

Liturgical Syncretism and Doctrinal Resistance in Coptic Christian Communities of Upper Egypt: An Ethnographic Analysis of Ritual Boundary Maintenance (2010–2023)

Ashley Moore

Professor

Ain Shams University

Ain Shams University, Faculty of Arts, Khalifa El-Maamon Street, Abbassia, Cairo, 11566,
Egypt

George Moore

Associate Professor

University of Edinburgh

University of Edinburgh, School of Divinity, New College, Mound Place, Edinburgh, EH1
2LX, United Kingdom

Alex Davis

PhD

Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Institut für Religionswissenschaft, Unter den Linden 6,
10099 Berlin, Germany

Abstract. This study examines the dynamics of liturgical syncretism and doctrinal boundary maintenance within Coptic Orthodox Christian communities in Upper Egypt, focusing on the period 2010–2023. Drawing upon eighteen months of multi-site ethnographic fieldwork, structured clerical interviews, and systematic liturgical text analysis, the research investigates the mechanisms through which Coptic parish communities negotiate the integration of folk-religious practices with canonical sacramental rites. Findings reveal that lay catechetical networks and deaconal orders function as primary agents of doctrinal gatekeeping, effectively mediating syncretic pressures emanating from ambient Sufi Islamic devotional culture. The study contributes a revised typology of liturgical resistance strategies, demonstrating that ritual boundary maintenance is neither static nor wholly institutionally driven, but is continuously renegotiated through localized pastoral authority and interreligious contact zones.

Keywords: Coptic Orthodoxy, liturgical syncretism, ritual boundary maintenance, folk religiosity, Sufi-Christian interaction, sacramental theology, ethnography of religion, Upper Egypt Christianity, doctrinal gatekeeping

Introduction

The persistence of liturgical identity amid prolonged interreligious cohabitation represents one of the most empirically underexplored problematics within contemporary religious studies. In the context of Upper Egypt, where Coptic Orthodox Christian communities have

coexisted with Muslim-majority populations for over fourteen centuries, questions of ritual purity, sacramental integrity, and doctrinal coherence have acquired renewed urgency in the post-Arab Spring landscape of 2011 onward. Escalating sectarian pressures, accelerated rural-to-urban migration, and the proliferation of transnational Evangelical missionary outreach have collectively destabilized long-established patterns of interreligious equilibrium, compelling Coptic parishes to articulate and defend the distinctiveness of their liturgical heritage with unprecedented explicitness. Liturgical syncretism, understood here as the partial or systematic incorporation of heterodox devotional elements into canonically prescribed sacramental rites, has been theorized extensively at the macro-comparative level—most notably in the works of Robert Schreiter on local theologies and Rosalind Shaw and Charles Stewart's foundational anti-anti-syncretism framework. However, the micro-level mechanisms by which specific parish communities identify, resist, or selectively absorb syncretic incursions remain poorly documented, particularly within Eastern Christian traditions operating under conditions of minority status. The Coptic case is especially instructive, given the Church's self-designation as a custodian of an apostolic liturgical lineage traceable to Saint Mark the Evangelist, a claim that generates powerful normative pressure against doctrinal innovation. The relevance of this inquiry is sharply amplified in the 2024–2026 horizon, as the global resurgence of religious nationalism and the intensified digital dissemination of heterodox devotional content via social media platforms place new adaptive demands on parish-level theological governance. Recent ethnographic surveys conducted across the Nile Valley corridor have flagged significant variance in how individual clergy and lay deaconal bodies interpret the threshold between permissible inculturation and theologically impermissible syncretism, suggesting that boundary maintenance is an actively contested, rather than passively inherited, ecclesiastical process. This paper proceeds as follows. Section two presents the theoretical framework, synthesizing ritual theory, boundary-work sociology, and Coptic ecclesiological doctrine. Section three outlines the ethnographic methodology, including site selection criteria, interview protocols, and liturgical observation rubrics. Section four provides a granular analysis of three parish-level case studies drawn from the Governorates of Sohag, Assiut, and Luxor. Section five develops the revised typology of liturgical resistance strategies, distinguishing between sacerdotal exclusion, catechetical reframing, and interstitial accommodation. Section six discusses the implications of findings for broader comparative work on minority Christian liturgical traditions under majority-religion pressure. Section seven offers concluding reflections on the theoretical and pastoral significance of boundary negotiation as a continuous, rather than episodic, ecclesial practice.

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