



The 21

A Journey into
the Land of
Coptic Martyrs

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER



Martin Mosebach

The **21**

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*A Journey into the Land
of Coptic Martyrs*

Martin Mosebach

Translated by Alta L. Price



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The Twenty-One Copts

Martyred on February 15, 2015

Tawadros Youssef Tawadros, born September 16, 1968, in El-Aour, Samalut

Magued Seliman Shehata, born August 24, 1973, in El-Aour, Samalut

Hany Abd el Messiah, born January 1, 1982, in El-Aour, Samalut

Ezzat Boushra Youssef, born August 14, 1982, in Dafash, Samalut

Malak (the elder) Farag Ibrahim, born January 1, 1984, in Al-Subi, Samalut

Samuel (the elder) Alham Wilson, born July 14, 1986, in El-Aour, Samalut

Malak (the younger) Ibrahim Seniut, born September 9, 1986, in El-Aour, Samalut

Luka Nagati Anis, born in January, 1987, in Mashat Manqatin, Samalut

Sameh Salah Farouk, born May 20, 1988, in Menqarios, Samalut

Milad Makin Zaky, born October 1, 1988, in El-Aour, Samalut

Issam Baddar Samir, born April 15, 1990, in El-Helmeya

Youssef Shoukry Younan, born June 2, 1990, in El-Aour, Samalut

Bishoy Stefanos Kamel, born September 4, 1990, in El-Aour, Samalut

Abanub Ayat Shahata, born July 22, 1991, in El-Aour,
Samalut

Girgis (the elder) Samir Megally, born October 1, 1991, in
Samsum, Samalut

Mina Fayez Aziz, born October 8, 1991, in El-Aour, Samalut

Kiryollos Boushra Fawzy, born November 11, 1991, in
El-Aour, Samalut

Gaber Mounir Adly, born January 25, 1992, in Menbal,
Matay

Samuel (the younger) Stefanos Kamel, born November 26,
1992, in El-Aour, Samalut

Girgis (the younger) Milad Seniut, born December 17,
1992, in El-Aour, Samalut

Matthew Ayariga, from Ghana

A note on names: Egyptians do not generally have last names as traditionally formulated in most Western countries. Instead, their name is composed of a given name followed by the given names of their father and grandfather. Egyptians known internationally often use their father's given name as a Western last name.

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Kiryollos

1

The Head of Saint Kiryollos

THE PICTURE ON THE COVER of a magazine drew me in: it showed the head of a young man, evidently of Mediterranean origin, surrounded by a bit of orange-colored fabric. He was a lean youth with brownish skin, a sharp hairline, and a rather light mustache, his eyes half closed; his thin lips were slightly parted, offering a glimpse of his teeth. His expression wasn't exactly a smile – it was more one of deep relaxation, such that his mouth had involuntarily opened to take in a deep breath or let out a sigh.

Only later did I learn that the photo had been cropped, and that I had been misled. I hadn't initially gathered that this head had been severed from its body. In fact, there were no signs that this man had suffered any violence. If his face had tensed during the decapitation, or if pain or fear had made themselves visible, then any sign of these things had vanished the instant he died.

The image showed the moment immediately after the crime. It came from a video taken by his killers to document their deeds and spread terror worldwide. Strangely, though, separated from its broader context, it didn't inspire fear, at least not at first. This was not yet the head of a dead man. After the beheading, a flicker of consciousness and warmth had lingered a moment on his face – an eternal moment of dreaming and slumber, in which the finality of

what had just happened no longer seemed important. The cruel and sudden severing of this life had already created a new condition: all else receded into the past. And yet, at the moment captured in the picture, the sum total of his existence – about to recede for good but still present in his head – was somehow tangible one last time.

I have since learned his name: Kiryollos Boushra Fawzy, born November 11, 1991, in the Upper Egyptian village of El-Aour in the diocese of Samalut. His patron saint was Cyril of Alexandria, who at the fifth-century Council of Ephesus played a significant part in establishing the title of *Theotokos*, “Mother of God,” for Jesus’ mother. Unlike Cyril of Alexandria, though, Kiryollos did not play even a modest role in Egyptian public life when he was alive. He was one of far too many who cannot find work in their own country. That did not prevent him from becoming one of the saints of the Coptic Orthodox Church, however, just like his namesake. Only two weeks after the massacre, Tawadros II of Alexandria, Pope of the Coptic Orthodox Church, added Kiryollos’s name to the *Synaxarium*, the liturgical list of Coptic martyrs; his image is now worshiped on icons.

In the February 15, 2015, video showing his execution – and that of his twenty companions – I see him alive. He kneels in an upright position before his executioner. He looks relaxed; his curiously indifferent gaze seemingly directed at the beach in front of him, as though he wanted to take in every last detail. Since then I have also found a passport photo of him, likely from 2009. He was a soldier at the time, and his black felt beret features the insignia of the Egyptian Republic: an eagle centered on a black, white, and red flag. The image shows that he had a palsy – his left eyelid is drooped, partially obscuring his eye – although it clearly did not prevent him from passing the medical exam. In this picture, too, a sliver of his teeth can be seen, although his lips are closed.

Christianity's history is rife with beheadings. The severed head of John the Baptist, Jesus' forerunner, is the subject of numerous paintings and mosaics, several of which have become widely appreciated works of art. John the Baptist was beheaded before Jesus was crucified, to satisfy the whim of an enraged queen. Then came Paul the Apostle, who, as a Roman citizen, was granted the privilege of requesting death by decapitation, thereby sparing himself the fate of being tortured to death – a punishment reserved for slaves. From then on, countless heads have rolled for maintaining their belief in Jesus Christ, even in predominantly Christian countries: consider the case of Sir Thomas More under King Henry VIII in England, or Alexander Schmorell, a member of the White Rose in Nazi Germany, who was later canonized by the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia.

And yet such figures feel far removed from us, as if they belong to some other, seemingly incomprehensible era. Much as the brutal nature of their deaths and the firmness, even stubbornness, with which they confessed their faith seem to match one another in context, we find their fate equally eerie. Hasn't the Western world, with its openness toward discussion and dialogue, long since overcome the need for opposites to be regarded as life-threatening? We live in an era of strict religious privatization, and want to see it subjected to secular law. Society seems to have reached a consensus on the rejection of proselytizing and religious zeal. Hasn't all that put an end to the merciless, all-or-nothing alternatives of believe or leave; or worse, renounce your faith or die?

But the photo of Kiryollos's severed head, and the video showing his companions' severed heads, are only a few years old. What does this apparent anachronism mean? Should we read it as a sign that our idea of historical progress was mere delusion? That martyrdom and Christianity

go hand in hand through every historical era, and that as long as there are Christians there will also be martyrs?

The head on the cover of the magazine would not let me go. Many readers were outraged, as an editor who had also been disturbed told me when I asked about it. But I wanted to keep it with me—I saved the clipping, and frequently contemplated it at length.

Kiryollos was the first of the fallen to step forward out of anonymity for me. The twenty-one men beheaded on the beach near the port town of Sirte, Libya, are always regarded as a group, just like the young martyrs of the Theban Legion, who were also from Egypt. Only one of the group was not a Copt, and came, as has since been learned, from Ghana, in West Africa. But because the Copts have considered him one of their own since his death, I, too, choose to refer to them here as the “Twenty-One.”

The Coptic community and its Christian traditions, which have been faithfully preserved since the early apostolic age, are not well known in the West. The Roman Catholic Church has long cultivated a certain arrogance with regard to Eastern Christians, who are not in communion with Rome, and that fact prevents many, especially Catholics, from looking eastward. Not long after the Twenty-One were beheaded, I met with a German cardinal. I asked him why the Catholic Church did not formally recognize the testimony of these men of faith, as the old church generally had in cases of martyrdom. “But they’re Copts!” he answered. I will not mention this high church dignitary by name, because I do not believe his helpless words should be heard as an expression of his own personal views. Wasn’t he simply saying precisely what many of his peers would have, if given the chance? Right then and there I decided that I had to learn more about the Copts, and the Twenty-One in particular.

How might I get closer to them and find out more about their lives, their origins, and the circumstances in which they grew up? There are so many historic martyrs we know so little about, other than a few inaccurate details of their deaths; the dry lists of the *Martyrologium Romanum*, the Catholic Church's official register of saints, remained abstract until Christian art turned them into tangible, relatable images. Things are rather different with the Twenty-One: not only is there a video of their Passion, but this video has the selfsame intention and effect as a work of art, albeit a particularly vile one – it is at once both document and aesthetically staged, pathetic concoction. Stretching our definition of “art” to such a degree may seem inappropriate, but mustn't we admit that the video is effective, carefully choreographed, and designed with an attentive eye for color? Aren't there other realms where the border between art and reality has become dangerously blurred? For many, the increasing surrealness of the world has aroused a hunger for absolute authenticity. And isn't it an enhancement to the spectacle when the blood bathing the stage is real?

The Twenty-One could well have echoed the words of Paul the Apostle: “For we are made a spectacle unto the world, and to angels, and to men.” But before they became such a spectacle for God and the world, each led the unremarkable life of a poor farmer. Seen in retrospect, this could be considered nothing more than apt preparation for their martyrdom. So was there anything in their villages that might have foreshadowed all this? In February and March of 2017, two years after the massacre, I traveled to Upper Egypt, to the homes they had left when they set out for Libya in search of work.



Samuel (the elder)

2

What I Tell and What I Do Not Tell

THE TWENTY-ONE COPTIC MIGRANT WORKERS were beheaded on a Libyan beach after the killers' leader called upon "merciful Allah"; the video documenting the murder describes itself as "Muhammad's answer" to the "nation of the cross." The language is clear – the situation seems to need no further explanation. Two equal sides are in opposition, a murderer for every victim. This was evidently important to the event's choreographers: the idea that the sacred purification of the world must be carried out individually, by each pure soul. That such pure souls must necessarily dirty their own hands, that the death of nonbelievers is good, and that it is even better to kill nonbelievers oneself, with one's own hands – this is a task to be completed, a serious duty.

This is how I understand what this "message" to the "nation of the cross" intends to say, and yet I know just as little as anyone else about who was actually behind this crime. Masks hid the faces of the perpetrators, and even after some of them were arrested in October 2017, including the video's cameraman, their nations of origin are still unknown. They are members of the belligerent terrorist troops of the Islamic State – though in Egypt many devout, educated Muslims claim that a vast array of contradictory, inconsistent interests are hidden behind this frightening

name, interests that have nothing to do with religion and everything to do with the influence world powers have on the Middle East. How, they rhetorically ask, could faithful, God-loving people commit murder?

One must be careful not to view this massacre as one more chapter of an ongoing religious war – that would be a false use of religion, invoking it solely to fuel the dispute in Egypt, justify the military dictatorship, and incite Western nations to intervene with weapons, air strikes, and troops. Just once, as we consider this crime, let's try posing the classic investigators' question: *Cui bono?* – Who benefits? The answers will likely constitute a garish bouquet of hypotheses in which the name of nearly every world power involved in the war in the Middle East pops up: Americans and Russians, dictators in Syria and Egypt, the hostile Muslim Brotherhood, Israel and the Gulf States, Iran and Turkey – somehow anything is plausible, since it's apparent that none of the forces involved in this “Islamic world's Thirty Years' War,” as some commentators have dubbed it, is interested in putting an end to it. Did the killers act out of some deeply perverted zeal, or are they just unscrupulous mercenaries who can be bought to commit all kinds of bloodshed? Do they hold sole responsibility, as terrorists who've lost all sense of control, or are they just pawns – pawns on a board whose actual players and goals are unknown even to them?

These questions have many answers – too many. They include expert opinions but also wild rumors, and sometimes both come to a similar conclusion. And can the perpetrators' portrayal of themselves, as shown in the notorious video, even be believed? Isn't it reckless to trust men capable of such acts?

I admit that I hadn't yet grappled with these questions when I made the decision to learn more about the decapitated Copts. I also had no intention, when I set off

for Egypt, to learn anything more about the perpetrators. It was enough for me to leave them in the darkness they themselves aspired to. To call the political situation underlying the massacre on the Libyan beach *complicated* is a fussy euphemism. Anyone who has taken in even the most superficial bit of contradiction-laden news from this region of the world knows as much. Another question I wasn't seeking to answer was whether Islam, the religion of the Prophet Muhammad, contains in its purest form elements that fundamentally complicate Muslims' ability to live alongside believers of other religions—a hotly contested question nowadays. Here, then, Islam will only be mentioned when it touches upon Coptic lives.

I was significantly more moved by, and motivated to know more about, the fate of the murdered men for whom, I suspect, things had been rather simple. Some of them could read, but probably couldn't write, as there was no need to in their daily lives. They hadn't taken part in the political discussions frequent among Egyptian intellectuals—even the subject matter of such debates would probably have been incomprehensible to them, because their daily toil aimed to meet the kind of modest needs that, from loftier points of view, seem insignificant: providing for a wife, parents, and children; saving for a new house; buying seeds to sow in small fields; perhaps even putting some money aside, in case misfortune struck. These tasks shaped their daily lives much as it did the donkeys upon whose backs they unthinkingly strapped heavy loads, since they themselves were so used to bearing such burdens. Their gaze sunk in the field's furrows, unable to rise beyond their narrow horizons. People looking on from the viewpoint of Western civilization, as well as Cairo's academics, might well describe these men this way, and find ample material to back it up. Yet such a summation would be wrong, or at least grossly incomplete.

We have become accustomed to assuming that it is primarily political and economic motives that lie behind every religious conflict, because we don't want to consider the fact that a person's faith might actually be the ultimate, highest reality. But for these twenty-one Coptic peasants and migrant workers, that is precisely what their religion was. They lived in a world where, for the past several centuries, being Christian wasn't a given. For their long line of ancestors, belonging to Christianity had always meant being willing to bear witness to their faith. They were well aware of the disadvantages associated with being a Christian in Egypt. But these people who superficially seemed so weak, who eked out such a meager existence, were willing to accept these disadvantages. They didn't seem to struggle over the decision: what they held already, in the form of faith, was infinitely more precious to them than anything they could have acquired if they gave it up. Life itself, without faith, would have been worthless to them. It would be mere existence—an existence more lowly than that of the animals, for animals are perfect in and of themselves, but humans are imperfect; their aim for perfection requires divine assistance.

That is why I found it repugnant when the Twenty-One were referred to as “victims of terrorism.” The word “victim” seemed too passive to me, implying an unwillingness—a giving in to something forced, something one might complain about. None of that, I thought, suited the Twenty-One. I suspected they had a strength that granted them a well-protected inner core of independence, and I was convinced their murderers' cruelty couldn't penetrate that deep.

The fate of Coptic Christians in Egypt does not look bright, and it doesn't take an oracle to predict rough times ahead. But we mustn't forget that the Copts have fared badly or very badly ever since the Islamic conquest of the

country in the seventh century, meaning that they have had it hard for the last fourteen hundred years or so. Our present day marks just one more instance in a long series of scourges. The Twenty-One in Libya certainly weren't the first Copts ever killed – the list of prior crimes is long – and what has followed seems to be an attempt to surpass all previous horrors. The blood on the walls of Cairo's St. Peter and St. Paul Church, where just before Christmas 2016 twenty-four women and the sexton were shot during prayers, had not yet dried when over forty worshipers in the churches of Tanta suffered the same fate. And that atrocity had just happened when pilgrims near Minya, including many children, fell into the hands of Islamist murderers. Is it unfair, ultimately, to single out the Twenty-One and their fate from this long series of atrocities – gruesome acts it currently seems will continue into the future? This is a rebuke I heard from several Copts in Cairo, who accused the church of remaining silent about the many killings on Egyptian soil so as not to embarrass the government, and of emphasizing the Twenty-One simply because they were murdered abroad. I then tried to explain what I saw as the key difference between the many people shot or bombed and the Twenty-One: they had not only been defenselessly slaughtered, but they had audibly professed their faith in Jesus Christ just before and even during their decapitation.

Restricting my view to the Twenty-One, I refrain from speculating about the future of Copts in Egypt. Some may be left unsatisfied by my fatalistic view of current conditions, countering that we shouldn't resign ourselves to a permanent state of injustice and violence; after all, there are think tanks working hard to solve the world's problems. These thinkers, of course, would know exactly what questions to ask: Isn't there any way that the Coptic community and Islamic majority might eventually live in harmony? What kind of international peace conference,

United Nations intervention, peace mission, transnational roundtable, or moderated conflict resolution might take care of the “Coptic question”?

All this hand-wringing obscures a sense of despair bordering on the unintentionally comic. A degree of good will verging on self-denial, on both sides, would be the first condition of rapprochement, since the history of Copts and Arabs, Christians and Muslims, living alongside one another has had both worse and better times over the centuries, though no truly good chapters. The unresolved tension between Arab conquerors and vanquished Copts weighs heavily on present-day Egypt, though, honestly, the country has other hopeless situations as well. But violence isn't actually an option, probably not even for fanatical Islamists, because there are too many Copts to simply drive them all out or murder them. In other words, the Turkish solution for Armenians and Greeks is no longer on the table. And where would they be shipped off to, anyway? Over many centuries of Jewish diaspora, the Jews could always dream of their homeland in Israel. But the Copts are already living in their homeland, to which they lay a claim predating that of the Arabs.

The Copts' perseverance is all the more astonishing in light of the fact that such persistent pressures haven't caused them to crack. The *Twenty-One* displayed a similar steadfastness. On my journey to Upper Egypt I homed in on the places these martyrs had lived, orbiting them at both greater and lesser distances, hoping this approach might tell me something about those who can no longer speak for themselves.



Gaber

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