

Anti-Intellectualism in Shenoute's Life

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Abstract

This paper briefly compares the evidence for anti-intellectualism in the history of Christianity in the United States with the spread of Egyptian Christianity in Egypt during the life of Shenoute (348-466). It begins from the hypothesis that there is a correspondence between the social and political forces in both societies, which cannot be explained away as mere coincidence, but which must depend on the presence of anti-intellectualism in the minds of both groups, despite their distance from one another in time and space. It seeks evidence for this hypothesis in the writings of Shenoute and his biography, along with circumstantial evidence from secondary sources. After a consideration of this evidence and the many points of similarity between these two societies, this paper arrives at the conclusion that there is very little support for the notion that anti-intellectualism was a major component of Sinuthian ideology, and that apparent similarities are the result of other unconnected but comparable factors.

1 Anti-Intellectualism in the United States

As Richard Hofstadter argued in his Pulitzer Prize-winning book (Hofstadter (1974)), anti-intellectualism has been a component of American culture and politics since before the Revolutionary War (Hofstadter, 1974, p. 6). That author's attempt at a definition is useful for the present discussion, and it is worth quoting in full: "The common strain that binds together the attitudes and ideas which I call anti-intellectual is a resentment and suspicion of the life of the mind and of those who are considered to represent it; and a disposition constantly to minimize the value of that life." ((Hofstadter, 1974, p. 7)) It is impossible to pinpoint the exact moment when this idea first arose, but it certainly gained prominence in the anti-aristocratic attitudes of early American colonists, who related the products of high culture, including education, to the abuses and imbalances of the European societies that they had just fled. With their immigration to the American frontier, the early pioneers abandoned any hope of a traditional education in a university setting. The now well-established East-Coast universities (such as Brown) were still in their incipient stages, and they were even less accessible to the average person than they are today (Phillips (1992)). As a result of these social and political prejudices, lack of access to higher education, and the harsh realities of frontier life, early settlers developed a "sour grapes" attitude to education in general (Hofstadter, 1974, p. 79).

Surprisingly, this attitude did not gradually disappear with the advent of civilization. In the absence of aristocracy, success in business offered social mobility to men of humble birth, and the

vast untapped resources of the new country meant that there was plenty of money to be made in the new industrial era. But while newly-minted tycoons founded universities and funded higher education as vanity projects (often shamelessly attaching their own names to the institutions they helped to create), in their rhetoric, these men regularly flaunted their lack of education in order to emphasize the scale of their success, and they rejected intellectuals as impractical and therefore hostile to the interests of business (Hofstadter, 1974, pp. 233-237). The opposition to education from business corresponds to a broader political division in US society: intellectualism has been established as the prerogative of a left-leaning, self-proclaimed “cultural elite”, while pragmatism lies within the domain of the right-leaning, self-made “businessman”. In everyday matters, these two groups are difficult to separate, because they share so many common interests, but this overlap disappears in political debates, where the goal of winning elections supplants all other concerns. Nowhere is this disagreement better evidenced in recent history than in the Left’s response to the perceived intellectual inadequacy of the (prep-school and Yale-educated) George W. Bush (e.g.: Jacoby (2008)), and this same argument has reappeared very recently in response to the candidacy of Donald Trump (Moyer (2016)). The result is that the Left impugns its opponents’ lack of education, even when these accusations are totally unfounded, while the Right appeals to its supporters anti-intellectualism by advertising its independence from the advantages of education, even when this is not true.

Despite this neat political dichotomy, it is likely that anti-intellectualism in the United States would not have survived without Christianity. The initial popularity of evangelical preachers derived in part from their shrewd perception of such undercurrents in American thought and their willingness to capitalize on them to further their own ideological objectives (and careers). The stereotypical association between Southern states, anti-intellectual biases, and Protestantism is neither illusory nor accidental. Beginning in the 18th century, revivalists tried to win supporters in New England and failed because the Anglican clergy was too well established there. They found willing converts, however, in the unorganized communities in the South and Midwest, where anti-elitism and anti-intellectualism were influential ideas among new immigrants from oppressive European societies (Hofstadter, 1974, pp. 74-76). The conclusion suggested by these facts is fairly straightforward: anti-intellectualism gained traction, not because it was attractive in its own right (all things being equal, why would someone be proud of a lack of education?), but because it provided a means for delegitimizing a maligned political institution (European nobility and the Church) and replacing it with another, more-accessible institution (grassroots Protestantism). The fact that the glorification of an ostensibly undesirable personal quality fits in neatly with certain Christian ideas, such as those expressed in the Beatitudes, was probably convenient for proponents of an anti-intellectual ideology, but this does not explain its origin.

Notably, the anti-intellectualism in these new evangelical sermons was neither subdued nor restrained. It has its most visceral realization in the deliberate and artificial use of hokey, homespun language:

But Jesus looked around and spied a little boy whose ma had given him five biscuits and a couple of sardines for his lunch, and said to him, ‘Come here, son, the Lord wants you.’ Then He told the lad what He wanted, and the boy said, ‘It isn’t much, Jesus, but what there is you’re mighty welcome to it.’ ((Hofstadter, 1974, p. 116))

but it is articulated most directly in the rejection of any knowledge beyond that which was necessary for basic survival or already found in Christian texts: “Read the Bible. It teaches you how to act. Read the hymn-book. It contains the finest poetry ever written. Read the almanac. It shows you how to figure out what the weather will be. There isn’t another book that it is necessary for

anyone to read, and therefore I am opposed to all libraries.” ((Hofstadter, 1974, p. 125)) However, the defining feature of American Christian anti-intellectualism is to see the pursuit of ideas for their own sake, not only as frivolous, but as dangerous to a believer’s faith. This attitude, though it is certainly hinted at in the ranting of the early evangelicals, was not a cornerstone of American Christian anti-intellectualism until the 20th century, when the scientific study of Geology and Biology began to challenge the biblical account of creation. These points become significant with regard to the spread of Christianity in Roman Egypt during Late Antiquity, where they can be used to find the minimum criteria to be sought for evidence of anti-intellectualism in the writings of Egyptian monks, such as Shenoute and Besa.

2 Egypt in Late Antiquity

Shenoute’s actions, as documented in his own writings and in the biography written by his successor, Besa, beg for comparison with other times and places. So little can be precisely known from this time, and so much is to be learned, that the attempt is worth any risk of anachronism or misinterpretation (provided that we follow the evidence with honesty and integrity, of course). In addition, several scholars (including this author) have independently suggested that a comparison between Egypt during the spread of Christianity and modern Christian societies, especially the spread of Protestantism in the United States, would be a useful endeavor (q.v. (Bagnall, 1993, p. 316 note 8), (Frankfurter, 1998, p. 27)). In particular, the appeal of Christianity to the disenfranchised members of the lower classes and the connection between the organized opposition to Christianity (or Protestantism) and educational/political institutions suggest that this comparison will be fruitful.

All higher education in Ancient Egypt depended on the temples, In particular, medicine, theology, and scribal education all revolved around the institution known as the $\square\text{𓆎}\square$ (*pr enḥ* = “house of life”), which was either a smaller component attached to a temple complex or a scriptorium associated with a specific parent institution. While the simplistic association between the $\square\text{𓆎}\square$ and the modern university has been thoroughly rejected (Gardiner, 1938, pp. 159), the point remains that Egyptian “higher education” (in the sense that it is understood to mean “erudition” and not merely the knowledge of one particular trade) was dominated by those well-funded, politically-connected, culturally-elite, Pagan¹ religious institutions: the temples. In addition, the financial endowments required to keep the temples running and the connection of this financial support to the political power structure of Pharaonic Egypt has been established beyond any reasonable doubt. These institutions were massively expensive, and they physically dominated the urban environment of Ancient Egypt (q.v. Figure 1).

Of the many features that enabled the long-term success of Egyptian religion and its associated temples, perhaps the most important was its reliance on mystery. The centrality of mystery in Egyptian culture is perhaps best evidenced by the frequency in Egyptian texts of the word $\overline{\text{stj}}$ (also often written *sstj*), which indicates that the concept of secrecy was extremely important to the maintenance of both religious authority and state power (Gardiner, 1938, pp. 169-175). The protection of secret knowledge helped keep Pagan religious practice in the hands of the elite, but there are probably more similarities between this society and our own than we would like to admit. Most relevant to the present discussion is the relationship between ancient religious mystery and modern scholarship, which has not gone unnoticed by Egyptologists:

¹I have chosen to capitalize the word “Pagan” and “Paganism” throughout this essay in an attempt to avoid the introduction of modern bias in the evaluation of the evidence.

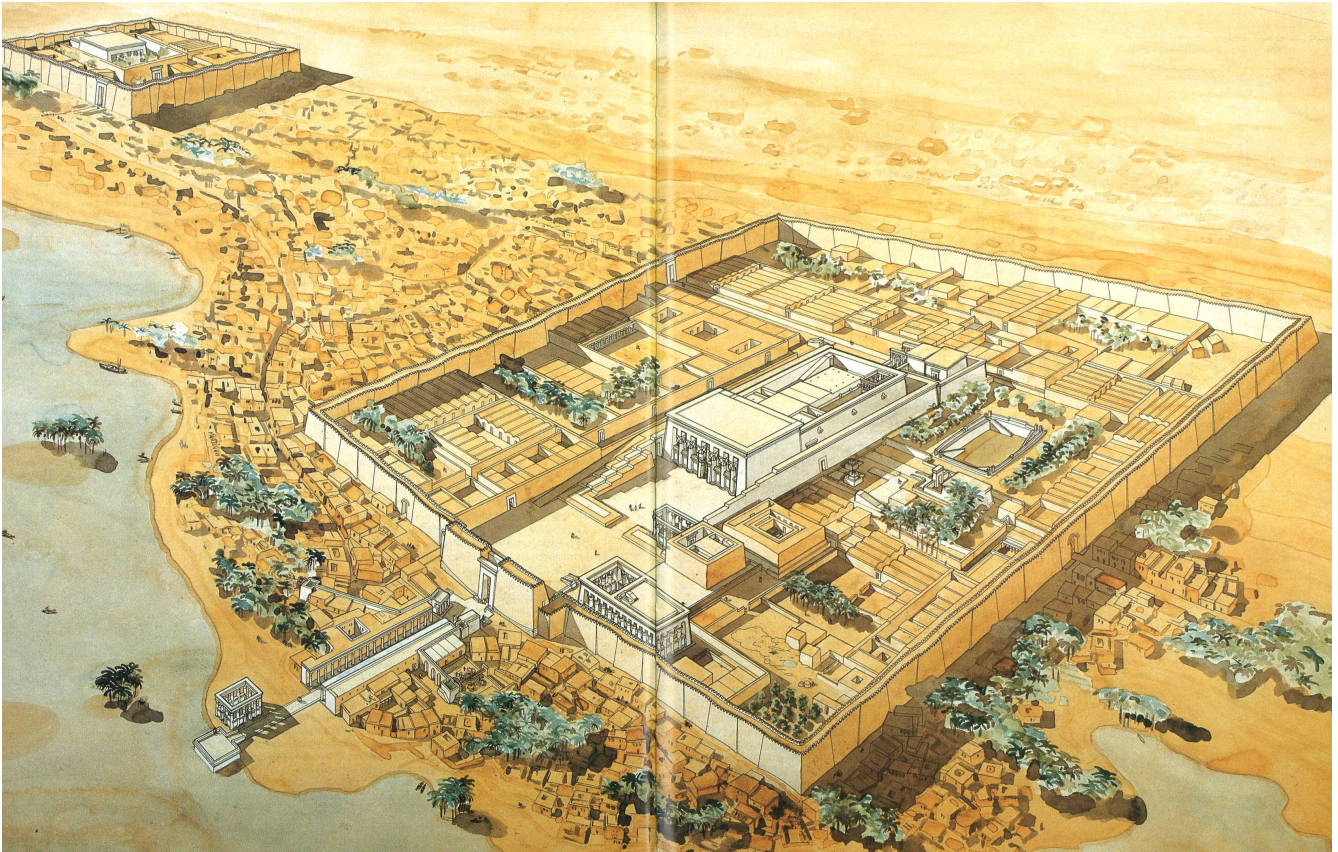


Figure 1: A reconstruction of an Egyptian town surrounding a temple (in this case, Dendera, but any example would suffice) shows the extent of state power required to maintain these institutions (Aufreere et al., 1991, pp. 226-227). In terms of domination of the urban environment and ubiquity in the landscape, the only appropriate comparison in the US is the university campus. Even the (much rarer) state capitols fail to compete on this scale.

Scholarship and arcane initiation are perilously similar. Academic conferences show resemblances to meetings of esoteric initiates. Many major changes come when such closure is broken and ideas are imported from outside; but these tend to be best received when proposed by internally accepted practitioners. ((Baines, 1990, p. 5))

Examples illustrating the deep truth of Baines' statement abound. From complex lab procedures and expensive equipment, which are inaccessible to the average person, to hairsplitting over different citation formats and other minor details that have nothing to do with the creation of knowledge, the Academy repeatedly demonstrates a marked preference for esoteric initiation rituals. While there is undeniably some practical value to this state of affairs, it also plays a less obvious societal role: it ensures that members cannot have their positions usurped by outsiders.

But this is precisely what happened in much of the US during the last few centuries, and the same seems to have happened to temple institutions in Egypt shortly after the arrival of Christianity. In order for monasteries to come to prominence in Late Antiquity, some societal force must have acted to delegitimize the existing Pagan religious institutions and invalidate their unique hold on power. Gardiner's argument that the Ⲙⲓⲛⲓⲛⲓ was more like a scriptorium than a university (Gardiner, 1938, pp. 175) must be reversed in order to consider the actual chronological progression: the Ⲙⲓⲛⲓⲛⲓ was not just an analogue of the Coptic scriptorium, the Coptic scriptorium was a *replacement* for the Ⲙⲓⲛⲓⲛⲓ. The full truth of the matter is even more remarkable than this single fact suggests. Egyptian temples provided many crucial social services, all of which were replaced by monasteries in a relatively short period of time. From predicting the future to caring for the sick, Christian institutions took over every function that the temple once had in Egyptian society (Frankfurter, 1998, pp. 184-185, 194).

How this happened exactly is still a matter of debate. The popular assumption that Christianity violently opposed Paganism and purged it from society has been challenged recently. But while it has been argued that attacks on Pagans corresponded to imperial edicts, rather than the rise in conversion to Christianity (Saradi-Mendelovici, 1990, p. 47), and that Shenoute *only* physically attacked Pagans on three occasions (López, 2013, p. 103), the balance of evidence still weighs heavily on the side of deliberate and overt iconoclasm (cf. Frankfurter (1998)). However, one particular component of these arguments bears further consideration. Both ancient sources and extant archaeological remains show that many sacred Pagan sites were neither destroyed nor converted, but simply abandoned (Saradi-Mendelovici, 1990, p. 47). This extraordinary fact demands explanation. Even taking into consideration the inevitable decline in the maintenance of temples that would result from the cessation of financial support, it is still difficult to explain why Christian zealots did not take advantage of the temples' vulnerability to destroy these symbols of Paganism if this had really been their ultimate goal. The obvious conclusion is that the destruction of these symbols was not their goal. In fact, it is clear from their actions that Christians valued the artistic qualities of these buildings just as their Pagan ancestors did (Saradi-Mendelovici (1990)). It is more likely given the evidence (and more in keeping with human nature) to suppose that both Christians and Pagans sought ideological domination of their rivals in society, and viewed the creation or destruction of artistic symbols as only one of many means to this end.

The Christians' method of obtaining a demographic majority in Late Antique Egypt was to create a legitimization crisis for traditional Egyptian religion, and they usually accomplished this in much subtler and more elegant ways than the destruction of buildings. One very popular approach was to deliberately associate Pagan religious elements with the Christian conception of Evil. Words which previously meant "active spirit of the deceased" (*ꜥꜥ*) and "the West" (*imtt*) developed into the Coptic words for "demon" (*ⲓⲛⲧ*) and "Hell" (*ⲁⲙⲉⲛⲧ*), respectively. This is not merely a quirk of

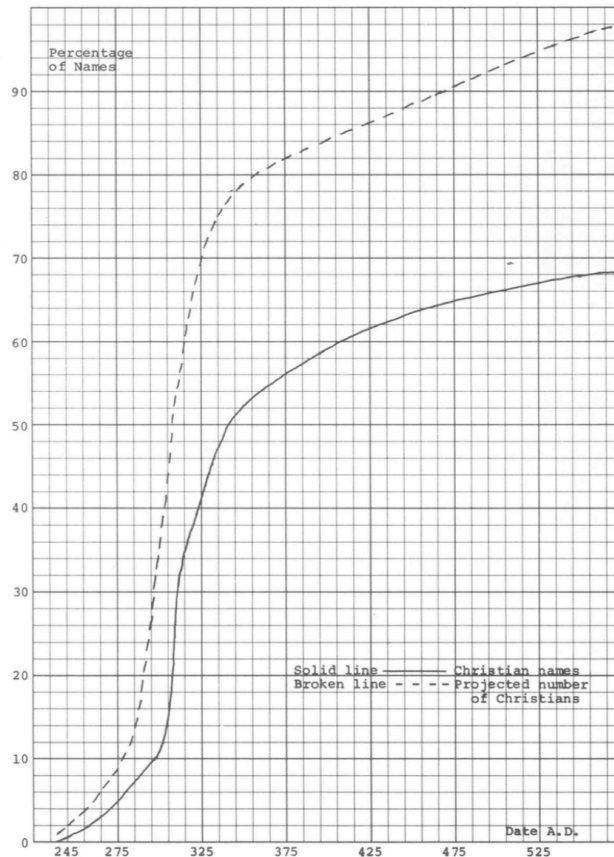


Figure 2: Rise in frequency of Christian names in Late Antiquity (Bagnall, 1982, p. 124).

language. Early textual evidence reveals a direct association between Pagan temples and demons, and there is even an instance of a hermit fighting the “demon” of a mummy (Saradi-Mendelovici, 1990, p. 56). There is also evidence for the increased use of Christian names during Late Antiquity (q.v. Figure 2), despite the fact that there seems to have been no religious objection to giving Christian children Pagan names, judging by the number of early saints with Pagan theophoric names. The switch to Christian names seems to have been a subtle act of defiance at first and later a claim to social dominance, rather than a simple aversion to Pagan names (Bagnall (1982)). Taken as a whole, the evidence suggests that Christians gained the most ground against Pagans by means of a smouldering culture war, rather than through outright hostility.

3 Shenoute and Besa in Their Own Words

At the same time, hostility toward Pagans was not absent entirely from Shenoute’s behavior, as evidenced on several occasions in Besa’s biography of him. For example, he seems to have had no reservations about breaking into the house of a Pagan opponent named Gesios (although he claims that the doors were opened to him magically) in order to steal the man’s statues, destroy them, and dump the pieces into the Nile: “ογορ εταυρωλ ριρενπιρο πτεπιρεληνος ρεντογνοϋ ανιρωϋ πτεπινη οϋωη ησανοϋερηνοϋ ψατεϋρωλ εϋοϋη επιμωιτ ερενηδωλον ηϋητϋ ογορ παιρη† αϋολοϋ ηεμνισηνοϋ εϋηεμαϋ αυενοϋ εβολ ριχενφιαρο αυκορϋοϋ αυαιτοϋ μϋαϋι ϋαϋι αυσατοϋ εϋρηι εφιαρο.” ((Leipoldt, 1951, 126, p. 57) and (Bell, 1983, 126, p. 78))

However, despite these indications of religiously-motivated violence, the early monks seem to have adduced an entirely different motivation for their actions, they claimed to have acted in defense of Egypt's poor: "αφτωνη οη πογσοη ηζελεηιωτ εθογαβ αλα ψεπογ† αφψε εθογηη εψμμη †πολιε ερεεσογ; πογρεζηηποε εθεε ηηβηηχοηε ετεεφρη μμωογ ηηηηηκη." ((Leipoldt, 1951, 81, p. 40) and (Bell, 1983, 81, p. 65)) This claim appears not only in Besa's description of events, written long after the fact, but also in Shenoute's own letters: "ητρε γαρ ετκο ηατπογτε ται τε τρε ετκελιβε ηηηηκε ρηηεκηηηρεφζηηβοηε." (Shenoute (2013)) Repeated references in both Besa and Shenoute's writings to Pagans mistreating those beneath them in social status, and claims of defending the poor from these abuses, strongly suggest that this was their primary motivation for attacking Pagans and Pagan institutions (at least in their own minds).

4 Putting it All Together

While there is evidence in Shenoute and Besa's writings for a sort of "class warfare" comparable to that which has been waged by American Christians against elite culture, there is no evidence whatsoever for anti-intellectualism either as motivation or justification for this conflict in Late Antique Egypt. In thousands of words written by or about Shenoute, there is not a single unequivocal instance in which any Christian author attacks the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. Further, neither Shenoute nor Besa ever attack Pagan institutions for the tight control they held over the spread of information in earlier times, even though this situation might have been ripe for criticism. Compared with the sermons of evangelical preachers, which make no attempt to hide their deeply rooted animosity towards intellectuals, the writings of Shenoute and Besa are remarkably silent with regard to the behavior of the Egyptian elite, and even openly strive for their own realization of an erudite style in the Coptic language. The revolution of Egyptian Christianity was nativist and populist in nature, but it was probably not in any way anti-intellectual.

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