastic life of at least 15 years and to be at least 40 years old. This effectively closed the road for the three Sunday School monks up for election. Articles in "Sunday School Magazine" between 1956-1958 frequently argued against this decision.

During Pope Kyrillos (1959-1971)

Pope Kyrillos was elected, and in 1962 consecrated Father Antonios to Bishop Shenouda. Prior to 1962, Bishops were only responsible for their diocese, but with the consecration of Bishop Shenouda "general bishops" were conceived for special tasks. Bishop Shenouda became general bishop of education. Later, more consecrations to the function of general bishop followed, giving them the same vote in the Synod as diocesan bishops, gradually weakening the status of individual diocesan bishops.

Bishop Shenouda was suspended in 1966 by Pope Kyrillos for his "campaigns for change" that called for popular election of bishops and priests, a principle that Bishop Shenouda later applied when he became Pope. This conflict between Pope Kyrillos and Bishop Shenouda was later resolved.

During Anwar al-Sadat (1971-1981)

When Pope Kyrillos passed away in 1971, Nazir Gayed was again one of the candidates for the papacy. The charismatic priest, Father Bishoi Kamel, then wrote a strongly worded pamphlet against the election of any bishop to the papacy, indicating resistance to changing the rules for who is eligible for election.

Following Pope Shenouda's consecration in 1971, he was not afraid to oppose government decisions that he believed restricted the freedom of Christians in Egypt. Only one year earlier Anwar al Sadat had become president of Egypt and decided to give more opportunities to Islamists in society. The policies of church and state clashed in particular over church building and Pope Shenouda's resistance against changing Article 2 of the constitution from the sharia as "a" source of legislation to the sharia as "the" source of legislation. Clashes resulted in tensions between church and state and in violence and death in the streets of Egypt among Muslims and Christians. British historian Vatikiotis called Pope Shenouda of these days "a firebrand". But Pope Shenouda was certainly not the only "firebrand". Many Muslim preachers qualified for the same description. Tensions in society worsened and Sadat decided to arrest 1,536 people, among them 120 Copts, including 8 bishops and 24 priests. Sadat banished Pope Shenouda to the monastery of Anba Bishoi, having him (de facto) replaced by a committee of five bishops.

Just days before Sadat was assassinated during a military parade on October 6, 1981, Father Matta al-Meskeen, a major reformer, told Time Magazine (28.9.1981): "Shenouda's appointment was the beginning of the trouble. The mind replaced inspiration, and planning replaced prayer. For the first years I prayed for him, but I see the church is going from bad to worse because of his behavior [...] I can't say I'm happy, but I am at peace now. Every morning I was expecting news of more bloody collisions. Sadat's actions protect the church and the Copts. They are from God." This statement contributed to a lasting schism between these two major reformers in the church.

During Hosni Mubarak (1981-2011)

Coptic expatriates, especially those from the US and UK, campaigned for the release of Pope Shenouda, supported by the episcopal priest Dr. Father John Watson, a proponent of the separation of church and state, who wrote numerous articles in support of the release of the pope. Pope Shenouda was released in January 1985, just before I first met with him.

Father Watson had become a personal friend of mine and I had met Pope Shenouda on numerous occasions in the years following. During his 25th jubilee as pope in 1996, I asked him how he saw himself. "As teacher of the church," he responded. He could not have described himself better. Since 1962 he organized weekly meetings and responded to questions from the public, consistently showing a tremendous knowledge of the Bible, quoting large sections verbatim.

Pope Shenouda had not forgotten the number of bishops who supported Sadat's decision to banish him to his monastery. Following 1985, his policy became to split bishoprics after the death of a bishop, thus increasing the number of bishops and weakening the position of individual bishops towards the patriarch. Pope Shenouda's relations with the state had changed, becoming quieter and more moderate. In 1996 he told me, however, that it was not he who had changed, but the president (Mubarak being a different person from Sadat). Though he did not always agree with President Mubarak, during the Egyptian Revolution of 2011, he remained carefully, but clearly supportive of him until the very end.

There were also regularly tensions between the two leaders, for example over the issue of Wafaa Costantine, a Coptic wife of a priest who he told should not continue the conversion procedure to Islam in order to obtain a divorce from her husband. Constantine conceded, but the residual public debates left deep scars between state and church. Despite the scars, Pope Shenouda knew well that a revolution would result in the advance of Islamists in society, which he feared.

Pope Shenouda was pleasant in meetings, but also could be very tough if he disagreed with someone. Father Daniel el-Baramousy, a charismatic monk who had become too Pentecostal in his preaching experienced this. He was told to leave the church. The former priest now preaches in the country as protestant pastor.

Episcopal priest Dr. John Watson found Pope Shenouda unwise in selecting people for important functions in the church. In the opinion of the priest, he was too authoritarian and surrounded himself with too many yes-men with insufficient qualities for their functions. Coptic businessman Hany Aziz, for example, was seen in Pope Shenouda's vicinity for many years without having a clear official function. Only later was he removed for his financial malpractices.

Pope Shenouda is often called a political church leader, due not only to his own attitude towards the Egyptian government but also because the government found it very handy to have in Pope Shenouda a major representative of Christians in Egypt. When there were serious tensions between Muslims and Christians, the pope was always consulted and large numbers of Christians would accept his advice as binding.

For at least the past ten years there have been discussions about the succession of Pope Shenouda. Until 1928 only monks had been elected to the papacy. Three diocesan bishops had been elected to the papacy in the 20th century but that had also resulted in resistance by those who believe that the church should adhere to its ancient principles for the election of a new pope. Bishop Marcos of Shubra al-Khayma stated that Pope Shenouda himself saw no problem in the election of general bishop as pope as opposed to a diocesan bishop.

Just as the death of Pope Yousab in 1956 resulted in a struggle around the succession, so Father Musa of Beni Suef suspects a struggle over the succession of Pope Shenouda. There is division over who could be eligible (monks only or monks and general bishops). There are

furthermore several ambitious bishops. For whoever will be elected, it will not be easy to stand in the shoes of a pope who had such a tremendous impact in his church and who has enjoyed so much popularity. Yet, for the church, it is important to soon have a strong new leader again in order to be able to safeguard the position of Christians in a country that is in transition following the Revolution of 2011.

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