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Transnational Anxieties: Coptic Christians as Martyrs and Migrants

By

Candace Bridget Lukasik

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Anthropology

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Charles Hirschkind, Chair
Professor Stefania Pandolfo
Professor Maria Mavroudi
Professor Mayanthi Fernando

Spring 2020

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Abstract

Transnational Anxieties: Coptic Christians as Martyrs and Migrants

by

Candace Bridget Lukasik

Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Charles Hirschkind, Chair

Transnational Anxieties examines how American religious and political focus on the persecution of Middle Eastern Christians has transformed Coptic identity in an era of migration to the United States. In commemorating martyrs and in making visible the plight of Christians back in Egypt, Coptic immigrants in the United States have engaged a new political subjectivity in a way that has transformed traditional forms of sociality, as well as religious practices and ecumenical efforts. The dissertation tracks this transformation starting with the socioeconomic reorganization of postcolonial Egypt, which created a new political order and presented challenges for an emerging national minority. These postcolonial challenges have traveled with Coptic immigrants to the U.S., intersecting with extant American racial and religious logics.

With the end of the Cold War, the United States emerged as the world's sole superpower, and the geopolitical enemy shifted from Communism to Islam. For American geopolitical and religio-political forces, the Copts offered a striking portfolio of imagery as Christian victims of Islamic terrorism. Copts became part of a broader discourse on persecuted Christians, emphasized by American evangelicals and, by the late 1990s, politicians as well. After 9/11, such discourses were amplified as the fight against terrorism became the central focus of American security directives and shaped foreign policy interests. Within this new era, Coptic Christians in the U.S. were not only understood as a community persecuted under Islamic rule by Washington D.C. policymakers and politicians, but many Copts also simultaneously became the targets of the War on Terror's racial logics of securitization. These American contexts have transnationally circulated back to Egypt, as well. Through social media interactions and communal connections with Coptic-Americans, Copts in Egypt have varyingly begun to interpret their minority status in a new way, through the different narratives and representations of their diaspora counterparts.

While Christian-Muslim relations in Egypt have oscillated between conflict and cooperation, animosity and friendship, transnational kinship connections have offered new reading practices and matrices of analysis. The dissertation ethnographically examines these circulations and feedback loops between the United States and Egypt and interrogates how Coptic encounters with American structures of religious-racial power alter the terrain of life for this transnational community.

For Saba Mahmood and Joseph Rogala

Memory Eternal

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Introduction

Uneven Encounters: Transnational Copts and U.S. Persecution Politics

Every June, Coptic Solidarity, a lobbying organization, holds an annual conference in Washington D.C. that aims to raise awareness on the persecution of Coptic and other Middle Eastern Christians. The organization, mainly composed of Copts, reaches out to American politicians, religious leaders, and advocates of international religious freedom. When I attended their 2016 conference entitled, "The Future of Egypt's Religious Minorities: Status of Copts After Two Revolutions," attendees were reeling from the recent attack on an elderly Coptic woman in the village of Karm, al-Minya, Upper Egypt. A rumor spread in the village about a love affair between a Christian man and a Muslim woman. A mob of forty Muslims burned the Christian's home to the ground, beat up the family, and dragged the seventy-year-old matriarch, Suad Thabet, naked through the streets.[1] Coptic Solidarity President Alex Shalaby noted, "The shameful incident in Minya serves as a reminder that Christians in Egypt continue to be the victims of discrimination and violence committed by perpetrators that all too often escape the hands of justice." Republican and Democratic politicians with large Coptic constituencies or strong interest in international religious freedom intermittently cycled into the room between speakers and sessions. Coptic clergy blessed the gathering and elite figures such as Egyptian Coptic billionaire Naguib Sawiris were the keynote figures of the conference.

During the second panel on the rights of Christians in Muslim-majority polities, Nina Shea[2], senior fellow at the Hudson Institute, a conservative think-tank in Washington D.C., garnered the most attention from her audience of Copts and US congressmen. "Today is the second anniversary of the ISIS attack on Mosul and from there all of Nineveh, in which every last Christian, Yezidi, and non-Sunni Muslim was told to convert or die. There is no Christian community intact in the so-called Caliphate. There is no religious leader, and there is no church that is functioning throughout all of Nineveh. Instead, those Christians are huddled in seven-foot-wide shipping containers in Kurdistan under the protection of the Kurds. They are basically in a hopeless limbo, waiting that someday they will be allowed to go back to their lands and rebuild their lives…Despite these tragic circumstances in Iraq and Syria, the face of ISIS persecution and the face of Christian faithfulness in the region are the 20 Egyptian Copts and 1 Ghanaian man beheaded on the shores of Libya last year [2015]. *That* is the iconic image of ISIS persecution of Christians and the fate of Christians under radical Islam."

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[1] Jane Arraf, "After 2016 Assault, A Coptic Christian Grandmother in Egypt Fights For Justice," *NPR,* May 26, 2017*,* https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2017/05/26/529508192/after-2016-assault-a-coptic-christian-grandmother-in-egypt-fights-for-justice.

[2] Nina Shea has been an advocate for international religious freedom and Christian rights. Her magnum opus, *In the Lion's Den: A Shocking Account of Persecution and Martyrdom of Christians Today and How We Should Respond* (1997) influenced the religious freedom movement that gained ground in the mid-1990s. For more on Shea and this movement, bringing together conservative politicians, American evangelicals, and others, see Mahmood 2015, 91-98.



Figure 1: Coptic icon of the 21 receiving the crown of martyrdom by Washington D.C.-based iconographer, Tony Rezk. Republished here with permission from author.

Shea continued: "Because so many people can't speak in Egypt, we need to use our power here…I'm thinking now of these Christians in Kurdistan and from Iraq and Syria, what can the US do there? I have two basic 'next steps': one is to help those who need to leave, to leave, and those who want to stay, stay…but yet there is no visa policy in the US to help these Christians. We're ramping up our Syrian refugee policy, and yet half than one percent of those people given visas are Christian, the rest are Sunni Muslim..." An older Coptic man sitting in the front row interjected, "Can you help us get priority for Christians fleeing the Middle East?" Shea responded, "That's what I'm trying to do." Another Coptic woman in the audience raised her voice, "May I just interject? I just came back from Egypt yesterday evening. One thing—speaking to the Copts in the diaspora doesn't help very much. You need to bring some Coptic kids from al-Minya to tell you exactly what happens to them in Upper Egypt, and ask them what they need in their own hometown." There was a cacophony of perspectives on Coptic plight in Egypt and the ways to help from the Coptic diaspora and its interlocutors in Washington D.C. and beyond. Politicians, think tank fellows, and government officials from the State Department, by way of panels and conversation, interpreted Coptic suffering and translated local contexts in Egypt and elsewhere in the Middle East through American religious imaginaries and political interests.

Congressman Louis Gohmert, Republican congressman from Texas and evangelical Christian, took the podium later in the day and elevated the role of the United States in saving Middle Eastern Christians, and particularly the Copts. Gohmert wove together a tapestry of American imperial power, calling on the US to save the world from evil enemies. "'To whom much is given, much is required.'[3] The United States has been so richly blessed, and it was Jesus that said to his own disciples, 'You're going to suffer for my sake,'[4] and they did. They were blessed beyond measure, but they suffered for his sake. Growing up in the United States, I did

[3] Luke 12:48.
[4] Acts 9:16.

not suffer for Christ's sake…but Christians are now suffering around the United States, and still nothing like we see of the suffering of Christians in Egypt." For Gohmert and many American religious figures and politicians like him, the idea of global Christianity has been shaped by narratives and representations of persecution. The United States, as global superpower and empire, has taken up the role of protector of the world's suffering. Chief among those suffering, Christians of the Middle East have figured prominently into these narratives and have shaped this theology and moral imaginary over the past three decades.

Gohmert continued: "If America does not stand up and use the gifts we have been given as a force for good, and a force to stop evil in the world, then we will not get to keep this gift…One of my biggest concerns is that since we have had the power to stand up for Christians across the world and stop their persecution, we have not, and now Christians are being persecuted in greater numbers than any time in history. And I believe it is our obligation as the United States of America that if we don't stop this, where God has given us the ability, then our run will be over and some other nation will be raised as the great nation and it may not be a freedom loving, caring, compassionate nation, it may be horrible…I believe that we have a role that we have been blessed with a purpose here in the United States and I hope God will forgive us for the lack of leadership we have shown in stopping the persecution of Christians…Hopefully we'll get the message across that will allow America to be the best friend Coptics could ever hope to have, short of heaven."

***

In the wake of the Arab Spring and civil war in the Middle East, Western religious leaders and politicians have been particularly concerned with the future of Middle Eastern Christians. The rise of ISIS in 2014 affected Christian communities throughout the region. In February 2015, Islamic State affiliates beheaded 20 Coptic Christians and one Ghanaian Christian on the shores of Libya. This iconic image of "the 21"[5] has garnered Western policy and mainstream media attention. As the region's most populous Christian community, the Copts have become the target of attack—from the 21 to recent church bombings between 2016-2017[6]—and news media have noted that an increasing number of Copts have left Egypt because of violence and fear.[7]

In this dissertation, I analyze how American religious and political focus on the persecution of Middle Eastern Christians has transformed Coptic identity in an era of migration to the United States. In commemorating martyrs and in making visible the plight of Christians back in Egypt, Coptic immigrants in the United States since the 1970s have engaged a new political subjectivity in a way that transformed traditional forms of sociality, as well as religious practices and ecumenical efforts. The dissertation tracks this transformation starting

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[5] This is in reference to Martin Mosebach's 2018 book *The 21: A Journey into the Land of the Coptic Martyrs.* Mosebach is a German Catholic writer who has focused his recent work on the foil of Eastern Christianity to Western Christendom's decline.

[6] Declan Walsh, "After Church Bombings, Egyptian Christians Are Resigned but Resolute," *The New York Times,* April 15, 2017*,* https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/15/world/middleeast/alexandria-egypt-coptic-church-suicide-bombing.html.

[7] For example, Amira El-Fekki and Jared Malsin, "Anti-Christian Violence Surges in Egypt, Prompting an Exodus," *The Wall Street Journal,* April 26, 2019*,* https://www.wsj.com/articles/anti-christian-violence-surges-in-egypt-prompting-an-exodus-11556290800.

with the socioeconomic reorganization of postcolonial Egypt, which created a new political order and presented challenges for an emerging national minority—the Copts. These postcolonial challenges traveled with Coptic immigrants to the U.S. in the late 1950s, intersecting with extant American racial and religious logics. As an emerging migrant community in the U.S., Coptic Christians developed political networks to lobby on behalf of communities in Egypt where increasing sectarian violence throughout the 1970s and 1980s impacted upon how the diaspora translated Christian-Muslim relations in the lands of immigration. These homeland contexts interwove with emerging American perspectives on Islam in the wake of the 1967 and 1973 wars between Arab states and Israel, as well as the 1973-1974 oil embargo, the 1979 Iranian revolution and the hostage crisis, among many other events interpreted by the Western press and policy experts during the 1980s and early 1990s (Said 1981).

Increasing Coptic immigration to the United States took place in a context where global discourses on Islam and terror were growing ever more present. Yet, American religio-political power struggles during the 1980s produced new contexts of translating Islam. With the end of the Cold War, the United States emerged as the world's sole superpower, and the geopolitical enemy shifted from Communism to Islam. American evangelical networks dually focused their efforts on converting Muslims and protecting the world against Islam. Coptic Christians increasingly immigrated to the U.S. throughout the 1990s via the Diversity Visa (or Green Card Lottery) as attacks against the Egyptian state and minority communities like the Copts became ever more frequent. As they migrated, Copts interwove such contexts into a new landscape. For American geopolitical and religio-political forces, the Copts offered a striking portfolio of imagery as Christian victims of Islamic terrorism. Copts became part of a broader discourse on persecuted Christians, emphasized by American evangelicals[8] and, by the late 1990s, American politicians as well. Persecution as a central theo-political analytic has brought together global Christian communities into a persecuted body traversing theological differences.[9]

After 9/11, such discourses were amplified as Islam became the central focus of American security directives and shaped foreign policy interests. Within this new era, Coptic Christians in the U.S. were not only understood as a community persecuted under Islamic rule by Washington D.C. policymakers and politicians, but many Copts also became the targets of War on Terror racial logics of securitization. These American contexts have transnationally circulated back to Egypt, as well. Through social media interactions with Coptic-Americans and communal interaction in Egypt, Copts in Egypt have variously come to interpret their

[8] Within the broader framework of American evangelicals, Catholics, Episcopalians, and other Protestants also participated in an emerging Christian coalition which advocated for persecuted Christians around the globe. For more on these coalitions and alliances see Neil J. Young, *We Gather Together*: *The Religious Right and the Problem of Interfaith Politics* (2015) and Lauren Frances Turek, *To Bring the Good News to All Nations: Evangelical Influence on Human Rights* (2020)

[9] This coalition, however, is not without its conflict. While many Coptic Christians in the U.S. may adhere to conservative political views on same sex marriage and abortion, they would also note that Protestants, and evangelicals especially, are heretical in their theology and beliefs. This is not a new phenomenon to the United States, but rather has its origins in Egypt. Since the 19th century when Protestant missions expanded throughout Egypt, the Coptic Orthodox Church has formed a particular theological animosity and political opposition to the influence of Egyptian evangelicals within the country. For more on Egyptian evangelicals and their interactions with Coptic Orthodox in Egypt, see Dowell (2015).

minority status in a new way, through different narratives and representations of their diaspora counterparts. While Christian-Muslim relations in Egypt have oscillated between conflict and cooperation, animosity and friendship, transnational kinship connections have offered new reading practices and matrices of analysis. This feedback loop has caused Copts in Egypt, for example, to view their daily interactions with their Egyptian Muslim counterparts through American political lenses that emphasize Muslim intolerance toward religious others—which offers few tools of differentiation that the Egyptian political landscape allows.[10] In the wake of the 2011 Egyptian revolution and increased bombings and attacks against the Christian minority, another wave of Coptic immigration has further altered transnational socio-political identity and religious tradition. In the wake of revolution, this dissertation investigates how Coptic concerns for kin in the homeland are translated by imperial interests in the lands of immigration.

The dissertation examines these circulations and feedbacks loops between the United States and Egypt and interrogates the ways Coptic encounters with American structures of religious-racial power alter the terrain of life for this transnational community. This introduction provides a historical gloss and general overview of the stakes of such encounters by addressing the waves of Coptic migration over the latter half of the twentieth and into the twenty-first century. It also frames such migration in light of broader religio-political changes in the United States since the end of the Cold War that will only be briefly touched on in the body chapters. Following these sections that introduce readers to the historical backgrounds traced by the dissertation, I provide a glossing of the theoretical interventions and themes that this writing aims to address.

Migratory Futures

In the wake of the Arab Spring and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's downfall in 2011, Copts have attracted attention worldwide as collateral damage of revolution and regime change.[11] In addition to local conflicts between Christians and Muslims, attacks on churches and the Maspero Massacre[12] added to Coptic concerns for their future in Egypt (Lukasik 2016). After the Muslim Brotherhood's forced exit from power, acts of retribution included the torching of dozens of churches nationwide in August 2013. In the era of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, Copts and their places of worship have also faced a number of attacks. As these events wreaked havoc on Coptic bodies and livelihoods throughout Egypt, many desired to emigrate to Western countries such as the United States. Immigrants packed churches in American Coptic capitals

[10] Coptic interlocutors in Egypt often differentiated between Islamists, particularly members of the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafis, and other Muslim neighbors, friends, and colleagues. For more on the aesthetics and politics of "Islamicization," see Gaffney 1994.

[11] Ross Douthat. "Democracy's Collateral Damage," *The New York Times,* October 15, 2011, https://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/16/opinion/sunday/douthat-democracys-collateral-damage.html; Rich Lowry, "Why Copts fear the crowds," *The New York Post*, February 11, 2011. https://nypost.com/2011/02/11/why-copts-fear-the-crowds/.

[12] In response to demonstrations over sectarian clashes in Aswan, Upper Egypt, the Egyptian military mowed down Copts with APVs and ammunition in front of the Maspero state television building. Over 28 Copts were killed and hundreds injured. "Fact Sheet: The Maspero Massacre: Seven Years On," *The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy*, October 9, 2018, https://timep.org/transitional-justice-project/fact-sheet-the-maspero-massacre-seven-years-on/.

like Queens, Brooklyn, Jersey City, Los Angeles, and Nashville, Tennessee.[13] In tandem with this influx, U.S. interest in the future of Middle Eastern Christianity intersected with Coptic contemporary contexts and histories of discrimination and persecution. As one priest emphasized to me, "The persecution is what connects us. I believe we're one of the most persecuted minorities in the world, if not at the top."

Like the Copts, other persecuted religious minorities from around the world have historically immigrated to the U.S.; most notably in the literature, Jews, Greeks, and Armenians (Brodkin 1998; Mirak 1988). In the post-9/11 context, Coptic persecution has been scaled from a national predicament to a global threat. This spells out a unique chapter of transnational Christianity, whereby the "saving" of Middle Eastern Christians has been embedded in a new phase of the War on Terror and the re-empowerment of the Christian Right since the rise of ISIS in 2014. Copts from Upper Egypt understand migration as both an opportunity to escape systemic discrimination, and in some cases, an economic necessity. Similar to Latin American Christians crossing over the treacherous Sonoran Desert, many of my Coptic interlocutors also understood their migration as much a spiritual event as it is a political and social response to pressure (Hagan 2012). In *Incarnational Exodus: A Vision for the Coptic Orthodox Church in North America* (2014), Coptic-American priest, Abouna[14] Michael Sorial, parallels Coptic migration to the Israelites' exodus out of Egypt:

> "After residing in and being enslaved within a foreign land for several hundred years, the Israelites were called out of Egypt by God. Their experience during the Egyptian exodus—the emigration of a mass group of people—produced a crisis of identity, which the Israelites struggled with for generations. The twentieth century resulted in a similar reality for the Coptic Orthodox Christians of Egypt, also known as the Copts."

Sorial argues that such a migration, spurred by intolerance in Egypt and financial opportunity in the West, challenged Coptic identity and the image of a Christian community "steeped in tradition" (3). The main theological analytic to best describe this dynamic is the incarnation ("And the Word was made flesh…" John 1:14). Sorial illustrates incarnational theology by way of the contentions of Coptic migration:

> "United to God in the flesh of Christ, the Church has continued to draw all humanity to the true knowledge of God revealed in Christ through similar acts of

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[13] The Coptic community in the United States is the largest Coptic community outside of the Middle East. It numbers up to 1 million persons as of the late 2000s according to Coptic advocacy groups, but only 300,000 according to the Church and even less 100,000-200,000 according to the scarce statistical evidence supplied by the Egyptian and U.S. governments. Importantly, most of the Coptic population in the U.S. today is said to have arrived in the 1990s and later (Elsässer 2014, 77; Brinkerhoff and Riddle 2012). The Egyptian Federation of Human Rights reported that approximately 52,000 Copts immigrated to North America in the first seven months following the revolution. However, there are no sound statistics of Coptic immigration after 2011. Based on my ethnographic research, though, it is possible that the post-revolutionary wave of immigration may rival that of the 1990s. See Emad Khalil, "NGO report: 93,000 Copts left Egypt since March," *Egypt Independent*, September 25, 2011, https://egyptindependent.com/ngo-report-93000-copts-left-egypt-march/.

[14] The Arabic term for "Father." This term will be used throughout the dissertation.

> self-emptying. Of the areas that is most challenging for the Church today is determining the proper role of culture. Whereas the early church was deeply concerned with theological matters directly related to the Incarnation of the Word, the contemporary church faces the same theological concerns with sociological ramifications."

Similar to other immigrant communities, Copts have had to contend with intergenerational issues of preservation and assimilation. Debates among Copts have included the elimination of Arabic, and in some cases, Coptic from religious services, separation of services based on generational lines, and cultural programming geared towards new immigrants and the second and third generations (mainly focused on cultural assimilation and apologetics, respectively). Paul[15], an interlocutor from San Francisco, California described this dilemma that emerged from the immigration wave after the 2011 revolution as the "great fall-out," as a "mass exodus" of the youth generations from the Coptic Church. "Second and third generation youth are alienated. Prior to 2011, progress was made toward assimilating the Church to their needs, linguistically and culturally. The Church is no longer their home," he noted. Dioceses across the United States attempted to quickly address the problem by consecrating English speaking, American-born priests. Although, the concern over "the exiting of youth" from the Church is a trope that was widely used in Egypt after January 2011 as well.

Abouna Daoud Lamie is a transnational Coptic figure who is well-known for his missionary efforts throughout southern Africa and whose family mainly resides in the United States. Lamie is the head priest at St. Mark's in Heliopolis, Cairo, and has attempted to transnationally address "the exiting of the youth" through social media videos, international conferences, and courses on apologetics. Paul, from San Francisco, identified the contemporary crisis of transnational Coptic identity through the lens of education. "We have preachers, but not enough teachers in the Church. There is a deficit in understanding why we believe what we believe, and reforming seminaries is vital to this. Secondly, there is a problem of relevance, especially in the diaspora, where pedagogical strategies of priests and lay leaders have become less and less relevant to youth. There is a language barrier. The youth feel like the elders are out of touch," he argued. Beyond this, *knowing* the faith has taken precedence over authoritative structures. "If I know more than the priest, I will not believe he is credible for my spiritual growth." As with Father Michael Sorial, Paul identified the main issue in the U.S. as confusion over the separation of faith and culture. "It is very difficult to make the distinction between what is Egyptian and what is Orthodox. Some Copts, even in the U.S., believe that if you're not Egyptian/Coptic, you are not worshipping in 'spirit and truth.'"

Transnational issues of spiritual authority have variously manifested themselves since the Arab Spring. In Egypt, Muslim and Christian leaders have intermittently focused efforts on combatting atheism. These efforts reached new heights in the summer of 2015 when press conferences, courses, and public talks were held throughout Egypt to address the problem.

[15] Throughout the dissertation, all names have been changed to protect the anonymity of interlocutors, unless they are public or historical figures. If a real name is used, permission from the interlocutor will be indicated in a footnote.

Bishop Rafael, then secretary of the Holy Synod of the Coptic Orthodox Church, was at the forefront of such efforts.[16]



Figure 2: Bishop Rafael sits in front of a sign that reads "The Church combats atheism." (July 2015) Photo by author.

The 2011 Egyptian revolution produced new pedagogical and spiritual challenges to the Coptic Orthodox Church. Many Coptic youth began to question their faith, and the rise of apologetics pedagogy and theological education extended from churches in Upper Egypt to the United States. These transformations inside of Egypt coincided with the rising number of Coptic immigrants to the U.S. The Coptic Church in Egypt sought to address these dilemmas through the establishment of the triennial Lands of Immigration (LOI) seminar. The first seminar took place at St. Paul's Monastery on the Red Sea in Egypt in May 2015 and aimed to address issues of evangelism, ecumenism, and the relationship of Coptic churches in diaspora back to the "mother church" in Egypt.[17] The seminar invited Coptic-American youth to discuss issues effecting youth retention and missionary work. Debate on new spiritualisms (Bender 2010) and culture war issues, such as same sex marriage, occurred between diaspora laity and the clerical hierarchy in Egypt. American, and more broadly Western, cultural contexts have impacted upon the Coptic Orthodox Church as both the national church of Egypt and a transnational institution. Since the Arab Spring, great focus on apologetics and theological education in the transnational Church has been a direct effect of the increasing numbers of Egyptian Copts migrating to the

[16] "*Bi-l-video…Anba Rafael yu'kad al-kinesa men asbab al-ilḥad* [Video: Bishop Raphael, on behalf of the Church, outlines the causes of atheism]," *Copts United*, June 16, 2015, https://www.copts-united.com/Article.php?I=2299&A=209447.

[17] David Bebawy, "2015 Lands of Immigration Seminar," *David Bebawy's Weblog,* May 22, 2015, https://davidbebawy.com/2015/05/22/2015-coptic-lands-of-immigration-seminar/

West. The LOI seminar held in New Jersey in October 2018 focused solely on pedagogy, education, and theology.[18]



Figure 3: Opening Session of the Lands of Immigration Seminar. (October 2018) Photo by author.

Following the revolution, Copts increasingly emigrated to escape the political upheaval. The number of Green Card Lottery recipients from Upper Egypt and asylum seekers transformed the generational dynamics of local parish communities in North America. Several new churches have been established throughout the United States and Canada to accommodate second and third generation youth who express distress at the class and cultural differences between themselves and the "newcomers," a term frequently used by interlocutors to describe recent immigrants to the U.S. Around the same time as the first LOI conference, the Southern U.S. diocese of the Coptic Church announced that the formation of the American Orthodox Church of Alexandria—a subset of the diocese—would establish parishes to serve American-raised Copts and other American converts.[19] The removal of "Coptic" from the title of the churches was scandalized by Egyptian Arabic press.[20] This move was a direct result of an increasing number of "newcomers" into diocesan parishes.

[18] "Sessions," *Land of Immigration 2018,* http://www.landofimmigration.org/sessions/.
[19] John Habib, "American Orthodox Church of Alexandria: What's in a Name?" *Orthodox Christian Meets World*, March 10, 2015, https://johnbelovedhabib.wordpress.com/2015/03/10/american-orthodox-church-of-alexandria-whats-in-a-name/.
[20] "*Infiṣal ūsqufiyyat janub al-Wilayat al-Mutaḥida 'an al-Kinesa al-Qibtiyya al-Misriyya* [The Separation of the Southern Diocese of the United States from the Egyptian Coptic Church]," *AlBawaba*, May 7, 2015, https://www.albawabhnews.com/1276791. Due to social media pressure, "Coptic" was later inserted back into church titles.

In the diocese of Los Angeles, Metropolitan Serapion's current auxiliary bishops—Bishop Abraham of social services (*Diakonia*), and Bishop Kyrillos of Christian education—were consecrated in 2016 to deal with the demographic shifts in the diocese and the resultant generational tensions. Their duties are divided between the needs of "newcomers"—from housing, work, and transportation—and the increasing needs of the second-generation who have grown frustrated at a lack of theological education in the Coptic Orthodox Church.[21] Among many of the issues voiced in these discussions around pastoral need and generational conflict is the lack of separation between Christian faith and Egyptian culture among the Copts in the U.S. Yet, these discussions are similar to many immigrant communities of faith. For the Copts, however, as a community of geopolitical interest, the American religio-political context that greets them has re-structured typical immigrant debates of assimilation and acculturation.

Global Christendom: Evangelizing Victimhood

While persecution has figured prominently into Coptic narratives of community and religious life in the Middle East (Heo 2018), Coptic immigrants to the United States over the past thirty years have encountered a different kind of persecution politics. In the latter half of the 20th century, American evangelicals[22] found themselves increasingly focused on a vision of Christian victimization in narratives of their own religious identity and a broader transnational awareness of a global Christian community. During the Cold War, evangelical narratives of persecution were centered on the suffering of Christians under communism, especially in the Soviet Union. In the 1980s, American evangelical publications gave more attention to Latin America than to the Middle East. Communism mattered most, and American Christians were most interested in the personal stories of Christians living under communism. As Melani McAlister (2008) has discussed at length, late Cold War evangelical internationalism intertwined anticommunism and mission-mindedness to form a dichotomous world of those with God and those without. Christians everywhere were understood to be besieged by those without God. As the Cold War

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[21] The diocese has organized services for "newcomers" consisting of welfare programs, driver licenses, social security, apartment searches, lottery and asylum applications, employment opportunities, and even instructions for Copts in Egypt before they even begin the process of emigration. See the following organization, a part of the diocese: http://saintabraamservice.com/.

[22] Not all American evangelicals have been conservative, not all have been white, and not all have been Protestant. However, in the late twentieth century, conservative white Protestants rallied around "evangelical" as a collective identifier. While American evangelicalism has resided disproportionately in the hands of its conservative white Protestant members, this dissertation refers to American evangelicals and evangelicalism as discursive frameworks, whereby evangelicalism has most forcefully shaped American culture and politics in the latter half of the twentieth and into the twenty-first century. I deploy "American evangelicals" and "evangelicalism" not to refer to a specific denomination nor people, but rather, I engage them as gathering posts for other conservative actors and forces that rally around concepts spearheaded by this coalition, which include persecution, religious freedom, and traditional values. Catholics, Mormons, Jews, Eastern Orthodox Christians, and as well as Middle Eastern Christians (such as Maronites, Copts, and Assyrians) have participated in this coalition. While this coalition has also been termed the Christian Right, I use the "evangelical" designation to signal the location of power and the pervasiveness of its influence. This dissertation offers glimpses into this religio-political convergence. For more on definitions, representations, and influences of American evangelicalism, see Griffith and McAlister 2007; Miller 2014; Turek 2020; Young 2015.

ended, this global vision began to break down. While American evangelicals have had religio-political interests in the Middle East since nineteenth century missions (Sharkey 2008), new opportunities for connection, communication, and conversion presented themselves in the late 1980s, when evangelical leaders began to remap their visions of a Christian internationalism. U.S. wars and geopolitical interests in the region opened up new places to evangelize and extend evangelical reach (McAlister 2018, 3).

In 1989, the Second International Conference on World Evangelization met in Manila, Philippines. 4,300 evangelicals from 173 countries began to imagine reaching "all the world" for Christ by the year 2000. Argentine evangelist Luis Bush proposed that the "10/40 window" (an area between 10 degrees and 40 degrees north of the equator, which encompasses the Middle East and much of Asia) demanded particular attention. It is there, Luis Bush said, that Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism "enslave" the majority of the inhabitants, the "billions of spiritually impoverished souls" (McAlister 2012, 144). The Conference on World Evangelization is part of the Lausanne Movement founded by American evangelical Billy Graham (also known as the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization), which describes "unreached people groups" as groups among which there is "no indigenous community believing Christians with adequate numbers and resources to evangelize."[23] The Middle East contains Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant Christians, yet it still fell under the category of the "unreached." For evangelicals like Luis Bush, Islam was a social system governing the cultural mores of the Middle East's inhabitants, regardless if they were Christian or not. To combat Muslim proselytization elsewhere, Bush said, "we must penetrate the heart of Islam with the liberating truth of the gospel."[24] Islam and Muslims became the target of evangelism and civilizational mission.

American evangelical moral imaginaries played a role in U.S. policy decision-making, as information and materials on the Persecuted Church were increasingly being produced and disseminated by American and European Christians, as well as Christians throughout the Global South with links to these international networks (McAlister 2012, 153). The end of the Cold War marked a shift in evangelical moral imaginaries and also corresponded to the reorientation of American foreign policy. On September 11, 1990, following the expulsion of Iraqi forces from Kuwait, President George H.W. Bush addressed the U.S. Congress. The "New World Order," he said, was one in which the world could be "freer from the threat of terror, stronger in the pursuit of justice and more secure in the quest for peace."[25] And this New World Order, while purportedly based on cooperation and internationalism, was to be a solely American World Order in which "Islam" and "terrorism" were molded as the twin figures of threat (McAlister 2001, 275). Events such as the Iranian Hostage Crisis (1979-81), the Beirut barracks bombings (1983), the First Gulf War (1990-1991), and the World Trade Center Bombing (1993) captivated American audiences. For example, nonstop media coverage of the Iranian Hostage Crisis brought the plight of the hostages and the revolutionary religious fervor of their Iranian captors into the homes of millions of Americans. While each of these contexts had their particular politics,

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[23] S. Kent Parks and John Scott, "Missing Peoples: The Unserved "One-Fourth" World: Especially Buddhists, Hindus & Muslims," *Lausanne Movement: Connecting Influencers and Ideas for Global Mission*, July 5, 2010, Lausanne.org.

[24] Luis Bush, "Getting to the Core of the Core," *AD2000*, Ad2000.org.

[25] President George H.W. Bush, "Address before a Joint Session of the Congress on the Persian Gulf Crisis and the Federal Budget Deficit," Youtube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=meXladt85oA.

American audiences were introduced by news media to new tropes on Islam and terrorism (Said 1997).

American victory in the Cold War aided the narrative of destiny and mission, and affirmed, for evangelicals and politicians alike, the victory of the American model of modernity, endowed with a reinvigorated belief in a universal mission. Above all, the end of the Cold War coincided with the coalescence of conservative Christianity as a dominant force in America's religio-political landscape. By 1992, for example, the Christian Coalition founded by Pat Robertson capitalized on American Christian feelings that they were quickly becoming a "persecuted" minority (Williams 2010, 229). The rise of the Coalition coincided with the convergence of conservative Christian positions and the Republican Party platform. The domestication of the persecution narrative also coincided with the push by evangelical intellectuals and activists to take up the mantle of human rights as a central paradigm for advocating for Christian persecution in the early 1990s. Key to such advocacy was the juxtaposition of America's advancement of human rights vis-à-vis the Muslim world. For conservative strategists like Diane Knippers of the Institute for Religion and Democracy, Islam as a religious tradition was incompatible with the church-state separation that American Christians claimed as a mark of their own commitment to freedom. While the great divisions of the Cold War had ended, Islam took its civilizational place. In tandem with the logic of the 10/40 Window, the Muslim world was both a place of spiritual darkness and a space where human rights were threatened by the improper mixture of religion and politics (McAlister 2018, 162).

During this era, former Cold War think tanks like the Hudson Institute, Freedom House, and the Institute for Religion and Democracy partnered with religious conservatives in shifting from the fight against godless communism towards the fight against persecution under fundamentalist Islam. In doing so, they began to advocate for religious liberty in new ways. One notable legacy of the ascendancy of American evangelicalism as a religio-political force in the United States is the passage of the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) in 1998. IRFA established the Office of International Religious Freedom in the U.S. State Department and a special IRFA advisor to serve on the National Security Council. While IRFA's stated mandate is to censure religious persecution wherever it occurs in the world, it provides a special waiver to important geopolitical allies and economic partners of the U.S. government, such as Saudi Arabia and Israel (Mahmood 2015, 95).

Prior to its final, revised form, IRFA proposed sanctions for countries that would violate religious freedom protocols. This presented particular challenges to Copts in Egypt. As documented in a 1998 article in the New York Times, Egyptian Copts saw IRFA has a new form of imperial interference that would impact upon Christian-Muslim relations. Edward Ghali Eldahabi, a Coptic member of the Egyptian People's Assembly at the time, noted, "Those who are trying to incite foreigners to interfere in Egypt's internal affairs are, in fact, stabbing Copts in the heart." An Egyptian Coptic businessman quoted in the article also said, "Such laws may advance the political agenda of some, but they overlook the harm it could do to all Copts here."[26] The transnational dissonance between Coptic communities speaks to the re-contextualization of Coptic identity and politics in diaspora, and especially within the annals of Washington D.C. policymaking circles impacting Copts between here and there. Selim Naguib, Coptic-Canadian activist intimately connected to Coptic-American activist networks of the time, noted in the same

[26] Youssef Ibrahim, "U.S. Bill Has Egypt's Copts Squirming," *The New York Times*, April 12, 1998, https://www.nytimes.com/1998/04/12/world/us-bill-has-egypt-s-copts-squirming.html.

article, "…it defies logic to say there are no problems for Copts when they are getting killed in their churches and shops and excluded from Government except in the most token fashion." The inclusion of Coptic voices into such debates and their diasporic enmeshment within American conservative politics has impacted upon Coptic life from Naj Hammadi to New Jersey.

Although the signing of IRFA was neither the beginning nor the end of the story of U.S. activism on religious persecution, it was a high point for conservative activists who wanted to make global issues central to their community. Their success was due in part to good organizing, but it was also the product of a new kind of "common sense" emerging in/from the evangelical public sphere. Such "common sense" has brought communities like the Copts into the evangelical and international spotlight, as Christian victims at the hands of Muslim monsters. In doing so, conservative political forces have compelled Coptic-Americans to tell their stories of persecution to new geopolitical audiences and, thus, Coptic collective memory of violence, subjugation, and trauma has been remapped into different political theologies. From the mid-1990s and through the early 2000s, the persecuted Christian movement, promoted by American evangelicals, showed a new kind of transnational solidarity. These religious campaigns and their political affects have placed communities such as the Copts into particular binds between diaspora and homeland.

While the movement slowed during the latter years of the Obama administration, in the Trump era, persecution discourse has been elevated to new heights, by the efforts of Vice President Mike Pence and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's intimate involvement in the religious freedom movement.[27] During his campaign and in his early weeks in office, Trump highlighted the plight of Middle Eastern Christians. The first version of Trump's Muslim ban even gave preferential treatment to Christian refugees. When Vice President Mike Pence spoke at the World Summit in Defense of Persecuted Christians in May 2017, he quoted Trump as saying, "Nobody has been treated worse in the Middle East."[28] By conservatives, such Christians were portrayed as being victimized twice—once when they were persecuted and again when liberals in the West cared less about them than other victims (McAlister 2018, 165).

After 9/11, while U.S.-based organizations and networks dominated the persecuted Christian movement, European, Asian, African, and Middle Eastern activists began taking on leadership roles. For example, lobbying organizations such as Coptic Solidarity, founded in 2009, has participated in such networks, inviting politicians, think tank fellows, and religious leaders involved in the persecuted Christians and the international religious freedom movement (Yefet 2017; Marzouki 2016). Despite Coptic involvement in the movement during the 1990s and 2000s, D.C. policymaking efforts have intermittently revived the same debates around IRFA. In December 2017, the U.S. House of Representatives submitted Resolution 673 calling on the government of Egypt to enact reforms ensuring that Egypt's Coptic Christians have "the same rights and opportunities as all other Egyptian citizens" and that it "end the culture of impunity for

[27] Matt Hadro, "Religious persecution is a global problem, Pence and Pompeo tell Ministerial," *Catholic Herald,* July 19, 2019*,* https://catholicherald.co.uk/news/2019/07/19/religious-persecution-is-a-global-problem-pence-and-pompeo-tell-religious-freedom-gathering/.

[28] Tommy Berry and Ron Nickel, "World Summit in Defense of Persecuted Christians." *Billy Graham Evangelistic Association,* May 12, 2017, https://billygraham.org/gallery/photos-world-summit-in-defense-of-persecuted-christians/.

attacks on Christians"[29] H.Res.673 was harshly criticized in Egypt, by Copts—including by the Coptic Church and activists—and by lawmakers and media in Egypt who argued that the U.S. Congress' tackling of this matter constituted gross interference in Egypt's internal affairs and that the problem of the Copts must be solved by Egypt alone.[30] Within these debates Coptic activists in the U.S. are described as "betrayers of the homeland" and "traitors." These framings are nothing new as the interweaving of Coptic otherness and histories of persecution are important aspects of contemporary Coptic historiography and folklore.[31] Comparable to the ways colonial regimes throughout the Middle East molded the minority condition, Middle Eastern Christian migrations to the U.S. at the end of the Cold War enmeshed communities like the Copts in new frameworks of religio-political power, reframing their identities and shaping their possibilities for collective action.

Thematic Contributions: Religious Networks and Circulations

The Coptic case helps to elucidate the interwoven nature of the local, the transnational, and the geopolitical of religious networks and circulations. On one level, the Coptic Orthodox Church dis-embeds localized relations in Egypt, and re-embeds them in new, overlapping networks across borders. While "diaspora" is used interchangeably, in Arabic [*aqbat al-mahgar*] and English, to describe Copts that live in the United States and other locations in the West, the term's association with dispersion and exile are too limiting to capture "the multiplicity of vectors and agendas" that characterize Coptic experiences both inside and outside of the homeland nation (Ong 2003, 86). Most early discussions of diaspora were firmly rooted in a conceptual "homeland" (Brubaker 2005). Studies of diasporas have expanded into addressing the implications for homelands and the multi-cultural states of immigration for groups marked by religious (Grewal 2014), ethnic (Bakalian 1993), cultural (Sokefeld 2004), national (Bernal 2006), and sexual (Beliso-De Jesús 2015) difference. Coptic "diasporic subjectivities" (Mandel 2008) are channeled through and administered by the Coptic Orthodox Church and its relationship to the Egyptian government. The transnational Coptic Church constructs and maintains a collective Coptic identity that, while having its own character and challenges in the diaspora, is also continually reconnected to the Egyptian homeland through religious symbolism,

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[29] Rep. French Hill, "In defense of Egypt's Coptic Christians," *Washington Examiner,* December 17, 2018, https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/opinion/rep-french-hill-in-defense-of-egypts-coptic-christians and Rep. French Hill, "H.Res.673 - Expressing concern over attacks on Coptic Christians in Egypt," December 26, 2017, Congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-resolution/673/text. For Rep. Hill's media promotion of the resolution, see Rep. French Hill, "Doing the right thing for persecuted Coptic Christian," *The Hill,* January 17, 2018, https://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/politics/369393-doing-the-right-thing-for-persecuted-coptic-christians.

[30] C. Meital, "Deep Divide Between Copts in Egypt and in the U.S. Over Introduction of Bill in U.S. Congress 'Expressing Concern Over Attacks on Coptic Christians in Egypt,'" *Memri,* March 13, 2018, https://www.memri.org/reports/deep-divide-between-copts-egypt-and-us-over-introduction-bill-us-congress-expressing-concern/.

[31] Other minorities in the late Ottoman empire were similarly labeled by Muslim majorities. For more on such predicaments see: Selim Deringil, *Conversion and Apostasy in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Bruce Masters, *Christian and Jews in the Ottoman Arab World: The Roots of Sectarianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Bernard Lewis and Benjamin Braude, *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire: The Functioning of a Plural Society* (New Jersey: Holmes & Meier Publishers, 1982); Donald Reid, "Syrian Christians, the Rags-to-Riches Story, and Free Enterprise," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 1 no.4 (1970): 358-367.

concern for Egypt's Coptic minority in a Muslim-majority country, the Church's administrative relationship to the Egyptian state, and, importantly, through continued Coptic emigration from Egypt to the United States.

Generally, the literature on migration and religion oscillates between maintenance and expansion. For example, in one scenario migrants use religious institutions to maintain ties to their homelands. In another, individuals form part of religious organizations and movements that connect them to coreligionists locally and globally. In this case, their primary identification is not to the nation, but to the global religious community. These two scenarios of global religious connection create and are created by the other (Bowen 2004; Kahani-Hopkins and Hopkins 2002; Levitt 2004). In the case of most Copts in the U.S., their faith, as *Christians* and specifically *Orthodox Christians*, guides the way they live their everyday lives, with whom they associate, and the kinds of communities they belong to. Coptic Christians immigrate to the United States and tap into networks of care through churches. Many Copts who did not necessarily attend church in Egypt lean on church networks for financial support and social interaction. Scholars have argued that many such immigrants, like the Copts, bring a much broader understanding of what religion is (Ammerman 1997; Hall 1997; Orsi 1999; Vertovec 2004). "The sacred and the spiritual spill over into the workplace, the schoolyard, and the neighborhood. When people adorn their refrigerator doors with 'saint magnets,' hang cross-stitched samplers with religious teachings on their walls, light candles in honor of the Vírgen, or decorate their rearview mirrors and dashboards with photos of their gurujis, they imbue the quotidian with the sacred" (Levitt 2007: 8). However, this scholarly separation of the profane and the sacred does not attend to how secular (Western) understandings of religion fail to account for the ways "religious" lives exceed secular demarcations of the public and the private, the "religious" and the "ethnic" (Agrama 2012; Bakker Kellogg 2019a; Fernando 2014; Mahmood 2015). With regard to the question in the anthropology of Christianity of Catholicism's and Orthodoxy's "invisibility" in earlier ethnographic studies, one must consider the profound tendencies of both Catholic and Orthodox forms of Christianity to structure communities as a form of life (Norget, Napolitano, and Mayblin, eds. 2017; Hann and Goltz, eds. 2010).

One aspect of the literature on religion and migration important for discussion on transnational Copts is the oscillation between allegiance to the original homeland and to one's global religious community. While a global orientation is prominent among my Coptic interlocutors, the U.S. context is still in charge of regulating movement across borders, religious expression, and issues of diversity and pluralism. In such instances, religious transnationalism is often depicted as a religion "going global." In cases where immigrants share the same vernacular or are members of a Church with a centralized administration (such as the Catholic Church), the propensity for such a pattern inevitably increases; religion offers a means for "transnational transcendence" of identities and boundaries (Csordas 2009). The above distinction obviously represents two ends of a continuum of a variety of possible combinations that are observed among various transnational or immigrant or diasporic groups (McLoughlin 2010; Roudometof 2015).

One of the major differences among transnational Coptic communities as compared to other religious migrations is the contemporary geopolitical interest in the future of Middle

Eastern Christianity. U.S. Empire[32] contains evangelical internationalism within it, as well as the military industrial complex, which continues to perpetuate and promote war and civil war in the region (Naber 2014). As John Collins and Carole McGranahan describe, "Today's U.S. empire is neither singular nor past, but instead persists, continuing to incorporate new peoples and practices while leaving behind others, in ruins" (2018). The enmeshment of religio-political actors in U.S. imperial formations (Stoler 2007) and interest in Middle Eastern Christians like the Copts makes their migration narratives quite unique from others.

In tandem with diaspora contexts, transnational circulation and feedback loops between the communities in the U.S. and in Egypt are important for understanding how such imperial formations impact upon the contexts of migratory departure. Migration and the circulation of ideas on social media networks between Egypt and the United States has certainly impacted upon issues of religion and identity (Fredericks and Nagy 2016). While diaspora has been discussed through the efforts and challenges of assimilation into the host country (Clifford 1997; Malkki 1993), host countries of diaspora communities also inform the homeland (Ghosh 1989). Copts in the diaspora and the Coptic Church engage in a "diasporic public sphere" (Laguerre 2005) by which on-line and off-line dimensions feed into one another, sustaining and expanding the sphere of Coptic interaction between the local and global (Brinkerhoff 2009), formally through the administrative apparatus of the Church and religious television that broadcasts liturgies and programming around issues of Coptic identity (Saad and Westbrook 2017; Iskander 2012), and informally through Coptic lay networks that address Coptic minority plight in Egypt (Rowe 2001). In Egypt, the U.S.-based Coptic diaspora, in particular, has oscillated between discourses of "threat" and "promise" (Axel 1996)—whereby their interactions with American politicians and pundits have had detrimental effects on the Coptic community back in the homeland. There has been increasing geopolitical focus on the community, which has enmeshed Copts within new imperial structures of power[33], whereby the affective dimensions of U.S. empire reorganize and discipline Coptic ways of life in diaspora. Importantly, new political affiliations under and

[32] I understand U.S. Empire as an imperial formation in plurality—an empire in place through the continuation of settler colonial projects, a military empire occupying countries physically and spatially, redefining territorial sovereignty in the name of democracy and freedom, an empire of ideas that is spread by global capital and global "religion" (in which I mean "Christianity," in its historical Euro-American developments), and an empire of racial infrastructure, that rearranges traditional forms of relationality. For more on how scholars have recently discussed U.S. Empire, see John Collins and Carole McGranahan, ed. *Ethnographies of U.S. Empire,* (Durham, N.C., Duke University Press, 2018). Alyosha Goldstein, ed. (2014) also draws on similar genealogies to examine present-day iterations of U.S. settler colonialism in North America and its overseas imperialism in the Caribbean and the Pacific. Anthropologists and scholars in Ethnic Studies have increasingly incorporated these analytics into their work. See: Zainab Saleh, "Seeing the Iraqi Diaspora through US Empire," *Anthropology News* website, July 10, 2019, DOI: 10.1111/AN.1200; Sunaina Maira, *The 9/11 Generation: Youth, Rights, and Solidarity in the War on Terror,* (New York: NYU Press, 2009); Adria Imada, *Aloha America: Hula Circuits Through the U.S. Empire,* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2012); Ann Stoler, "On Degrees of Imperial Sovereignty," *Public Culture* 18, no.1 (2006): 125-146.

[33] Copts had to contend with colonial reorganizations of life and knowledge under the British and Euro-American missionary influence. For more on this, see Omnia El Shakry, *The Great Social Laboratory: Subjects of Knowledge in Colonial and Postcolonial Egypt,* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007) and Vivian Ibrahim, *The Copts of Egypt: The Challenges of Modernization and* Identity, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011).

affective reorganization of life by U.S. Empire not only impact upon the administrative decisions and initiatives of the Church, but jointly affect Christian-Muslim relations in Egypt.



Figure 4: Protestor at the U.S. embassy in Cairo following the release of "Innocence of Muslims," an anti-Islam film produced by Los Angeles-based Coptic Christian, Nakola Basseley Nakola. September 2012. Photo from unknown archive.

The interplay of diasporic politics, transnational religious identity, and discourses of national unity are enmeshed in contemporary Coptic life. Copts are embedded in larger polycentric social fields and "sacredscapes" within which people, money, ideas, images, objects or values circulate (Garbin 2014). Collective experiences of diasporic religion shape the role of power relations and conflicts within wider transnational social fields. However, the question here is thus not merely what "travels well" (which scholars of migration and religion like Csordas 2009; Knott 2008; Tweed 2006; Vásquez and Knott 2014; Wong and Levitt 2014 have explored), but how power differentials shape and continue to shape what does travel (Rose 2019).

Thematic Contributions: Religion, Race, and Empire

Throughout the 1990s and particularly after 9/11, Copts in the U.S. became a unique ally to burgeoning anti-Muslim organizations and political campaigns, positing themselves as the original and exemplary victims of Islamic terrorism (Marzouki 2016). Religio-political leaders have championed the plight of persecuted Christians around the globe, and especially in the Middle East. The success of these efforts to politicize Coptic lives hinges on the post-Cold War remapping of the world, as a civilizational battle between Christianity and Islam. The increased migration of Copts over the past decade has taken place in this context.

Copts in Egypt have come to view migration to the United States as an answer to their economic woes and social hardships *as* Christians, assuming that their shared Christianity with the majority of Americans will protect them from discrimination. Morcos, a Coptic interlocutor in Bahjura, asked me over lunch one hot summer afternoon if the United States is predominantly Christian. I responded affirmatively. Looking at me inquisitively he continued, "This country is our country. We are its indigenous people [*al-asliya*]. They want to say that it is theirs, but that is plain wrong." For Morcos, there is an inter-communal divide between Muslims and Christians in Egypt. Put differently, Muslims claim Egypt as theirs, but it is really "ours"—Christian—because the presence of Copts in Egypt predates the arrival of Islam. Morcos understood the United States as a Christian nation, a place where Christians have power because they are the majority, contrary to Egypt, in which they feel powerless and precarious because they are a minority. Yet, even within this sectarian imaginary of majority-minority dynamics, Copts and other Middle Eastern Christians in the U.S. face discrimination because of their racial difference from white America, and suspicions of an overly close relationality to Muslims and the Middle East. These forms of discrimination manifest in a number of ways—from verbal and physical assault, murder, and securitization.

Islamophobia and anti-Muslim rhetoric has affected not only Muslim Americans, but also Sikhs, non-Muslim Arabs, or people of South Asian descent. The racialization of Muslims and Middle Eastern communities in post-9/11 America has meant that certain bodies have been made "suspicious." In the United States, Copts have been included among these suspicious bodies, and have tried to combat such suspicion through highlighting their Christian faith, one particular strategy that Middle Eastern Christians have deployed to assert a claim of racial-religious misrecognition. Thus, while Coptic racial difference—as a Middle Eastern community—places them into vectors of solidarity with other people of color, and with those communities who have been targets of the post-9/11 racial infrastructure, Copts have been compelled to distance themselves from such communities by American religious and political forces whose support hinges on their special status as Middle Eastern *Christian* victims of Islamic violence.

Coptic suffering and death has been translated as a warning for the West—that *they* are coming for *us*, too. In December 2003, Jonathan Eric Lewis at the *Wall Street Journal* wrote the following: "While Americans only became aware of the dangers of Islamist terrorism on September 11, Coptic Christians were subjected to a campaign of intimidation and violence throughout the 1990s when Islamists repeatedly targeted Coptic civilians. Given the fact that Egyptian Islamism was an incubator for al Qaeda, one can justifiably view Copts as the victims of the same sort of Islamic extremism that, left unchecked, went on to cost innocent lives from New York to Bali."[34] Coptic death was a premonition, a precursor to 9/11. For the author, Muslim-Christian violence in Egypt is emblematic of a more global problem. Such discourses have not only been propagated by mainstream media and Washington D.C. policymaking and lobbying circles. The Coptic diaspora is enmeshed in and engages these discourses in their everyday interactions.

In early 2017, I participated in a Serve-to-Learn program to Egypt through Coptic Orphans, a Washington D.C. based charity which aids the less fortunate in Egypt (Brinkerhoff 2008). A young woman on the trip, Farah, was born and raised in Canada. In her early twenties at the time, she had never visited Egypt prior to this trip. Her first experience of the homeland

[34] Jonathan Eric Lewis, "The Coptic Path," *Wall Street Journal*, December 24, 2003, https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB107223219966741100.

was teaching Coptic youth in one of Egypt's poorest villages. Before class one day, over hard-boiled eggs, tea with plenty of sugar, and sweet biscuits, she explained to me what Egypt represented for her growing up. "I feel connected to them [the Copts in Egypt] in that we mostly believe the same things because otherwise I don't think I would be very connected to these people at all because yeah I'm Egyptian, but what does that really mean back home? That I go to a Coptic Church and that I eat molokhaya sometimes…I wanted to come visit here a lot, but every time I wanted to visit, something always happened right before, like a bombing or at one point acid being thrown on women's faces when they weren't wearing the, ya know" [draws a circle around her face indicating the hijab]. "Your parents would see these incidents on the news or hear of them word of mouth and then prevent you from visiting Egypt?" I asked. "Yes. They'd say, 'No, you're not visiting. There's no way I'm having you, my 12-year-old child, walking the streets.' So, because of that my impression was always that it wasn't safe here and that the biggest divide in Egypt was Muslims and Christians. I've always thought that. Whereas coming here, I really don't feel like I see that divide at all…When we're in the streets, other than the women, I can't tell Christian men and Muslim men apart. That's one of the biggest things that has changed, before I just used to think it was completely divided…I was really surprised to see that there are so many churches and that these churches are huge and that our [Christian] bells ring and that the Muslims are okay with it.[35] Because it was my impression that Muslims always hated Christians."

The sectarian topography of Egypt molds diasporic identities as well. While other diaspora communities are affected by generational trauma, national politics, and violent memory in transnational contexts (Koinova 2017), Copts and other Middle Eastern Christian communities in Western diasporas (particularly North America) interface with Euro-American concern of "radical Islamic terrorism."[36] Western discourses of Islam, terrorism, and portrayals of the Middle East influence the experiences, relationships, and politics of minority diasporas like the Copts. There remains an analytic tendency to spatially and geographically separate U.S. empire from the realities of life in the United States. Contemporary U.S. imperialism requires us to reframe time and space—it is all happening together, even if in different spaces. The diaspora of contemporary U.S. empire means that one lives one's homeland differently, as part of a transnational diaspora (Naber 2014, 1114).

In addition to examining how power structures impact upon diaspora-homeland dynamics, the relative absence of race and racialization from the anthropological study of Middle Eastern Christianity has left important avenues of research underexplored (with some exceptions Heo 2014; Napolitano 2015). The first wave of Middle Eastern immigrants to the U.S. arrived from Ottoman Syria in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Ninety percent of these immigrants were Christian, and they established the first Arabic speaking churches on American soil (Kayal 1983; Marvasti and McKinney 2004; Womack 2016). Syrian immigration peaked in

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[35] Ironically, in late April 2020, some Coptic Canadians voiced their frustration at the announcement by Mayor Bonnie Crombie of Mississauga allowing for the broadcasting of the evening call to prayer (*azan*) from local mosques and other non-residential buildings regularly used for worship during Ramadan. For more on this see, "An Opportunity to Trump Hate? Copts Respond to the Muslim Call to Prayer in Canada," *Coptic Canadian History Project*, May 7, 2020. https://thecchp.com/2020/05/07/an-opportunity-to-trump-hate/.

[36] Peter Holley, "'Radical Islamic Terrorism': Three words that separate Trump from most of Washington," *The Washington Post,* March 1, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/02/28/radical-islamic-terrorism-three-words-that-separate-trump-from-most-of-washington/.

1914 and came to a near halt after the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 limited immigration into the US, especially from non-European countries. A second wave of Arab immigrants from more diverse religious and national backgrounds began in the 1940s, and their numbers rose dramatically after the US repealed the quota act in 1965.

The Coptic Orthodox Church established in Jersey City in 1970 was the first of a number of Coptic churches founded in major cities across the US (Abdelsayed 1977). New Jersey's Egyptian population continued to grow and by 1977 Coptic Christians had become the largest segment in Jersey City (Holsinger 2009, 47; Kayal 1977, 22). Today, Egyptians are the largest Middle Eastern group in New Jersey's estimated Arab American population of 85,956 (AAI 2015). Arab Muslims are the minority within both Middle Eastern and American Muslim populations (Salaita 2006, 9).[37] The entanglement of Middle Eastern Christians within post-9/11 regimes of securitization and racialization are important to track not only for studies of anti-Muslim racism and the Global War on Terror, but to also trace how the Christianity of Middle Eastern Christians separates and sutures such Christians to the workings of U.S. empire.

Since the First Gulf War, but especially after 9/11, Copts in the U.S. have also experienced anti-Arab/Muslim racism. Many Copts have come out publicly denouncing their identification with Egyptian or Middle Eastern Muslim counterparts, with the aim of disentangling from the American surveillance state in the War on Terror. This move was exemplified at a conference that occurred shortly after 9/11 in southern California held by the American Middle Eastern Christians Association, as it was then named. Mainly composed of Copts, Syriacs, and Lebanese Christians, local congressmen joined in on the discussion of the effects of 9/11 and how Middle Eastern Christians stand in solidarity with other Americans. During fieldwork in early 2018, I sat with Tony, a Coptic rights activist who organized the conference. He immigrated to the United States in 1969, and has only visited Egypt a couple of times since his departure. On the day of that conference after 9/11, he told me that the "influence of the Islamic religion" brought different Middle Eastern Christians together that day. Yet, following 9/11, their Christian difference from Islam proved ineffective in combatting racism. "Our faces are the same as Muslims and we're looked at as part of the problem," he told me. "White supremacists can't tell the difference. They hate us because we are not white like them and they think we are Muslim, but we're not!"

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[37] The Arab American Institute Foundation (2017) estimates there are close to 3.7 million Arabs in the U.S. The current religious makeup of the Arab American population is difficult to determine because the Census Bureau does not ask questions regarding religion. However, scholars have agreed that Arab American Christians account for upwards of 63-75% of the Arab American population (Kayyali 2018; Womack 2016). Based on the most AAI poll on religious affiliation taken in 2002 shows that 63 per cent of the Arab Americans surveyed self-identified as Christian. Of the survey respondents, 24 per cent identified themselves as Muslim (Sunni, Shi'a, and Druze). According to this survey, the Arab American Christian population is 35 per cent Catholic (Roman Catholic, Maronite, and Melkite), 18 per cent Orthodox (Antiochian, Syrian, Greek, and Coptic), and 10 per cent Protestant. See Randa Kayyali, "The People Perceived as a Threat to Security: Arab Americans Since September 11," *Migration Policy Institute,* July 1, 2006, https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/people-perceived-threat-security-arab-americans-september-11

Tony's speech during the conference was entitled, "On Both Sides of the Fence!" Using his nephew's experience at airports post 9/11 as example, he outlined why Middle Eastern Christians should *not* be misrecognized as Muslims, and more importantly how Copts and other Middle Eastern Christians can be allies with the U.S. government in fighting terrorism:

The tendency is for security agents and the general population to lump us in with others from the Middle East and view us with suspicion. Unfortunately, this has led to some horrific abuses. What people fail to understand is that Middle Eastern Christians do not victimize people. In reality, for centuries we have been experiencing terror at the hand of Muslim extremists that the Western World has only begun to know in recent years. Middle Eastern Christian have been placed in a difficult situation. According to Muslim extremists' narrow interpretation of Islam we are infidels that deserve to die. On the other hand, our fellow Americans often view us with suspicion after hearing our names and seeing our complexion.

…American Middle Eastern Christians, though we are loyal Americans, we have two problems. Extremists Muslims label us as infidels. And the fact that we might have the features of the 19 terrorists who attacked America on 9/11 compels some of our fellow Americans to suspect us of being terrorists. Sadly, this puts us on both sides of the fence. We are identified with the terrorists and the terrorized, the criminals and the victims.

We understand and expect that, given our unique situation, we have to endure some inconveniences. But I hope that the American people will come to the realization that because somebody looks Arab or speaks Arabic, does not necessarily imply he is a terrorist. The chances are that such a person might not even be Muslim. According to statistics, 75% of Middle Eastern people in the United States, who speak Arabic as their mother tongue, are in fact Christians. Let's join together in our fight to save America and humanity from the perils of terrorism.

Many Copts in the U.S. embrace and are embraced by American persecution politics as witnesses to the horrors of Islam and Muslim governance. This is not to deny the devastating effects of discrimination and sectarian violence on the Coptic community in Egypt. Anti-Christian sentiments are structured by religious politics internal to Egypt, but also influenced by the effects of continuous American incursions and wars in the Middle East. Tony's understanding of Islam and Coptic communal identity is shaped by collective memory and trauma experienced in Egypt, but also, by way of migration, Copts like Tony have re-read their such trauma through new lenses of U.S. empire. Tony speaks to the paradoxical predicament faced by many Middle Eastern Christian communities in the United States. Their real concerns for kin in the homeland are translated by imperial interests in the lands of immigration. In Tony's speech, the realities of migration became apparent—that a larger structural issue was at play in the reason many Christians throughout the Middle East, Africa, and Central Asia have migrated to the West throughout the twentieth century.

Christians in the Middle East no longer feel safe in the homelands of their forefathers. Throughout Egypt, the West Bank, Lebanon, Iraq, Sudan, Pakistan, and many other countries the story is the same. Many Christians are slaughtered or kidnapped for huge ransoms. Churches are burnt to the ground…The end result is that Christians are leaving the land that was once the cradle of Christianity and are immigrating to any country that is willing to accept them.

In the midst of war, civil war, and sectarian conflict, such Christians like Tony have left behind traumatic histories of violence and memories of structural and societal discrimination. In spite of these minority struggles in the homeland, Coptic positionality in the U.S. is again reconfigured by their racial and cultural status; they exceed the logic of racial legibility—being both from the Muslim World, but not the Muslim Other. Middle Eastern Christians, like the Copts, must contend with these transnational anxieties.

Thematic Contributions: The Anthropology of Christianity and Power

The subfield of the anthropology of Christianity has addressed how the return of various forms of Christianity to the public sphere—in the West and elsewhere— has had an effect on anthropological inquiry and imagination (Bialecki, Haynes, and Robbins 2008). The growth of Pentecostal and charismatic Christianities, and its influence on politics and piety, drew anthropologists (Engelke 2007; Keane 2006) and other social scientists (Marshall 2009) to examine, mainly, Protestant and Catholic Christianities as objects of study. Within this field, Orthodox Christianity has been less of a focus (Hann 2007). However, Oriental Orthodoxy, the denomination of many Middle Eastern Christians, has only recently been more critically examined. While scholars in the sub-field have lamented the lack of Orthodoxy in the anthropology of Christianity and identify a Western bias in the study of Christianity more broadly (Hann and Goltz 2010), most anthropological studies of Orthodox Christianity have neglected the Oriental Orthodox[38] (or non-Chalcedonian) churches.[39] The different histories of

[38] The term "Oriental Orthodox" became associated with the non-Chalcedonian churches by the first unofficial meeting between Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox in 1964. Until the colonial encounter, there was no overarching designation for non-Chalcedonian Christians. However, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Euro-American writers published works on the "Oriental" Church, which usually referred to the Greek or Russian churches when making the designation. Around the 1940s and 1950s, with the rise of the ecumenical movement in Euro-America, "Oriental Orthodox" came to describe non-Chalcedonians. In 1965, the hierarchs of the Oriental Orthodox churches officially convened in Addis Ababa under the invitation of Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie. As a note, "Oriental Orthodox" is not readily translatable from English to Arabic. The term has mainly been used for English-speaking, Western ecumenical audiences. In Arabic, "Rum Orthodox" demarcates the English term, "Eastern Orthodox," but this designation signifies the remnants of Chalcedonian Christian connection to the Byzantine Empire. On one of the first English publications of "Oriental Orthodox" to describe non-Chalcedonians, see John Romanides, Paul Verghese, and Nick Nissiotis, eds, "Unofficial Consultation between Theologians of Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Churches: August 11-15, 1964, Papers and Minutes," *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* X, no. 2 (1964). For an example of the "Oriental Church" label prior during the nineteenth century, see Rev. George Waddington, *The Present Condition and Prospects of the Greek, or Oriental, Church,* (London: John Murray, Albemarle-Street, 1829).

[39] Exceptions to this include Sarah Bakker Kellogg, "Perforating Kinship: Syriac Christianity, Ethnicity, and Secular Legibility," *Current Anthropology* 60 no.4 (2019): 475-498; Tom Bolyston, *The Stranger at the Feast: Prohibition and Mediation in an Ethiopian Orthodox Christian Community,* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2018); Angie Heo, *The Political Lives of Saints: Christian-Muslim Mediation in Egypt,* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2018); Mina Ibrahim, "A Minority at a Bar: Revisiting the Coptic Christian (In-)visibility," *Social Compass* 66 no.3 (2019): 366-382; Vlad Naumescu, "Pedagogies of Prayer: Teaching Orthodoxy in South India," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 61 no.2 (2019): 389-418; Anthony Shenoda, "The Politics of Faith: On Faith, Skepticism, and Miracles Among Coptic Christians in Egypt," *Ethnos* 77 no.4 (2012): 477-495.

Eastern and Oriental Orthodoxy makes a difference in how anthropologists construe the historical context of the twenty first century Orthodox world because this context has shaped that historical imagination in variable ways. (Eastern) Orthodoxy's historical relationship with empire impacts how Eastern Orthodox communities today understand their Byzantine pasts and ecclesiastical presents. For Oriental Orthodox communities, many of who were/are subjugated by the Byzantine empire, subsequent Islamic empires, European colonial regimes, and American imperialism, it is important to situate even the most neutral seeming of scholarly claims about the past within the very traditions of imperial Christian heresiology, ethnography, and historiography (Bakker Kellogg 2019b; Berzon 2016).

In most anthropological studies of Orthodoxy (Luerhmann 2018), beyond a dearth of material on contemporary Oriental Orthodoxies, there is a lack of attention to the post-national formations that make religious spaces new, important local and transnational modes of political aggregation (Napolitano 2019). While there is much attention on the aesthetic formations of prayer and piety (Meyer 2009), there is less attention on how such formations are mediated by politics, migration, and diaspora-formation in the shifting of local forms of Orthodoxy into new relations of transnational mobility (Coleman 2019). Attending to these new movements of people and ideas means analyzing both the specificity of Oriental Orthodoxies and the ways they are being reshaped by contemporary migrations to Euro-America.

The lack of attention on Oriental Orthodoxy within the Anthropology of Christianity points to a particular tension within the discipline itself. Anthropologist Joel Robbins, one of the spearheads of the sub-field, has noted that its emergence was a direct response to the "changing role of religion in the world," and to how "Christianity is no longer best described as a 'Western' religion" (2014, S160). The diversity of Christianity, as it emerges outside of the "West," is located in the growth of Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity in the Global South. Robbins suggests that its academic appeal lies in the fact that it is different from other streams of Christianity by its totalizing effect; it is "...a kind of religiosity that at once looks like the kind of total social phenomenon anthropologists of religion have long been used to studying and that it is impossible for field-workers to ignore" (S161). Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity encompasses life, behavior, attitudes, and aesthetics in ways that other Christian sects do not, according to Robbins.

In her article "Christianity, Anthropology, Politics" (2014), Ruth Marshall tackles the preoccupation of anthropology with the problem of difference, challenging many of Robbins' presuppositions on the sub-field. Cultural alterity is fundamental to anthropological inquiry, where Pentecostals and charismatics, while emerging from a Western, Christian tradition still epitomize political difference in the form of "Western political illiberalism and evangelical, conversionist cultural superiority" that anthropology has struggled against (Marshall 2014, S347). At issue for Marshall is the way in which Robbins, and anthropologists more generally, have made distinction based on cultural alterity fundamental to inquiry. With alterity as the centralized focus of anthropological inquiry, anthropology runs the risk of rendering difference as sameness—translating concepts into a Western legibility.

The central problem in the anthropology of Christianity then is to address these tensions. Moreover, if Christianity is to be understood as a discursive tradition (Asad 2009), then its study must also include "...anthropology's historical entanglements with colonial Christianity, empire, and the West's civilizational discourse. Indeed, it could be argued that

from a certain perspective, this tradition includes all social science, philosophy, history, and our names today for the secular, for sovereignty, for media and mediation, for world, for globe, and for the very space and movement of globalization" (Marshall, S350).[40] Marshall does not argue that modernity, secularity, and anthropology are mere unfoldings of Christianity. Rather, her argument seeks to understand how anthropology, as a modern discipline, can be conceptually parsed from Western Christendom, in that the emergence of such disciplines is founded on particular historical and social contexts of Christianity in Europe. The main problem for the sub-field, then, is to study Christianity as mere religion, when the epistemological grounds of "religion" are itself based on an historical, Christian context (Asad 1993). This premise is not only vital for evaluating the sub-field, but more importantly for considering ways forward for anthropology as a discipline and method of inquiry, where encounters with difference run the risk of being constructed as universalized struggles, under one united humanity, without important attentiveness to power differentials that perpetuate global systems of oppression and favor the expansion of particular religious and political styles and dispositions over others.

For a renewed theoretical understanding of the anthropology of Christianity, Christianity should not simply be treated as an anthropological object of study, as "merely a religion" (Derrida 2001, 74). Understanding (Western) Christianity's colonial legacy and postcolonial configuration, its global influence and reach, and finally its political worth is essential to considering ways forward in the anthropology of Christianity. Attending to the ways "Christianity" is read through Western sensibilities and methods of inquiry is vital to unpacking the blind spots of the sub-field, and thinking about interdisciplinary ways forward. The "repugnant" nature of some Christians is a debate the broader subfield of the anthropology of religion has had at length (Harding 2000). "Repugnancy" exemplifies how the discipline organizes the world into the familiar and the strange. The very act of power that such an organization entails speaks to the influential reach of Western forms of governance, knowledge, and religiosity that underpin the ways anthropologists methodologically approach Christianity—in any of its forms.

In considering the anthropological study of Christianity and the case of the Copts, imperial formation and asymmetry are important analytics for unpacking how theological difference is traversed in an age of U.S. empire. The Christianity of the Copts is utilized beyond ritual and theology. It comes to define civilizational difference—of who discursively belongs and who does not—and shapes religious practice, political orientation, and communal belonging between homeland and diaspora

[40] See also Jacques Derrida, "Above All, No Journalists!" in *Religion and Media, eds.* Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 56-93; Gil Anidjar, "Of Globalatinology," *Derrida Today* 6 no.1 (2013): 11-22; Ibid., "The Idea of an Anthropology of Christianity," *Interventions* 11 no.3 (2009): 367-393.




Figure 5: (Left) Bahjura, Upper Egypt. June 2017; (Right) Jersey City, New Jersey. January 2018.

Fieldsites, Methodology, and Structure

This project began over a decade ago. Since 2007, I have traveled to Egypt, visiting Coptic interlocutors, pilgrimage sites, and attending the divine liturgy throughout Cairo. Following my first trip to Egypt, I also began attending Coptic parishes throughout the United States. While my initial dissertation work was set to expand upon the relationship between the Church and youth after the 2011 revolution, changes in political conditions under Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi encouraged me to rethink this project as a transnational endeavor between Egypt and the United States, given personal experience at the parish-level. By switching the project's framing, it became increasingly clear that Coptic life in contemporary Egypt inherently entails transnational forms of politics, identity, and kinship, with more Copts migrating abroad and particularly to Western countries. Thus, in my dissertation research, I employed a multi-sited approach to "follow the people" and "examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects and identities in diffuse time-space" (Marcus 1995). Scholars have argued for more empirically grounded, multisite studies that enable the researcher to make comparisons between groups on a number of variables (Levitt 2001; Vertovec 1999). As a "mobile ethnography," my research has traced Coptic identity across and within multiple sites in order to understand the interlocking relationships between Coptic communities, globally, and the particular power relations a Middle Eastern Christian community in the United States must face in the context of the Global War on Terror and anti-Arab/anti-Muslim discrimination.

For this dissertation, I conducted fifteen months of research between 2016-2018 in various locations of Egypt, primarily the village of Bahjura, Naj Hammadi, Upper Egypt, and the United States, primarily Jersey City, New Jersey. It is difficult to contain this research in sealed-off field sites because of the constant mobility of interlocutors throughout Egypt and in the United States. In Egypt, I was constantly mobile by train between provinces in Upper Egypt, and in the United States, I drove between Staten Island, Queens, East Brunswick, Cedar Grove, and

Jersey City to follow the people that became my closest interlocutors. Beyond the literal movement of people, Copts have formed a transnational community through their mobile devices. Facebook debates, Whatsapp groups, and Viber communiqués were vital to my research. These technoscapes (Appadurai 1996) facilitated Coptic transnationalism in new ways that altered the material reality of the homeland. While my ethnography gestures to transnational networks "from above" at the institutional level, much of my work is centered on transnationalism "from below"—focusing on how such structures of power alter the terrain of Coptic life (Ebaugh and Chafetz 2002; Smith and Guarnizo 1998). Without collapsing the time-space distinction between the influence of U.S. empire "over there" and "over here," this study aims to methodologically challenge national borders and boundaries, historical event and contemporary life, by weaving together Coptic life between city and village, nation and trans-nation, through the transnational nodes and ties, and the density of those nodes and ties, as well as cliques and bridges, of transnational Coptic identity.

The dissertation is organized into two parts and five chapters. *Part I: Minority Migration as Postcolonial Condition* consists of two chapters: *Chapter 1: Vacant Villas, Living Pasts* traces structural and local changes in modern Coptic belonging. Through a reconstruction of village history and an excavation of the living past (Harding 1984), I offer a different perspective on intercommunal relations and Coptic communal identity during the nineteenth and early twentieth century. By interweaving a family chronicle of Takla-Sidarous, a Coptic landowning family, and contemporary ethnographic accounts of collective memory, the chapter offers an intimate perspective on the rise of a (Coptic) landowning class during the British colonial era of the latter half of the nineteenth century and their decline after the 1952 Free Officer's Revolution and subsequent land reforms that spurred the earliest migrations of Copts to North America. *Chapter 2: Minority Movements* examines the waves of Coptic migration to the United States during the latter half of the twentieth century, which transformed communal belonging and enmeshed the community in new racial and religio-political dynamics. This chapter engages participant observation and interviews conducted between Bahjura and Jersey City, New Jersey, among Green Card Lottery recipients, transnational clergy, and first and second-generation Coptic Americans. In the United States, Copts formed new political and ecumenical alliances previously absent. This chapter provides an overview of the stakes of migration to the U.S. for the contemporary Coptic community.

Part II: Traumatic Fragments—Law, Politics, and Theology consists of three chapters that focus on the effects of the Global War on Terror and how Christianity has been redefined in an era of securitization. *Chapter 3: Muslim Monsters and Christian Victims* focuses on processes of asylum seeking among Copts in the United States after the 2011 Egyptian revolution. Western news media described post-revolutionary Coptic migration from Egypt as an "exodus," and focused on the suffering of Copts at the hands of Islamist groups, the Egyptian government, and everyday Muslims. Such media narratives and discursive formations—of the Christian victim and Muslim "monster"—have impacted the adjudication of Coptic asylum cases in the United States. In the chapter, I attend to what I have termed "common sense legality," which tracks how shifts in legal rationalization and bureaucracy altered how Coptic cases were made to be persuasive. The chapter ethnographically follows Coptic asylum seekers as they apply and interview, and sit in courtrooms awaiting decision. *Chapter 4: Empire of Blood* unpacks how Copts have been caught at the nexus of American evangelical moral imaginaries and the racialization of Muslims in a post-9/11 context. The chapter illustrates how Copts have contended with War on Terror racial-religious power structures, and locates how Copts, as part

of a transnational diaspora, engage whiteness as a pervasive logic that reorders how they imagine Islam and experience Egypt, the homeland, differently. Building on the previous chapter, *Chapter 5: Transnational Conversions* unpacks how colonial and contemporary geopolitical interest in Middle Eastern Christian communities has affected Coptic religious practices and theological discourse. Through an examination of debates on religious education and morality at Bible studies, youth meetings, and national conferences in Egypt and the United States, the chapter examines the impact of the global cultural wars on Coptic understandings of religious life and secular threat.

Part I: Minority Migration as Postcolonial Condition

Chapter 1
Vacant Villas, Living Pasts

As evening took hold, we migrated upstairs to the roof for a cool breeze after a long, sweltering summer day. The sisters of the family took a bowl of apricots with them. I finished two and held the pits in my hands. Looking around for a waste basket, Christine, one of the sisters, told me to throw it onto the roof of the building next door. I found this very peculiar. I asked Christine if the owners of the building would find this offensive. "No," she replied. "The building is filled with cats. They moved to Cairo, anyways." Christine's village, Bahjura, lies between Naj Hammadi and Farshut in the governorate of Qena, Upper Egypt. Throughout the village landscape, there are vacant buildings, indicating the departure of kin and neighbors. Many have left the village for the capital Cairo or abroad, abandoning property and in their wake, altering the world of Bahjura. As villagers have left, those remaining have remade social and political relations within and between households.

Over the past fifty years, Bahjura's residents have sought employment and better livelihoods outside of the village—moving to neighboring Naj Hammadi, as it became the center of local commerce, to Cairo, or abroad, to Persian Gulf countries like Saudi Arabia and Kuwait for work, or Canada, Europe, and the United States to permanently resettle. Through the alleyways and streets of Bahjura, there is vacancy, which is an overarching theme in local folklore. Documented through various local publications and passed down by oral tradition, it is said that there was a historic fire that burned through the village, leading many to flee. Because of this fire, the village was renamed "Mahjura," (meaning, abandoned) and then eventually "Bahjura."[41]



Figure 6: "Welcome to Bahjura." October 2017. Photo by author.

Entering Bahjura, you leave behind agricultural lands and drive between two water projects. On one side of the road, boys and men use one for a refreshing swim on a hot summer day. On the other side, a garbage-laden canal is being packed-in by the local government. This is

[41] Sheikh Ahmed Hasan Al-Sharif, "Bahjura under the Microscope," *The Book of Bahjura* (May 1956).

the village's main road, from which you see scattered homes; some newly built, some abandoned, and some are magnificent colonial villas from the early twentieth century. Bahjura's villas—few occupied and many vacant—are a unique fixture of this small village's local history. The villas stand as a living testament to the Coptic landowning families that once held considerable political and social power, prior to the 1952 revolution and its land reforms. While many of them and their descendants have left the village, settling in Cairo, Alexandria, or abroad in Europe or the United States, their villas remain as well as the memory of their presence in the landscape. Areas are named after a former '*izba*, or plantation, stories of their families fill pages of documents at the local libraries, and their family names are on the tips of local tongues who describe their importance to Bahjura and their broader historical significance to Egypt. Yet, these lived memories are overshadowed by contemporary anxieties of migration, economic decline, and religious difference.



Figure 7: Bahjura's main street. Villas in the background. Summer 2017. Photo by author.

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This chapter examines structural and local changes in belonging. Through a reconstruction of village history and an excavation of the living past (Harding 1984), I offer a different perspective on intercommunal relations and Coptic communal identity during the nineteenth and early twentieth century. I investigate a world where Muslim-Christian mediation, sociality, and community was experienced differently; and when state institutions did not control most aspects of social life (Hirschkind 1997, 14). By interweaving a family chronicle of Sidarous-Takla[42], a Coptic landowning family, and contemporary ethnographic accounts of memory, this chapter offers an intimate perspective on the rise of a (Coptic) landowning class

[42] One of the last remaining family members in Egypt gave permission for the family name to be used in this dissertation.

during the British colonial era of the latter half of the nineteenth century and their decline after the 1952 Free Officer's Revolution and subsequent land reforms. Through the family chronicle and use of landowning documents, this chapter focuses on family members who operated within and between colonial and imperial institutions. This excavation aims to illuminate the reach and absence of Cairo's ruling apparatus on Upper Egypt.[43] In contemporary Bahjura, this era is remembered through current contexts of sectarian tension and migration in the wake of increasing violence against the Coptic minority. This chapter offers biographical and ethnographic accounts of the decline of the Coptic lay elite and the institutional rise of the Coptic Orthodox Church as state representative of the Coptic people during the twentieth century. The 1952 revolution offered many Egyptians hope in a postcolonial era. Yet, it also ushered in swift changes to inter-communal sociality at the village-level. This chapter focuses its analysis on the family, the *bayt*, which became the eye of the storm of agrarian reorganization of the 1950s. As reforms overtook villages like Bahjura, families like Sidarous-Takla, remade their methods and relations of production as well as social and political relations within and between *bayout* [plural of *bayt*]. Through a family chronicle on *bayt* Sidarous-Takla, I highlight the demise of Bahjura as a "social and moral universe" (Harding 1984, 161).

The collective effect of these reforms was to dissolve villages like Bahjura and the local ruling structure of its landowning families as ecological, social, and moral universes. As the local institutions of authority shifted away from families who owned property and agricultural lands, social decay was connected to loss of prestige and the dissolution of the family, and their home [*bayt*] as an ecological whole. Bahjurians constructed a world in which agriculture was more a livelihood than a way of life, in which interdependencies within and between village families, and between families and the land, were eclipsed by these land reforms, and in which local domains of authority and community gave way to more national commitments. As Susan Harding describes in her ethnography on social memory, revolutionary change, and agricultural reform in the village of Ibieca, Spain, "Ibieca was very much a world, one that evoked a sense of belonging, that staked a claim of place upon the minds of its people" (Harding 1984, 160).

As in other rural areas of the Middle East during the late nineteenth century, family rank and prestige took precedent over religious affiliation, defining elite status (Makdisi 2000, 35). Family alliances occurred across religious lines, creating alternate kinships that transcended differences of faith. The postcolonial era offered a new set of challenges to the Coptic community. Argued by Coptic politicians and elite figures in Cairo in the decades leading up to the 1952 revolution (Carter 1986; Mahmood 2015), the position of the Copts in an Egyptian nation-state was debated and negotiated. In contrast, many other minorities found that they were unwelcome (Beinin 1998; Dalachanis 2017). It is in this context I offer a perspective on pre-1952 non-equal, non-liberal pluralism from Upper Egypt, an under-represented region in archives and ethnographic accounts.

As historian Magdi Guirguis has noted, "In general, most historians of the Ottoman period rely primarily on the city records, which in my view represent the state discourse. However, these records do not give a picture of how everyday life in the villages was organized" (Guirguis and van Doorn-Harder 2011, 6). Throughout the Ottoman period, regions of Upper Egypt failed to come under control of the central authority, and while many Copts in cities were registered and had to pay the *jizya*, or poll tax, Coptic elites in Upper Egypt had an entirely

[43] For another example of this methodology, see Christine Philliou, *Biography of an Empire: Governing Ottomans in an Age of Revolution,* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010).

different relationship to state governance. The chapter traces this perspective from the early eighteenth century until 1952 to offer a counterpoint to contemporary literature on the Copts that focuses primarily on Church-state relations (Guirguis 2017; Hasan 2003; Pennington 1982; Tadros 2009). Providing another frame for understanding contemporary Coptic community, this chapter approaches understudied corners of Egypt's south to deprivilege the din of minority politics, the primacy of institutional authority, and sectarianism. The memory of and nostalgia for Coptic landowning families from different classes of Bahjura's Copts is couched with the contemporary constraints of Coptic life—marked by bouts of sectarian violence, Cairene imperialism, and the supremacy of the Coptic Orthodox Church. By unpacking the history of modern landownership and feudal relations, different traditions of sociality that traversed religious community can more fully be explored. Through this exploration, the current inter- and intra-communal conditions of Bahjura can be better understood. Local discourses among Bahjura's Christians about these Coptic landowning families reflect the tension between religious legibility in contemporary Egypt, and communal histories and collective memory of pre-1952 Egypt.

Bahjura, a Place

In "A Place Called Home?" geographer Doreen Massey describes how places must not be thought of as bounded areas, but rather as "moments in networks of social relations and understandings" (1994, 154). Instead of thinking of places as frozen in time, they should be thought of in terms of processes. Places are processes. Taking up Massey, I understand the history of Bahjura's Coptic landowning families not as a moment in time of the village, but rather as a process of understanding. Today, these families represent and narrate something different than what they did in pre-1952 Bahjura. Local interlocutors of various classes discuss these families with great reverence, without directly attending to the historical contexts of inequality between large landowners and peasants, or *fellahin*, who worked the land. Bahjura is a place, in Massey's sense, because it has always been a complex location where "numerous different and frequently conflicting communities intersected" (163). It is both a location, a coming together, a point of movement and flow. Yet, it is also a "changing geography of (changing) social relations" (167).

Coptic interlocutors juxtaposed Bahjura now and Bahjura then, when landowning families commanded authority, and "had power."[44] Remembering Bahjura as a Coptic utopia reflects the current conditions of minority life in Egypt. Since the 1980s, an increasing number of attacks, political instability, and economic decline have encouraged many Bahjurians to seek opportunities abroad. For those left behind, concern for the future is interpreted through a remembrance of the past. Bahjura's past does not already exist, but is constructed by present constraints, hopes, and fears. In *Yearning*, bell hooks argues, "Memory need not be a passive reflection, a nostalgic longing for things to be as they once were; it can function as a way of knowing and learning from the past…it can serve as a catalyst for self-recovery" (40). Recollection of the grandiose lifestyle of such families—with their villas, European clothing, and political status—points to the sense of loss and unfulfilled promises of present. Alternatively, it also indicates an underlying desire to rebuild new futures of Coptic flourishing by drawing inspiration from the past.

[44] Conversation with interlocutor in Bahjura (June 6, 2017).



Figure 8: Portrait of Kamal Takla, *Bayt Sidarous-Takla*. Bahjura. January 2017. Photo by author.

The Sidarous-Takla Family

Contemporary Bahjura is demarcated along religious lines, as are many other rural and urban areas of Egypt. The oldest part of the village, known locally as *Shig al-Nasara*, or the Christian area by neighboring Muslims, stands next to the canal. On the other side of the canal, former and current agricultural fields of past and present Coptic landowning families have become the poorer areas of the village. '*Ezbet Kamal*, '*Ezbet Daoud*, '*Ezbet Abu Iskander*: the names of the contemporary outskirts of Bahjura were all former plantations of Coptic landowning families. Along the old canal, villas of the Coptic landowners remain, many vacant. One such property was owned by Kamal Bek Takla, whose former *'izba*, '*Ezbet Kamal*, lies behind the family property. Today, a wall surrounds the compound, which contains the remarkable villa, the St. George Church (known locally as Anba Bola), and a four-story center built by the local diocese of Naj Hammadi, under the auspices of Bishop Kyrillos.

The Kamal Takla family left Bahjura in the early 1950s for Geneva, Switzerland, upon learning that the 1952 revolution was imminent and subsequent political and economic reforms were as well. The family left the villa vacant until the early 1980s, when Kamal's first son, George, known as "Berty," returned to Bahjura. Many Christian Bahjurians, including clergy, describe Berty's return to the village as marking the end of a world that reigned before the 1950s. During a particularly hot summer day, I sat with Abouna Mina of the local church in his office. He grew up in Bahjura and remembered the family fondly. He recalled, "Coptic families, like the Takla family, held all of the power because of their land, but now they are selling their lands. In the early 1980s, I can remember when a fight broke out between Muslim villagers during Ramadan. One villager hit the other. They went to the Takla villa, to Berty Takla, to settle the dispute." As described by local clergy and villagers alike, Coptic landowning families, like the Taklas, were looked to as mediators of conflict, even for fellow Muslim Bahjurians, because of their wealth and social status.

Few of these Coptic landowning families remain in Bahjura today, with their villas vacant, or sold to other parties. The Takla family is best-known of these families and not one of the family members resides in the village. Their villas are all that remain. I became acquainted with the Takla villa when I first started fieldwork in January of 2017. I participated in a three-week English language program for youth from Bahjura and the surrounding villages. We resided in the four-story diocesan center directly next to the Takla villa. Ironically, the washer was located on the second floor of the villa. During the first week of the program, we entered the villa to wash clothing and discovered a magnificent home still in pristine condition. Next to the grand staircase, covered in multi-colored light from the stained-glass window streaming in sunlight, stood four large cabinets with glass pane doors. While they were locked, I could see stacks of books and documents covered in dust and dirt through the glass panels. I became intrigued and kindly asked the house's caretaker to open one of the doors for me to look at the documents. He agreed, and I became acquainted with the Kamal Bek Takla family.

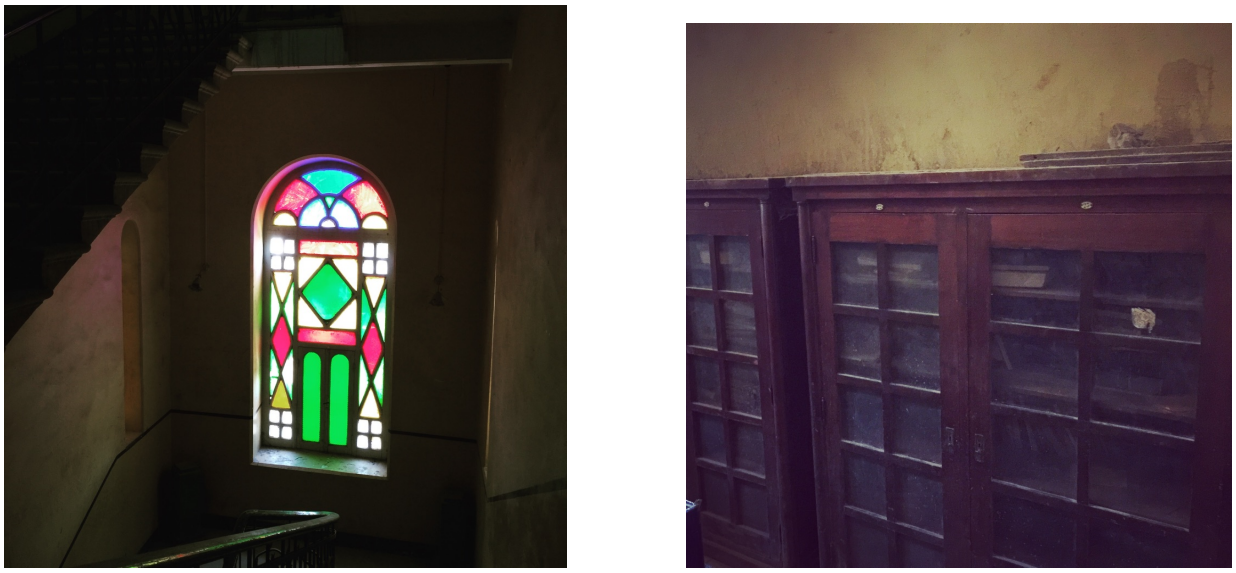


Figure 9: (Left) Takla grand staircase. (Right) The family bookcase. Photos by author.

Before their departure from Bahjura in the early 1950s, the Takla family commissioned a chronicle of the family, published in 1946 by Kamal Bek Saleh Nakhla, member of the Committee on Coptic History [*lajna al-tarikh al-qibty*] and writer of the well-known, "The History of the Coptic Nation" [*tarikh al-umma al-qibtiyya*] (1948). The family chronicle, entitled "The History of the Sidarous Family" traces a genealogy of the family from the seventeenth century through the twentieth century. As I sifted through the documents, trying to make sense of them, the caretaker pulled out this chronicle from another room containing more of the library. "This will help you understand who Kamal Bek *is*," he said, pointing to the portrait of Kamal, in full regalia that hung over the foyer of the villa. While physically departed, Kamal is present for this caretaker and many other Bahjurians I spoke with. The commissioned chronicle offers a glimpse into the movements and ascendency of such families in modern Egypt. While it documents the past, it speaks to possibilities of different futures beyond present predicaments.

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Mu'allim[45] *Boktor Sidarous was born in the late seventeenth century and is originally from the village of Balout, in Manfalout, Minya (Upper Egypt). While the Ottomans ruled from Cairo, local Mamluk rulers governed social, political, and economic transactions. Boktor was a primary school teacher at the local Coptic kuttab (school). He gained favor with the local Mamluk lords for his accounting skills, and eventually moved to Cairo, where he was able to build a family home in the al-Saqāīn area with his earnings. After his death in the early eighteenth century, his son, Solomon, also became a teacher, married, and became close, like his father, to Mamluk lords and Ottoman rulers in Cairo. He eventually took up a position in charge of the financial, clerical, and administrative affairs for local and state rulers. Ibrahim, Solomon's son, took up a position with Mamluk lords. In 1791, his first wife [unnamed] died of The Plague that swept across Egypt under the rule of Ismail Bek Al-Kabir. The remaining Mamluk lords, particularly Ibrahim Bek and Murad Bek, escaped the illness because they resided in Upper Egypt at the time due to political conflicts [al-huwadith al-siyasiya]. During this time, as well, Mu'allim Ibrahim al-Guwhary resided with Mamluk lords in Upper Egypt. In the late eighteenth century, after the death of his wife, Ibrahim accompanied some of the Mamluk lords to Upper Egypt, stopping in Isna. He marries there, and his wife, Delagy, gives birth to two boys and one girl. They eventually left Isna, and traveled back to Cairo to live in their family home in al-Saqāīn. There, he buys additional, connected properties to expand the family home. Back in Cairo, Ibrahim takes up work in land registry [musalḥa al-masaḥa]. Ibrahim died at the end of the eighteenth century, but left his inheritance to his two sons, Mankarius and Estasius. The two returned to Upper Egypt, after Ibrahim's death, landing in Farshūt, to the west of Bahjura, to work with the infamous Sheikh al-Arab Hammam Yusuf al-Kabir. Designated also as a "mu'allim," or teacher, Mankarius gained favor with Sheikh al-Arab Ali Yusuf Issa, a close relative of Sheikh al-Arab Hammam, and sought Mankarius' expertise in the management of his properties [idara amlaku], and his general affairs. Because of Mankarius' success with Sheikh al-Arab Ali, Sheikh al-Arab Hammam asked Mankarius to work for him personally in Farshut. Their friendship grew because of Mankarius' success in his initial role, which pushed Sheikh al-Arab Hammam to put Mankarius in charge of all of his affairs [kūl al-'amal]. Because of Bahjura's proximity to Farshūt, both Mankarius and Estasius eventually married from the village, and Mankarius bought a house on the Western part of the canal [al-tera'a].*

During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the political situation [al-ḥalat al-siyasiya] was complicated, especially in Upper Egypt, where conflict raged between Mamluk lords and the Ottoman state, and also between these parties and the French, who had begun their occupation [1798-1801]. Because of his mediation between these different political powers, Sheikh al-Arab Hammam was well-respected [manzila muḥtarima] among all of the local tribes. Mankarius died during this period, and the Sheikh was distraught [ḥuzanan shadidan] because Mankarius helped him with more than just the management of his affairs. Following his passing, Sheikh al-Arab Hammam entrusted Mankarius' brother, Estasius, with his affairs. Knowing that Mankarius left a son, Gerges, the Sheikh took care of the child. It is written that he said: "God willing you will be as great as your father [insha'Allah ta'ala takun kheir khalif lkheir salif]…"[46]

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[45] An honorary designation of respect. Its literal translation is "teacher."

[46] Kamel Saleh Nakhla, *The History of the Sidarous Family*, (1946), 1-8. All translations are mine.

The close relationship of the Sidarous-Takla family to those in power—such as the Mamluk lords and Sheikh al-Arab Hammam—operated through negotiation, competency, and management. Yet, more than that, there was a sense of intercommunal care and familial intimacy. Shared life, environment, and priorities between the family and various rulers evidence not simply transaction, but also connection through common flourishing. In a similar fashion, historian Ussama Makdisi (2000) describes how social status rather than religious identity mediated communal relations in rural Mount Lebanon around the same time as Mankarius and Estasius. Makdisi writes, "The great families of Mount Lebanon presented themselves as the intermediaries between religious communities. They drew their pride and their social position from a combination of their religious standing and the respect, tradition, and reciprocity that they enjoyed with other elite families" (35). Makdisi goes at lengths to argue that conflict between Druzes and Maronites in Mount Lebanon was described through religious difference, but it was subordinate to and enmeshed in a range of competing discourses of obedience, allegiance, and loyalty inherent in local society. There were shared values and interests held by the political elite, regardless of religious affiliation, as the chronicle also suggests.

Shared life through material concerns and values molded relations beyond religious difference. Yet, by imperial and colonial manipulations of the nineteenth century, new concerns were brought to the fore throughout the region. The portrayal of Mount Lebanon, for example, as a Christian sanctuary under threat from Islam was not something that registered to local communities until the onslaught of Western missionary efforts (Makdisi, 41). In the competition between Western colonial powers, Ottoman imperial will, and local elites, villagers of Mount Lebanon, as in Upper Egypt, grappled with competing forces and pulls that drew them out of everyday material concerns. While this chapter focuses on the lives of an elite landowning family in Egypt, it also seeks to trace through other historical examples what life may have been like for the agricultural classes (peasants, or *fellahin*) in Egypt. Makdisi constructs how agricultural life in the village may have been experienced by *fellahin*.

> "The villagers centered their lives around various crops and trees. Seasons were described by the produce they brought in their wake, and the all-important mulberry tree's yield made the difference between prosperity and penury. Women unwound and reeled raw silk and participated in battles. Together with the men of the village they struggled to pay a number of taxes, the largest of which was the basic Ottoman land tax known as the miri, which amounted to 10 percent of the produce of the cultivated land. Depending on the region, villagers had numerous other obligations: in Kisrawan, they presented their shaykhs with a quantity of soap, coffee, honey, or tobacco at Easter or on the occasion of the marriages of the shaykhs' daughters, sons, or sisters. Villagers could not marry without the permission of their lord, and it would have been unheard of to have a celebration or feast without inviting the clergy. Certain plots of land that the shaykh owned were set aside and not taxed. The produce of this land defrayed the costs of hospitality, but it was the peasants who had to work the land collectively, usually on a Sunday after the local clergymen had exhorted them to do God's bidding" (Makdisi, 42-43).

Comparably, we can surmise that the lives of villagers from Egypt's rural parts were quite different from those living in Cairo. While those in Upper Egypt intermittently interacted

with imperial rule, they also maintained their own customs and traditions. This is quite evident in the historical accounts that differentiate Coptic-Muslim relations and mores in the city from the countryside. Edward Lane (1801-1876) wrote that in towns and cities, Copts and Muslims wore distinctively different attire. "In towns, they [the Copts] are usually careful thus to distinguish themselves from the Muslims, but in the villages, many of them wear the white or red turban [usually reserved for Muslim city dwellers]" (Lane 1871, 535-536). Andrew Watson (1834-1916) of the American mission in Egypt notes the same: "No respectable Copts in the large towns would then allow himself to be mistaken for a Muslim by wearing a white turban, even had he been allowed to do so; but in the villages there are no such distinctly marked lines" (Watson 1904, 54). It's important to note that many such descriptions were of *fellahin* and not of elite families like Sidarous-Takla, who adapted their styles to the imperial, and later colonial, powers they served. The purposes of arguing regional distinction is to disrupt traditional historiography on Christian-Muslim relations centered in cities.[47]

Copts and Muslims of the same social class, even in villages, would have more in common than a Coptic *fellah* and a member of a landowning family. Or, as historian Doris Behrens-Abouseif has argued: "In villages differences between Copts and Muslims were not very prominent, and the traditional Islamic restrictions on the dhimmi not to ride horses or wear white turbans as well as not to carry weapons, were much less respected in villages than in cities. As observed by a longtime European resident in Egypt, a Coptic peasant has much less in common with a Copt from the city than he has with a Muslim peasant" (1982, 186). Orientalist historians of modern Egypt even noted that before the British occupation of 1882, they had seen "…Coptic churches built by Moslems, and a mosque, built only a year or two before the Occupation, by a Coptic landowner. In the Secular Coptic schools, built by private munificence, in different parts of the country, I have never failed to find Moslem pupils; and no one thinks of excluding Coptic children from similar schools built by the Moslems, especially in the country places."[48]

The importance of tracing the historiography of the Sidarous-Takla family then lies in imagining Christian identity in Egypt otherwise. It is not to deny that incidents of violence and discrimination intermittently did take place against Christians and other communities in Egypt, or that Christians even in Egypt's southern and rural parts were not captured by imperial influences of Cairo or Constantinople. But, as Makdisi points out, this did not overshadow other ways of identification in local society. "From shari'a courts, Ottoman decrees, village proverbs…it is clear that such a language [of religious discrimination and differentiation] existed, but it was subordinate to and enmeshed in a range of competing discourses of obedience, allegiance, and loyalty inherent in local society. It presented, in other words, no significant barrier to a social order founded on the shared values and interests of a nonsectarian elite" (36). By outlining the history of land ownership in early modern and modern Egypt, the supremacy of religious difference as a marker of sociality is troubled by the interactions of Sidarous-Takla and other elite families and rulers in southern Egypt. This elite status existed in a shared world with other members of the same social class.

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[47] Examples include Vivian Ibrahim, *The Copts of Egypt: Challenges of Modernisation and Identity,* (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2011); Paul Sedra, *From Mission to Modernity: Evangelicals, Reformers, and Education in Nineteenth Century Egypt,* (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2011).

[48] Assyriologist Archibald Henry Sayce quoted in S.H. Leeder, *Modern sons of the Pharaohs: A Study of the Manners and Customs of the Copts of Egypt,* (North Charleston, South Carolina: Createspace, 1918), 332.

The Sidarous-Takla family, as outlined in the family chronicle, was established in the late seventeenth century. Local power structures of the seventeenth century were defined by land ownership and management. At the end of the seventeenth century, the Ottomans, who controlled Egypt, at least in Cairo, from 1517, established land tenure and inheritance in Egypt in the form of tax farms known as *iltizams*. These tax farms were inherited and produced an elite class, which led to the establishment of autonomous rule by local leaders, which was based on the control of local revenues from these tax farms (Cuno 1992, 27). By the eighteenth century, Mamluk beys held this position. The biography describes this balancing act for the first members of the Sidarous-Takla family. Boktor, Solomon, and Ibrahim all worked for these Mamluk beys in the accounting of their landholdings—whether in surveying or registry. During the latter half of the eighteenth century, various Mamluk and Ottoman factions, including Murad and Ibrahim Bey, and the rival faction of Ismail Bey, retreated to Upper Egypt on a number of occasions.

During the late eighteenth century, Mankarius and Estasius encountered Sheikh al-Arab Hammam. This Sheikh was a part of the Hawwara tribe, which established de facto control over Upper Egypt beginning in 1380, as described by Zeinab Abul-Magd in *Imagined Empires: A History of Revolt in Egypt* (2013). Abul-Magd illustrates how the Hawwara maintained a "separate state" in Upper Egypt (19). After prolonged wars with the Mamluks, the Hawwara dominated agricultural properties, trade, and industries throughout Upper Egypt. The Ottoman sultan in Cairo established peace treaties with the Hawwara in exchange for financial compensation annually. The sultan kept Mamluk elites in power in Lower Egypt, under the supervision of an Ottoman pasha sent from Istanbul, establishing the second state according to Abul-Magd. She describes specifically how Sheikh Hammam, by the mid-1700s, was the sole tax farmer, or *multazim* (owner of *iltizams*), for all of Upper Egypt—from Assiut to Aswan (21). This is the provincial ruler that Mu'allim Mankarius and Mu'allim Estasius worked for, with Mankarius managing all of his financial affairs (Nakhla 1946, 7).

Since the Mamluk period, the Hawwara tribe monopolized agricultural production, which allowed them to grow their autonomy from the Ottoman rulers and Mamluk lords. The Hawwara controlled sugarcane plantations and refineries, especially in the area of Farshut, near Bahjura, in the Qena Province (Abul-Magd 2013, 22). This is why we can surmise that Mankarius and Estasius end up in Farshut because of its centrality to Sheikh al-Arab Hammam's business dealings as an elite member of the Hawwara tribe. Abul-Magd explicitly states that the Hawwara established a social contract with the "educated accountants" among the Copts. She explains, "Replicating the model followed by Cairo-based Islamic empires ever since the Islamic conquest of Egypt in the seventh century, the Hawwaras' administration relied on Coptic expertise to run the financial system in Upper Egypt. The Hawwara hired Coptic *mu'allims* to manage the registers of their tax farms and private commercial businesses as well" (Abul-Magd, 24). Sheikh al-Arab Hammam hired Mu'allim Mankarius and later Mu'allim Estasius to manage financial affairs for the state. The Sheikh's Coptic accountants also acted as his deputies in the local villages, where they would collect a grain tax from peasants and transport it to Cairo (33). He ruled the area around Farshūt from the 1720s until 1769[49], and by 1773, the two-state arrangement was abolished, and the Mamluk military elite in Cairo established authority over the tax farms, trade, and administrative system in Upper Egypt (37).

[49] The family chronicle's account does not reconcile with these dates, since it describes Mankarius and Estasius leaving for Farshūt only after their father, Ibrahim, passed away at the end of the eighteenth century. See Nakhla, 5.

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Mu'allim Gerges Mankarius bin Ibrahim bin Solomon bin Boktar al-Balouty was born in late eighteenth century. His wife and children returned to Harat al-Saqāīn [Cairo] and Gerges began work in land surveying, or registry ['amal al-masaḥa], and eventually became the head of the land survey [registry] council [ri'asat diwan al-masaḥa]. al-Alfee Bek al-Shahir [known as al-Alfee al-Kabir] chose Mu'allim Gerges as his head scribe, and Gerges returned to Upper Egypt in 1803. At such a young age, Gerges was chosen to be in the service of the Mamluk Bakawat [leaders, or lords]. This position passed on to his son Mikhail, and his grandson Sidarous. Sidarous was the first to firmly establish the Sidarous-Takla family in Bahjura, with the birth of his son Takla in 1832. After obtaining an education, the German government appointed him as a consular agent in Luxor during the reign of Khedive Ismail Basha.

At the time, there was a movement among wealthy Coptic and Muslim nobles [a'yan] to protect their money from the tyranny [istibdad] of the Turkish rulers. So, they sought local consular positions from foreign countries as a means of protection. The government was alerted to this movement and when Khedive Ismail Basha met the Patriarch, he confronted him about the rich Copts seeking help from foreign governments and leaving Egyptian patronage [al-ra'iya]. The Patriarch responded that the reason Coptic a'yan did so was because of the oppressive practices of the rulers in the provinces. The Khedive promised that the situation would quickly change, and that anyone who left foreign protections would receive an important [government] position. Indeed, the Khedive followed through on the promise. Takla [Effendi] left his consular position with the German government, and was given the position as the head of lawsuit registry [nadhr qalm al-da'wiy] in Qena and stayed in that position until his death in 1872. His son Filasteen took up his work for the Qena Province, but did not like the restrictions placed on him in governmental work. He was appointed a consular agent by the Italian government in Isna. He was a man whose opinion was valued by rulers and families, maintaining a great influence among the a'yan. Because of this influence, he was able to grow his agricultural landholdings, and his work was crowned with success, with his sales in agriculture and the management of its [financial] affairs. He died in 1904.[50]

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In 1805, Muhammad Ali Pasha rose to power in Egypt, and subsequently transformed its social, political, and economic landscape. Under Ali, the government in Cairo centralized authority. The Provinces, especially Upper Egypt, no longer had the autonomy it had intermittently enjoyed centuries prior. Starting in 1837, the state began to institute a limited form of private ownership of large agricultural properties. Full private ownership of land was established in 1891. Royal lands could be purchased in 1906 and state lands by 1912 (Abbas and al-Dessouky 2011, 201). Muhammad Sa'id Pasha was the Wali of Egypt from 1854-1863. In 1858, he created a new land code, in line with modernization strategies started by Muhammad Ali.[51] Before this law, the lands of all villages were state property. Upon Muhammad Ali's death, 'Abbas Pasha's decentralized regime allowed provincial bureaucrats to seize state-owned land.

[50] Nakhla, 8-15.

[51] For more on Muhammad Ali's modernization of Egypt, see, for example, Khaled Fahmy, *All the Pasha's Men: Mehmed Ali, His Army and the Making of Modern Egypt*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

Sa'id's law, known as *al-la'iha al-sa'idiyya*, was a means to legalize those seized properties (Abul-Magd, 37).

Egyptian historians Raouf Abbas and Assem al-Dessouky describe the development of private land ownership in Egypt as a culmination in the development of a free-market economy. Three institutional developments allowed the growth in large landownership including the development of irrigation techniques, the availability of land, and the availability of credit (Abbas and al-Dessouky 2011, 32). The Coptic elite benefited from this new system. Under Muhammad Ali and subsequent regimes, Copts had the ability to become large landowners, with the acquisition of private estates by officials, village notables, and urban merchants. As historian Gabriel Baer notes, however, it was not until the 1880s that Copts stood out as an important group of large landowners (Baer 1962, 64). He points out that by 1891, French researcher, Alfred Jacques Chelu listed "a few Coptic families with large estates in Upper Egypt" as the fourth most important group with landholdings, after the state, the Muhammad Ali family, and high-ranking officials (64). Because of larger structural changes to landholdings, Coptic elites found openings to increase their rank and privilege within larger Egyptian society, with the help of Western forces.

Even before the British occupation of Egypt began in 1882, Christians obtained extra privileges from foreign powers. For those Christians that were able to acquire a *berat*, or a license that allowed a number of tax exemptions and access to European law, navigating imperial regulations became much easier than for their Muslim counterparts. Perhaps even more important than the acquisition of a *berat* was the appointment as a local consular agent, which many in the Sidarous-Takla attained. By the middle of the nineteenth century, foreign protection of minorities in the Ottoman Empire had greatly widened. At the same time, the Ottoman government was attempting to remove some of the restrictions on non-Muslims, including the exemption of Copts from the *jizya* tax in 1855 (which, as previously noted, was variably enforced). Moreover, in their efforts at modernization, both governments needed every ounce of local talent available, and since the minorities were already much more educated and westernized their role in administration and policymaking greatly increased (Issawi 1982, 274). Elite Christians had their taxes reduced during the nineteenth century, were excluded from military service (in return for payment of a special tax), and utilized separate courts based on Western legal principles to take advantage of these new provisions. In particular, the Ottoman Land Code of 1858 and its counterparts in Egypt allowed free transfer of land, and made it possible for Christians to accumulate vast holdings through grant, purchase, or foreclosure for debt (Issawi, 275-276).

By January 1863 in Egypt, Ismail Pasha took power and began granting estates to officials and relatives. Before his ascendance to power, he organized new estates throughout Upper Egypt, for the purpose of cotton and sugarcane production, and established a sugar refinery (Mitchell 2002, 62). Under Ismail's policies, the emergence of the "agricultural colony," or *'izba*, took place, which was isolated from the main village (70). In today's Bahjura, this legacy is apparent, with the *'izba* owned by Kamal Bek Takla lying behind the main family villa, away from what was originally the main part of the village. As will become apparent later in this chapter, the memory of the *'izba* today in Bahjura is much different than its structural reality of two centuries ago. Timothy Mitchell outlines how the *'izba* was remembered as a prison. He notes:

"From a more recent period, the inhabitant of a medium-sized estate with ninety-five acres of land that was broken up after the 1952 agrarian reform remembered it as a prison. 'The *duwwar* was surrounded by the houses of the *zurra* (sharecroppers), and this was the whole *'izba* at the time. There was a gate which closed at night. It was like a concentration camp.' French scholars who carried out an extensive study of the *'izba* in the 1930s described it as 'a private village, where the proprietor is the absolute master. The houses are his private property. The *fellahs* whom he employs are there at his invitation; at any moment, he can send them away if he pleases, without being accountable to anyone.' Not only the worker houses, in fact, but their tools and equipment, even domestic animals, were usually the property of the estate owner" (70).



Figure 10: Part of a former *'izba* in present day Bahjura owned by the Sidarous-Takla family. October 2017. Photo by author.

Kamal Bek Takla and, his uncle, Daoud Bek Takla, held 800 *feddans* and 1,800 *feddans*, respectively, and were considered to be large landowners.[52] This granted them political access and social prestige among both Christians and Muslims. Many of their farmers, employees, or slave laborers were Muslims.[53] The *'izba* was not exactly an arm of the state, nor a private arrangement in opposition to the state. Mitchell importantly points out that "until this period

[52] These figures are based on interviews with remaining family members and other Coptic landowning families still living in Bahjura.

[53] As Baer notes, during the nineteenth century, hundreds of slaves were employed on the sugar plantations in provinces like Qena under Ismail Pasha (421). *Fellahin*, or peasants, also owned slaves (422). However, by the late nineteenth century, free labor became more cost effective than slave labor, and was slowly phased out of agricultural plantations. See Gabriel Baer, "Slavery in Nineteenth Century Egypt," *Journal of African History* 8, no. 3 (1967): 417-441.

neither state nor society was imagined to exist" (74). These large landowners controlled entire villages, if not provinces, through their agricultural wealth and political reach within local society. Abbas and al-Dessouky state that these landowners lived "in their own circles and [were] absorbed in their own culture," not having "any particular awareness of the everyday living conditions of the peasants they were controlling" (Abbas and al-Dessouky 2011, 187).

Under the *'izba* system, a certain class of Egyptians became richer, more connected to power, and of course, their social ranking was reinforced. Coptic families like Sidarous-Takla were built through the passing down of social position and wealth. Copts fit a niche under Muhammed Ali and his modernization programs, particularly in the field of finance and administration. As evidenced in the family chronicle, many Copts were employed as accountants to large private landowners (at this time, the Mamluk provincial lords), land surveyors, and tax collectors during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Historian Vivian Ibrahim has pointed out that these positions were inherited:

> "The demand for these roles was kept up through a system whereby the same profession would be inherited from father to son. The strength of the Copts lay in the fact that their accountancy system was highly complex and unique to them. Coptic boys would from a young age, go to local…Christian schools to acquire the basic knowledge of reading, writing, geometry, and mathematics…In their teenage years, they would act as apprentices to accountants and land surveyors following in their father's footsteps. As a result of their specialization, by the time Muhammad Ali came to power Copts were in a better position to serve in their role as land surveyors than anyone else" (Ibrahim 2011, 18).

This is evidenced through multiple generations of the Sidarous-Takla family, whose main area of expertise lie in land surveying or registry. Their expertise was well-known and word spread from one leader to another of their effectiveness. Elite Copts carved out niches in Egyptian society that required them to serve in particular roles that would be inherited from one generation to the next. These positions gave elite Copts social prestige, allowing them, once the laws changed, to acquire land and be granted land through their administrative labor.

Under the Muhammad Ali dynasty, the entrance of European colonial powers into Egypt, and the reformation of agricultural property, Coptic (and Muslim) elite families alike were able to expand their wealth beyond what it had been previously. Landownership in nineteenth century Egypt was the basis for a particular class to emerge. The two are inextricably linked. Landownership was a means to attain power, and this power further expanded landownership (Abbas and al-Dessouky 2011, 212.) Economist Adel Beshai, using the work of economist and historian Charles Issawi,[54] asserts that according to the percentage of taxes paid on agricultural lands in the nineteenth century (sixteen percent) compared to their percentage of the population (six percent), Copts owned proportionately more land than Muslims (Beshai 1998, 192); this was particularly influenced by Western protections for Christian minorities and general colonial influence on the preference of Christians for positions of power. Beshai speculates as to why Muslims were not angered by Coptic wealth and prestige at the time. "Perhaps the reason lies in the marriage of economic and political power," Beshai argues. Despite colonial interference in

[54] For example, Charles Issawi, *Egypt in Revolution: An Economic Analysis*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).

Christian preference, the political power of Copts at this time was connected to their wealth in a way that traversed religious difference, and brought classes together in shared financial control and domination.

When agriculture became profitable during the late nineteenth century, many of the elite shifted their investments to agriculture, and wealthy Coptic families bought large swaths of land. Elite Copts, especially those who worked as consuls for European countries, knew how to navigate the system that would best serve their financial interests. As Abbas and al-Dessouky note, "These Copts could benefit from landownership as well as from the Capitulations[55] and from other institutions such as the Mixed Courts that looked after the affairs of the Europeans and those affiliated to them. It is not surprising to find that the British occupation saw a considerable increase in investment in agriculture; Copts were among those doing the investing" (Abbas and al-Dessouky 2011, 74). Especially after the British occupation of Egypt in 1882, Coptic landowning families had wider opportunities to expand their agricultural investments and increase their wealth, with extra privileges and preference given to them because of their Christianity (Abbas and al-Dessouky, 151).[56] In a practical sense, the British army was more advanced than the Egyptian army in terms of equipment and organization, and thus many from the elite of Egyptian society—from the Khedive to aristocrats, both Coptic and Muslim, chose to support the British to protect their interests.[57] Economic interests surmounted much else for this elite landowning class.[58]

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Gerges Effendi Takla was educated at the Great Coptic School under Pope Demetrius. Following his education, he was offered government work, but took up work in agriculture and trade instead. Under his watch, he expanded his land holdings [amlaku] and that of his uncle, Filasteen, in his absence from Bahjura. The wealth of the Takla family grew under his watch, doubling the houses and property, and taking advantage of the reforms [on land] available to him.

During the days of Muhammad Bek Nohy, the governor of Qena, the general security of Bahjura was entrusted to Gerges who was implored to be the interim 'omda [local leader] until security was restored to its normal condition. After security was restored, he resigned from the position and the government rewarded him for his efforts by raising him to the fourth rank of Nishan al-Majidy in the era of Khedive Abbas II.[59] After this, the Italian government chose him as a

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[55] For more on the effect of Capitulations and Mixed Courts in Egypt, see Nathan Brown, "The Precarious Life and Slow Death of the Mixed Courts of Egypt," *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 25, no. 1 (2009). For an earlier resource on Mixed Courts in Egypt, see Jasper Y Brinton, "The Mixed Courts of Egypt," *American Journal of International Law* 20, no. 4 (1926): 670-688.

[56] This argument is very specific to Coptic elites; not all Copts. Coptic Christians come from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds during this time period and today.

[57] Importantly, they note that all Egyptians were not in support of the occupation. Rather, it was the large landowning class that sought to maintain their status.

[58] For a different perspective on the time period, and especially the origins of the 'Urabi Revolt (1879-1882), see Ibrahim Abu-Lughod, "The Transformation of the Egyptian Elite: Prelude to the 'Urābī Revolt," *Middle East Journal* 21, no. 3 (1967): 325-344.

[59] This Ottoman military ranking system starts in 1852 and ends in 1922. There are five rankings, with five being the highest. Filasteen was also granted this rank for his service by Sultan Abdulmejid I, but his

consular agent in Aswan from 1896-1908, when he died. Gerges Effendi was one of the Coptic elite [arakhina] and cherished his Church. His children stuck with their Orthodox faith[60]*, as will be documented in the history of their lives.*

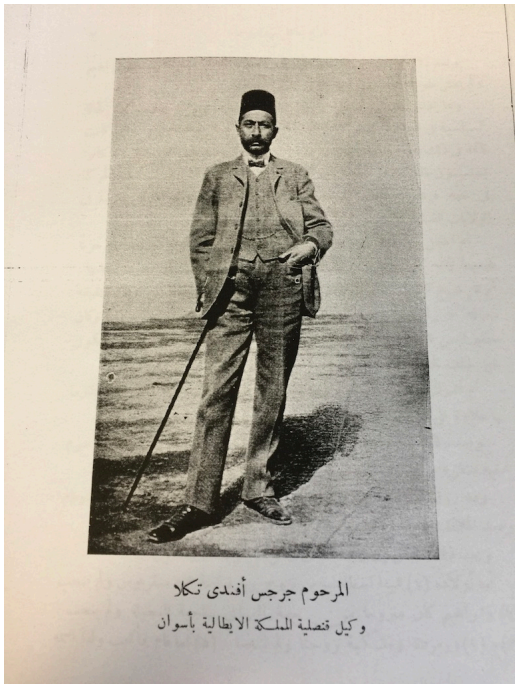


Figure 11: Photo of Gerges Effendi Takla from *The History of the Sidarous Family*.

His brother, Daoud Takla, was born in 1856. He was appointed as a consular agent for France in Aswan. He was honored with the first order of Bey by Khedive Abbas II. He married his uncle Filasteen's daughter, Sayida, and maintained his faith in the Coptic Church until Filasteen's death when conflict arose between him and priests of the local church in Bahjura. So, he left the Coptic Church for the Protestant Church [al-madhhab al-protestanti]. In the early 1920s, he became ill and left to Paris for treatment, where he later died on September 18, 1924. His nephew, Kamal, took his body to Alexandria to be buried. The Protestant Church there conducted the funeral service, and buried him in their cemetery plot in al-Shataby, Alexandria. In 1935, Sayida died and was also buried next to Daoud. Before his death, Sayida used their funds to construct a major school in Bahjura, today known as Daoud Takla High School[61]*, and placed it in a waqf [endowment] to allow for its perpetual continuation.*

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ranking is not specified in the family chronicle. For more on Ottoman honorifics in general, see Güçlü Tülüveli, "Honorific Titles in Ottoman Parlance: A Reevaluation," *International Journal of Turkish Studies* 11, nos. 1-2 (2005): 17-27.

[60] This comment is of particular importance. At the time of Gerges life, Protestant and Catholic missionaries vied for Coptic Orthodox converts, which continued to be a concern through the period that Nakhla is writing. These existential concerns of Western religious domination shaped Coptic communal relations. Conversion was also a tactic of distance from the growing authority of the Coptic Orthodox Church.

[61] This school is still in use today, and allows students from surrounding villages, unable to afford private schooling in neighboring Naj Hammadi, to obtain an education beyond primary and secondary school.

Kamal Bek Takla, Gerges' son, was born on October 12, 1885. [It is mentioned that] Pope Kyrillos V and the Takla family were close. The Pope personally ordained Kamal and his brother Mikhail deacons and made a personal visit to the family in Bahjura in 1888. Also, when the Pope visited the Sudan, he and the Takla family met in Aswan for a visit.

After early tutoring in Bahjura, Kamal traveled to Cairo to attend the Jesuit school in Fagalla in 1895. Thereafter, he traveled to Assiut to attend the American College for nine years, finishing his high school education there. Following graduation, Kamal returned to Bahjura to work in agriculture with his father.

In 1906, Kamal was appointed by the Italian government as a consular agent. He specialized in translation, since he was trained in English from a young age. On December 17, 1909, the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs officially adopted this appointment. Until 1923, Kamal traveled back and forth between Bahjura and Aswan to carry out consular functions and to manage his agricultural properties. During Kamal's time at the Italian consulate in Aswan, the Egyptian government was carrying out the first construction of the Aswan reservoir.[62] To complete this work, about 500 Italian manufacturers, artisans, and craftsman were employed. For the increase in his work in managing the affairs of the Italian manufacturers, the government raised Kamal to the second ranking of Bey on October 18, 1913.

In Bahjura, Kamal established a private church, St. George the Roman Church, behind his villa in Bahjura. The new church was opened on April 11, 1943 and was attended by Anba Kyrillos, the bishop of Qena and Qus and Anba Yusab who would soon become Patriarch. Kamal did not limit his sectarian efforts [majhoodu al-ta'ifi] to his hometown of Bahjura, but he and his brother Khawaja Ibrahim made valuable contributions to the construction of the Naj Hammadi church.[63] The church was constructed on a plot of land owned by the late Gerges Effendi Takla, along the Nile at the most important spot in town. He and his wife greatly contributed to various charitable works—from building churches to educating students to renovations at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem. Kamal made his presence known in every sect—in any institution or charity—providing them with valuable assistance [musa'adatu al-qima] regardless of their nationality or religion, whether Islamic, Coptic, or otherwise.

Kamal was generally dedicated to all charitable works, including the building of an emergency hospital [al-sa'af], on his own land in 1940, and eventually became one of the best emergency hospitals in all of Upper Egypt. The halting of rent payments [rey'a] on his confiscated land [aradhu al-muwqufa] did not stop him from continuing and carrying out his humanitarian mission [mahmatu al-insaniya], even building a home for guests passing through the village.[64]

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[62] This was known as the Aswan Low Dam. Because its initial construction between 1899-1902 provided inadequate storage capacity, the dam was raised during the period of 1907-1912. See Travis Cook, "Engineering Modernity: The Aswan Low Dam and Modernizing the Nile," (Department of History capstone paper: Western Oregon University, 2013).

[63] Today, it is known as the Mari Yuhanna Church in Naj Hammadi.

[64] Nakhla, 16-28.

During the nineteenth century, Coptic landowning families, like Sidarous-Takla, possessed anywhere between 535,058 and 1,500,000 *feddans* of land throughout Egypt. In combination from other sources, it is estimated that Copts owned one-fifth to twenty-five percent of Egypt's wealth (Seikaly 1970, 268). Their economic prowess guaranteed their elite political influence and power. They bought land, invested, and owned banks and financial companies. Additionally, they were present in several professions, including medicine, engineering, and law, and because of their presence within society, they also monopolized several ministries and departments of government (Seikaly, 268).

Landowners in Egypt held considerable influence on the country's political life, with the support of the British colonial regime. As Baer documents, the percentage of directors of land companies in 1924 was 45.2% comprised of "local minorities" (which included Greeks, Italians, Armenians, Christian Arabs, Copts, and Jews) and only 11.3% comprised of Muslim Egyptians (the rest were Western Europeans). In 1932, these figures increased to 58.9% and 12.3% respectively, and in 1949 58.5% and 29.4% respectively (with Western European directors in decline) (Baer, 129). Such minorities were entrusted by the British and other Western regimes with significant authority over their financial interests in Egypt. The distribution of landed property into the hands of elites was not a question engaged by Egyptian public opinion before the 1940s. In 1936 and 1937, with the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty[65] and the abolition of the Capitulations, respectively, Egyptians started to turn inward, focusing on ideas of "national" concern, with several books on social problems published during this time. They emphasized the necessity of reforming Egyptian society and following initial steps towards independence from colonial rule (Baer, 203).

Other reasons for reform stemmed from the onset of widespread inflation during the 1930s, widening the gap between rich and poor, the dislocation of the food supply in the early 1940s, and the malaria epidemic[66] in Upper Egypt, which killed tens of thousands (Baer, 203). These social issues reflect the decline of large estates in the province of Qena. In 1929, there were 91 large estates, but by 1949, that number had shrunk down to seventy-six (Baer, 227). During this time period, economic power, influenced and supported by the British colonial regime, was intertwined with political clout, which made rich Coptic landowners some of the most powerful of Egyptian society. However, following 1952 land reforms this paradigm shifts. The post-1952 ethos was such that political power no longer accompanied economic power (Beshai, 199). The influence of Coptic elites shifts after the 1950s and in the midst of decolonization. A different system of social governance emerges, one by which the power of the state institutions, such as the Coptic Orthodox Church, became paramount.

In the lead-up to the 1952 Free Officers revolution and the rise of President Gamal Abdel Nasser, marches for nationalization and socialist reform affected the rich—both Muslim and Christian. Copts, it can be argued, were affected by these economic shifts more, not because of religious discrimination or prejudice on the part of the new political leadership. Rather, elite Copts held leading positions in banking, industry, and business (Beshai, 194). But many Copts continued to hold such positions because of their proximity to British colonial power. This

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[65] For more on this, see Laila Morsy, "The Military Clauses of the Anglo–Egyptian Treaty of Friendship and Alliance, 1936," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 16, no. 1, (1984).

[66] For more on this, see Jennifer Derr, *The Lived Nile: Environment, Disease, and Material Colonial Economy in Egypt*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018) and Nancy Elizabeth Gallagher, *Egypt's Other Wars: Epidemics and the Politics of Public Health,* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1990).

placed them into a contradiction-laden predicament, much of which was articulated through the many debates spawned by the 1919 revolution on the demand for (or opposition to) minority rights. Saba Mahmood (2015) outlines the impact of the minority debates in this way:

> "…Western religious and secular discourses were crucial to the construction of the minority problem in Egypt. The political imaginary of Copts and Muslims alike at the turn of the twentieth century had become saturated with European depictions of Islam and Christianity. Just as the European discourses on race and eugenics undergirded the Coptic claim to racial purity, the Western portrayal of Islam as a barbaric and uncivilized religion was the foil against which declarations of Muslim glory were crafted…none of these positions is comprehensible without an adequate appreciation of the power that the British colonial government, the missionaries, and European public opinion exerted in shaping the self-understanding of Egyptians and the field of political action within which they operated" (Mahmood 2015, 72).

British rule gave Muslims and Copts the pretext on which to unite—in favor of or opposition to colonial power, depending on their socioeconomic status and political influence. In many cases, the British sowed division between Christians and Muslims in Egypt as a means to maintain their power. Lord Cromer and missionaries working in Egypt advanced the idea that the occupation had saved Copts from a massacre, and used the concern for Coptic safety to justify British rule (Carter 1986, 66). While religious inequality was a figure of Ottoman rule throughout the empire—whereby religious communities were separated into *millets*—British colonial rule and Euro-American influence in Egypt spurred the development of minority consciousness during the late colonial period (1911-1923), when the Copts' status as a minority was debated publicly.[67] Through such debates, Copts transformed from a community (under the Ottoman *millet* system) to a minority. While there were certainly majority/minority dynamics under the Ottoman Empire, the introduction of the minority concept into Egyptian public discourses reimagined political form and intercommunal dynamics. Citizenship [*al-muwaṭina*] and equality became the measurements of Muslim-Christian relations that shaped the constitutional debates of 1923 (Mahmood 2015, 73-80).

Following the 1952 revolution, Nasser created an administrative structure that did not draw upon the political elites of the nationalist movement at the forefront of the anticolonial struggle. Instead, Nasser's political apparatus consisted of a different cadre of loyalists and supporters. In his push to quell civil society, Nasser undermined the authority of the Coptic laity—for example, economic elites such as those of the Sidarous-Takla family—and the Coptic Communal, or Lay, Council (al-Majlis al-Milli)[68] that had sought to democratize the ecclesiastical structure of the Coptic Orthodox Church. While Nasser's reforms created a strong sense of

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[67] See C.A. Bayly, "Representing Copts and Muhammadans: Empire, Nation, and Community in Egypt and India, 1880-1914," in *Modernity and Culture: From the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean, 1890-1920,* eds. Leila Tarazi Fawaz and C.A. Bayly (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 158-203; Shami Seteney, "Aqalliyya/Minority in Modern Egyptian Discourse," in *Words in Motion: Toward a Global Lexicon,* eds. Carol Gluck and Anna L. Tsing (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 151-73.

[68] For more on the importance of this council, see Chapter 5. Also see, Weston Bland, "Copts, the State and the 1949–1950 *al-Majlis al-Millī* Electoral Crisis: Articulating Community in a Time of Anxiety," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 30, no. 3 (2019).

national identity by giving all Egyptians access to public goods and resources, they also weakened the power of Coptic elites, which held authority over the Coptic Church and had wide influence in regional societies, such as Qena (Bahjura's wider province).

By weakening Coptic elites, as well as Parliament and the Coptic Communal Council (run by Coptic landowners and elites), Nasser groomed the Coptic Orthodox Church as a national institution to represent and consolidate "Coptic" interests, regardless of class difference. Through an intense political crackdown and the Agrarian Reform Act of 1952, Coptic landed aristocracy was severely decimated (Hasan 2003, 103). By destroying the economic power of Coptic elites, it destroyed their political power and influence, as well.

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Back in Bahjura, June 2017. In the reception, Nader Abu Eskander[69], kin to the Taklas, spoke with me of Nasser's land reforms. "It was just a way for him to win over the people [*naksab ash-sha'ab*]. Before those reforms, Copts had clout [*nafodh*]. Following those reforms, our prestige [*heyba*] declined. Our family wasn't against the idea of social justice [*a'adala ijtima'aiya*], but there were no laws to guide how those feddans[70] would be used. It wasn't organized [*mish munadhimeen*]."[71]

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Land Reform

The family chronicle of the Sidarous-Takla family was published in 1946, prior to the rise of Nasser and subsequent land reforms. Under land reform, the *'izba* system was incrementally dismantled. Before the 1952 revolution, there were more than 15,000 *'izbas* throughout Egypt (Ayrout 1963, 18). By 1952, land reform limited individual ownership to two hundred *feddans*, and redistributed the excess land in plots of two to five acres to *fellahin*, or peasants. Modifications of the law in 1958 and 1961 reduced the maximum to one hundred acres. Although about 750,000 acres had been made available for redistribution, the number of new owners of said land became only seven percent of all owners (Ayrout, xiv). These new owners were sold very small plots, closer to two acres than the maximum of five. As sociologist Morroe Berger described in his Introduction to Henry Habib Aryout's *The Egyptian Peasant* (1963), large landowners lost their wealth and power in this process, and while that wealth had gone to new owners and tenants, the lost power went to the regime (Ayrout, xiv).

Land reform became the rallying cry for the new Egyptian nation-state, which firmly established the *fellahin* as the bedrock of "national history." Nasser broke with the past and broke the chains of "feudalism" [*iqta'*]. He proclaims the following in one of his various speeches to the newly-formed Egyptian nation: "My brothers, this land is our land. We have overcome feudalism [*iqta'*]. We have overcome exploitation [*istighlal*]. We have overcome the feudal lords [*iqta'iyeen*]. We have overcome exploitation. We have overcome the exploiters [*istighlaliyeen*]."[72] Through land reform, power became re-centered around the new revolutionary regime of Gamal Abdel Nasser and not the landed aristocracy. Nasser's land reforms are still criticized by Islamists and others alike for false promises of revolution and transformation. Salafi

[69] I have been given family permission to use the Abu Eskander name in this dissertation.
[70] One feddan is approximately 1.038 acres.
[71] Conversation with Nader Abu Eskander (June 2017).
[72] "Gamal Abdel Nasser, Damahour, June 15, 1966," Youtube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e8GiZxFxeK4.

Islamist politician and former presidential candidate, Hazem Salah Abu Ismail described, while on the campaign trail in 2012, how the results of agricultural reform did not equal its initial goals. "They initiated agricultural land reform. They took land from the rich. But, to our surprise, they did not give this land to the poor. They gave the poor loans and allowed them temporary use of the land, known as a temporary lease contract [*'aqd igar mu'aqt*]. Each year they needed to renew it, and until today, from 1952 until today, over sixty years, these peasants still don't own their land. Why? Because they took land ownership from the rich. It didn't go to the poor. It stayed in the middle, with the government, and in order to [acquire] the piece of land in his possession, you must prostrate [*tasgud*] before the ruler."[73]

Agricultural reform, known in Arabic as *al-islah al-zira'i*, promised a break with the past of feudalism and exploitation. *Fellahin* (peasants) were the victims of feudalism, and Nasser positioned himself as the leader to break its chains. Sociologist Reem Saad describes how national rhetoric under Nasser transformed the perspectives of *fellahin* following the 1952 revolution. Complaints from her interlocutors were directed specifically at "injustice" [*dhulm*] and "exploitation" [*istighlal*] due to "feudalism" [*iqta'*] (Saad 2006, 186). The 1952 revolution, as many peasants and national memory recounts it, was portrayed as a break with the past, towards a more equal and enlightened future. One of Saad's interlocutors recounts the break this way: "Before the Revolution, I would be renting a piece of land when the owner came at the middle of the crop telling me: 'Go out, I do not owe you anything.' And I wouldn't be able to say anything. [Speaking of Nasser]: He is the one who put the big people at the same level with the small people" (Saad, 187). The estate, or *'izba*, held power over tenants, or peasants. For these peasants, the revolution broke this power-relation and allowed for a new system to emerge. In present day Bahjura, the memory of Nasser's reforms is still contested, even among the descendants of those who benefited from them.

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Helim comes from a line of merchants, mainly of sugarcane. His family never had great wealth like those of the Sidarous-Takla family. Yet, he prides himself on being from Bahjura, the home of these Coptic landowning families. Because of this contradiction-laden positioned, Helim had voiced disfavor towards Nasser and his land reform policies. Over dinner with his wife, Georgina, one evening, they argued over the legacy of Nasser in today's Bahjura.

Helim: What was our economy like before Nasser? We had cotton and so many other things. Nasser was the worst thing to happen to Egypt. At least under colonialism, we had a good economy. After Nasser, the pound declined. What did agricultural reforms do for anyone except ruin the country?

Georgina: Yes, but we were slaves (*'abeed*) to someone else! What Nasser did in agricultural reforms allowed you to be who you are today!

H: He made things worse for everyone; what did the agricultural reforms actually produce?

G: So, it's better that there remained different classes (*tabaqat*) with a few families at the top and everyone else at the bottom?

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[73] See the following video: "Hazem Abu Ismail, *al-ḥaqiqa al-iṣlaḥ al-zar'iy* [The Truth of Land Reform]," Youtube, January 25, 2012 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gfDLPOYSE0A.

[I interjected and mentioned Nasser's reforms in education and the university system. Helim did not seem impressed.]

H: Look at the schools we have here! Mounira and Daoud…those were started by these [landowning] families who provided jobs to people. When is the last time the government helped us here?

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The 1952 revolution redistributed political power in the service of the new nation-state—re-centering the core and defining the periphery to the contemporary dismay of Bahjurians such as Helim. The power of landowning families was portrayed by Nasser's regime as limiting freedom and justice, and preventing change. Nasser described family relations and the social relations they engendered prior to the revolution in this way:

> "The entrenched social relations [*'alaqat igtima'iya*] present in the rural areas of Egypt; we know them all too well. Social relations that were built on exploitation [*istighlal*] and control [*tuḥakm*] and class division [*ṭabaqiya*]. Social relations were based on masters [*sāda*] and slaves [*'abeed*]. Social relations were not simply represented by land ownership, but also by power [*nafoodh*] that consists of and results in land ownership and not in the distribution [*tawzī'a*] of land. The [elite] power present in the rural areas of Egypt results in, for example, one family owning a large amount of land. And the local village leader ['*omda*] and all the village elders [*mushaykh*] and guards [*ghafur*] are from the same family. This family controls everything. It's not possible for anyone to raise his voice [*yrfa'a sowtu*] in objection to the family."[74]

In pre-1952 Egypt, as Nasser recalls it, land ownership constituted power, which begot more power and more land. This cycle allowed the landowning families of Egypt from the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth century to control political and economic power in Egypt. Nasser's revolution was one that decimated this political and economic system, placing that displaced power in the hands of the new regime, weakening not only the elites, but what today would be considered "civil society." As the Egyptian state rose to power, so too did its institutions, including and especially the Coptic Orthodox Church.

Representative of the Coptic People

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In 1981, Kamal Takla's eldest son, Berty, returned to Bahjura to sell the family villa and its property. Prior to the 1952 revolution, the family fled to Switzerland. Now, some four decades later, the once burgeoning wealth of the Takla family was dwindling. A local Muslim businessman offered Berty one million Egyptian pounds for the property. Word of this was received by the local Coptic Orthodox bishop. The bishop approached Berty with a counter-offer: "Berty, he [the Muslim businessman] will first tear down the church [located on the

[74] "Gamal Abdel Nasser, Damahour, June 15, 1966," Youtube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e8GiZxFxeK4.

property] and remove the name of the [Takla] family from the entire property." The bishop, instead, offered Berty 250,000 Egyptian pounds. Berty accepted, and the Takla family villa and its grounds became property of the Coptic Orthodox Diocese of Naj Hammadi.[75]

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Following the 1952 revolution, Nasser molded the Egyptian state into a bureaucratic apparatus, forming its myriad of institutions. Nasser's authoritarian rule was transposed onto the religious institutions he molded in the late 1950s and 1960s, including the Coptic Orthodox Church. The Church took the place of those entrenched social relations Nasser sought to eliminate. In a pre-1952 Egypt, the selling of the Takla villa to another Muslim landowning family may not have brought on the same ire as it did in 1981. Social relations between 1951 and 1981 were reconstituted through the mediation of the state and its institutions. Serving the "national interest" became paramount, whereby the regime, and subsequently the Church, absorbed the power that Coptic landowners and political elite possessed.

By 1959 with the enthronement of Pope Kyrillos VI, the Egyptian state formed an entente with the Church. Throughout the 1950s, Gamal Abdel Nasser imposed restrictions on civil society and inhibited virtually all forms of civic life, including Coptic civic engagement. The weakening of the Coptic laity—including landowners, lay religious leaders, and businessmen—was accompanied by the strengthening of the Church's political and social role. As anthropologist Angie Heo argues, Nasser effectively transformed religious institutions like the Coptic Church and al-Azhar into state institutions, organizing Egyptian society along sectarian lines. Heo notes: "…the fact that today's Copts are integrated into their community through religious practices and understand their rights in terms of religion is thus not a natural outcome…it is rather a historical outcome of Egypt's development as a postcolonial nation-state, and more specifically, its political arrangement of managing Christian-Muslim affairs through the Coptic Church…" (2018, 10).

Nasser was not a religious ideologue and his policies were not specifically aimed at Coptic Christians. Yet, his rule had an overwhelming effect on silencing the plurality of Coptic voices that had been active in the nationalist movement of the 1920s and elite Copts that held considerable landownings and political power throughout Egypt. The Coptic Orthodox Church became the main representative of a Coptic community before the newly formed state, and in return the Church granted Nasser support (Mahmood 2015, 82). This particular relationship has been identified in the literature as a "church-state entente" or the "neo-millet system."[76]

Administered by the Egyptian nation-state and the Coptic Orthodox Church, religious difference played a crucial role in redefining community and communal authority. Prior authority among Copts throughout Upper Egypt and the Nile Delta rested in the hands of the socioeconomic elite who owned plantations. Especially from the 1960s onwards, that power shifted towards the clerical hierarchy, allowing the Church to integrate all Copts, especially those from the middle class and rural areas of Egypt into the Church's institutional reach. The Coptic

[75] Conversation in Naj Hammadi (June 17, 2017).

[76] For more on the millet partnership, see Paul Sedra, "Copts and the Millet Partnership: The Intra-communal Dynamics behind Egyptian Sectarianism," *Journal of Law and Religion* 29, no. 3 (2014): 491-509; For more on the idea of an entente, see Mariz Tadros, "Vicissitudes in the Entente Between the Coptic Orthodox Church and the State in Egypt (1952-2007)," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 41 (2009): 269-287.

Revival of the 1960s and 1970s was a movement to integrate all Copts into community with one another, flattening traditional family and socio-economic differences into one comprehensive whole mediated by religion.[77] Heo succinctly lays out the meaning of the movement for the Coptic community: "What this mass reform and revival meant on the ground was that ordinary Copts were not so much becoming 'more religious,' as they were acquiring techniques and skills, new ways of knowing their past and their ties to Egypt, along with new frames of social interaction with others" (11). Familial and economic ties that governed the elite classes of Egyptian society prior to 1952 were reconfigured through religious affiliation. Thus, Copts' frames of reference and networks of sociality were radically altered.

Through this reconfiguration, the Church became the container of all aspects of society in which Copts could participate. Once the Coptic elite was sidelined, Coptic civic involvements in matters from education to investment to politics was transferred to the Church, where little was added to these national conversations on behalf of the Christian minority. Instead, the Church only entered into debates about the preservation of the Egyptian nation, with Copts as partners in national unity. To preserve the Egyptian postcolonial nation-state was to preserve Coptic homogeneity (al-Khawaga 1998, 172-173). This process of homogenization was led by the Coptic Church, as a state institution and representative body of Coptic community.

Homogenization means the integration of Copts into a community form, demarcated and authorized by the clergy and clerical hierarchy of the Coptic Orthodox Church. The Renewal reorganized ways of seeing the world and reordered daily life. Traditional forms of sociality were made ineffective by the Renewal. By doing so, the Church reconciled religious identity, as the basis of sociality, with the overall aims of the community (181-182). During the Renewal, this was done through a "clericalizing logic," whereby the faithful, by which she means all Copts from the 1960s onwards, were integrated into the clerical structures of the Church (185). By doing so, the Church was able to claim representation of all Copts, with the Patriarch as spokesman. Copts became institutional appendages of the Church; the faithful were not free liaisons. In line with Heo, these developments inside of the Church mirror how the Egyptian state sought to integrate all citizens under its gaze.[78]

In the weakening of the Coptic elite, the Church became the defender of Copts against onslaughts of religious discrimination that began to seep into Egyptian society. While at a macro-level, Christians and Muslim Egyptians came together under one national fabric, at the micro-level communal differences pervaded Egyptian society, splitting citizens into a religious two, regardless of socio-economic status. The Church took control over defining Coptic community, but under their authority, Copts now sought clerical leadership in moments of conflict with their Muslim counterparts. The Church as both a state and communal institution secured its place as the arbiter of the Coptic community to the Egyptian state, as well as the arbiter within the community itself, defining sociality and spirituality.

Following Nasser's death in 1970 and shifts in economic conditions, the state could no longer provide the same kind of services it had under the socialist programming of the 1950s and

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[77] For more details on the revival, see Chapter 5.

[78] While it is outside of the purview of this dissertation, the formation of the Egyptian nation-state included the Copts, but excluded many others, such as Jews and Greeks. For more on this topic, please see the following publications: Joel Beinin, *The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry: Culture, Politics, and the Formation of a Modern Diaspora*, (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1998); Angelos Dalachanis, *The Greek Exodus from Egypt: Diaspora Politics and Emigration, 1937-1962* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017).

1960s. Instead, under the Open Door, or *infitah*, policies, President Anwar Sadat initiated the privatization of the economy and public goods, and the Church acquired further power and prestige by alleviating the state in matters of social welfare—providing employment, educational opportunities, and healthcare within the community. In return, the Church received further recognition from the state as the spokesman for the Coptic community (189). Under Nasser, state institutions were strengthened, creating a new middle class and destroying the former landowning elite. Sadat, through his Open Door economic policies, privatized the Egyptian economy and spurred the emergence of migration as a critical analytic for Egyptian identity. The 1970s and 1980s became an era of mass migration, when Egyptians sought work in the Persian Gulf. Saudi Arabia and Kuwait became choice destinations for former *fellahin* throughout Egypt. As the old agricultural system, decimated under Nasser became near extinct *fellahin* in Upper Egypt sought opportunities abroad, reshaping economy and culture for decades to come.

Open Doors

Under Nasser, displays of state development, public sector employment opportunities, and other economic incentives discouraged emigration. In addition to these structural factors, the regime portrayed those that sought emigration as the anti-citizen—those that did not seek to build the nation (Tsourapas 2017, 36-37). Importantly, it should be noted that Egyptians, generally, under Nasser did not have freedom of movement. Special permissions were required for Egyptian citizens to leave the country. By September 1969, however, Nasser abolished all forms of emigration, suspending all exit permits (37). A year later, Nasser passed away and his successor, Anwar al-Sadat had a different vision for the future of Egypt. Where migration was seen as a betrayal of the nation under Nasser, it was seen as a right under Sadat. The right to migration was sealed in the 1971 Constitution. Article 52 stipulated that "citizens shall now have the right to permanent or temporary migration" (38). Sadat's *Infitah* [Open Door] policies of economic and social liberalization led many Egyptians to seek employment opportunities abroad. Egyptians flocked to the Persian Gulf and even Eastern Europe for employment. Gerasimos Tsourapas notes that by 1978 some 15-18 percent of Egypt's active workforce was employed abroad (39).

Nasser's focus on building the nation from within runs counter to the transformations under Sadat. Building the nation meant molding it to serve its external economic and political interests. As such, with an increasing number of migrants to Gulf countries, such as Saudi Arabia, Sadat was encouraged to position himself as the pious president, or *al-ra'is al-mu'min*. Saudi Arabia became vital for Egypt's economic future, and it began to shape Egyptian policy, politics, and social relations. With this new partnership in the Gulf, Sadat welcomed back those members of the Muslim Brotherhood that escaped to the Gulf under Nasser, promising to reinstate their Egyptian citizenship (39).

Mass migration to the Gulf during the 1970s introduced Egyptians to a new form of sociality and understanding of religious life. The return of Islamists to Egypt shifted universities, professional associations, and the overall sociopolitical landscape towards conservatism. Rejection of Nasserism was predicated upon the allure of Saudi Arabia's wealth and political standing in the region by the 1970s. Many Egyptians returned from Saudi Arabia in the 1970s

wearing finely made conservative clothing and blasting Qur'anic recitations on their imported record players, exemplifying luxury and piety (40).[79]

During Sadat's presidency, migration and religious uniformity came to dominate modes of sociality and national identity. While Sadat proclaimed himself a "Muslim president of an Islamic state,"[80] the Church carved out its own Coptic society, one which allowed Coptic religiosity to flourish and the Church's institutionalization to expand. Copts, across class, found that those traditions of sociality that once defined local communities—based on shared histories and frames of reference—fell away and in its place sectarian relations came to define difference among local communities. While still acknowledging that those different traditions of sociality continued on, maintaining themselves amidst these broader national changes, the Church moved to centralize its power.

Pope Shenouda III, enthroned in 1971, molded an administration that enforced uniformity on the diocesan level, through the abolition of local privileges and regional separatism (Hasan, 124). Loyalty was made to the Pope, first and foremost, above personal, local loyalties. No longer did elite Copts represent their interests through economic prowess or political participation. The Church consolidated institutional power, giving itself the exclusive right to represent Coptic claims before the state. In *Christians versus Muslims in Modern Egypt*, S.S. Hasan aptly writes: "The relevant Coptic elite today is the clerical elite, which is not just a symbol of sanctity, but a custodian of Coptic power" (264). Coptic politicians from the 1970s onward are marginal to the wider Coptic community who looks to (and more recently has challenged[81]) the Church as their representative. The clerical hierarchy took the place of the Coptic elite, and altered the terrain of Coptic life, under the spiritual and political leadership of the clerical hierarchy of the Coptic Orthodox Church.

Amidst these institutional changes taking place in Cairo, Bahjura and its Coptic landowning families remained, wading through new modes of sociality, community, and status. While Sadat's regime initiated privatization and the neo-liberalization of the Egyptian economy and public goods, Mubarak consolidated and intensified these processes, leading many to emigrate. In tandem with these migratory shifts, by the 1990s, landowners began to receive back landholdings lost under land reform of the 1950s and 1960s, reversing Nasser's main nationalist effort.

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[79] For more on the material culture and aesthetics of the Islamic revival in Egypt, see Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

[80] See the following video: "I am a Muslim president of an Islamic State—Sadat," Youtube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qkj4JaLdqJ0.

[81] See the following work on Coptic political movements for reform after the 2011 revolution: Magdalena Delgado, "Contentious Copts: The Emergence, Success, and Decline of the Maspero Youth Movement in Egypt," in *Contentious Politics in the Middle East: Popular Resistance and Marginalized Activism beyond the Arab Uprisings,* ed. Fawaz Gerges (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 259-280; Candace Lukasik, "Conquest of Paradise: Secular binds and Coptic political mobilization," *Middle East Critique* 25, no. 2 (2016): 107-125; Carolyn Ramzy, "To Die is Gain: Singing a Heavenly Citizenship among Egypt's Coptic Christians," *Ethnos* 80, no. 5 (2015): 649-670.

Agricultural Reversal

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By the 1980s, Bahjura's socio-economic landscape had changed. Emil received his degree from Ain Shams University, and returned to Bahjura following his grandfather's death to tend to the family land. His brother remained in Cairo, as much of the family had moved from Bahjura by that time. While family was in Bahjura—grandparents and distant relatives—for the younger generations, education or a job was outside [*bara*]. Emil returned because of a sense of duty. "This is my land. I have to take care of it," he told me in 2017. By 1983, when he returned, if he sold, and especially rented, his land, he would have made less than actually farming it. So, that's what he did. He returned to Bahjura and raised his family there.

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Sadat's economic liberalization was witnessed in all sectors of society. The public sector was declared bankrupt and sold off to private investors at undervalued prices (Abaza 2013, 236). It is here that organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood and the Coptic Orthodox Church take up the duties of the state, offering social services, including health care, for their followers or congregants, in lieu of state services. Sadat's logic in economic growth was concentrated on remittances from abroad and the cultivation of natural resources, instead of on heavy industries. This shift in economic policy occurred while, between 1980 and 1992, the agricultural sector suffered neglect in terms of investment.

Starting in the 1970s, land reform law, no. 76 of 1952, regarding the status of tenancy, was challenged in favor of large landowners in the People's Assembly, or *al-majlis ash-sha'ab*. Under Sadat, lands sequestered by agrarian reform began to be restored to their former owners, giving the landowners the right to evict their tenants (Abaza, 237). Following Sadat's assassination in 1981, Mubarak continued what Sadat had started. In 1992, land reform law no. 96 was passed leading to the eviction of tenants, affecting millions of *fellahin* (239).[82] The law was viewed as a direct attack on the achievements of the 1952 revolution. It determined a five-year transitional period, ending in 1997, after which tenants had to return land to its original owners. The tenants had rented these properties for forty years with fixed rents determined by law since the issuance of law 157 of 1952. By 1997, determining the rent of the land was left to the landowners, who increased rents exponentially. The new law cancelled the two most important aspects of law no. 157 of 1952, which fixed rental value and disabled eviction of tenants from rented lands (Saber 2006).

In addition to the reversal of Nasser's land reform, the state, under Mubarak, retreated from providing welfare, which led to the further impoverishment in the countryside, and its deterioration and marginalization. Rural Egypt was neglected in terms of social services and infrastructure. Sociologist Mona Abaza, citing political economist Ray Bush, notes that the period between 1980 and 2000 witnessed the sharpest income inequality, of which Egypt's rural parts bore the brunt. Between 1990 and 1996, poverty in Egypt doubled to 44 percent, or about 30 million people. Using the $1 a day measure, 94 percent of the population in the countryside and 80 percent in towns were considered poor (239). *Fellahin* revolted against these measures, and a sense of insecurity settled in the countryside, including places like Bahjura.

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[82] For more on this see, Reem Saad, "Egyptian Politics and the Tenancy Law," in *Counter-Revolution in Egypt's Countryside: Land and Farmers in the Era of Economic Reform,* ed. Ray Bush (New York: Zed Books, 2002).

The structural transformations under Sadat and Mubarak have had effects throughout Egypt, with a general drop in standard of living, and increasing incidents of violence against fellow Egyptians and against the state. Economic changes under Sadat and Mubarak had an enormous impact on the lived environment and daily life for Bahjura's residents. The remaining parts of this chapter will focus on how these transformations over the past seventy years have affected the Coptic landowning families that remain in Bahjura, and attends to their interpretations of the past.

Interpreting the Past in Bahjura

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The canal [*tera'a*] that runs through Bahjura was dug in the era of Muhammad Ali, according to George. Today, the canal is overrun with garbage. George says this is a result of the introduction of gas [*butaghaz*] ovens for making sun bread [*'ayeesh shamsi*]. Previously, ovens in Bahjura worked by placing organic garbage below the oven [*forn baladi*] itself which would be used for a fire. The garbage would be used as the source of energy for the fire. This type of oven became obsolete when the gas oven was introduced to the village. Garbage had no place to go aside from the street and the canal. Now, the government would like to close up the canal with dirt, since it has become a health hazard. The canal, during the hey-day of the *'izbas*, provided the irrigation ways necessary for agriculture. With farming's decline, the canal is no longer a necessity.

The canal was a gathering place of the early-mid twentieth century. An oasis from the rest of the village. By phone, I spoke with Mikhail, a former resident of Bahjura who now lives in Geneva, Switzerland. He described how the canal was a special place. Residents of Bahjura would put out chairs and sit along the canal as a source of recreation. "At one point in time, sitting on the canal was a source of romance [*kan fi romance*]. Now, it is a source of disgust."

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The landscape of Bahjura, with its *'izbas* and landowning family villas, has withered, yet remains mentally intact in the collective memory of the village. Just as historian Kenneth Cuno argues for the era of Muhammad 'Ali, the 1952 revolution was not a complete rupture (Cuno 1984, 122). Despite land reform, some Coptic landowning families remained. While the landscape of the village has changed, it is interconnected through the memory of what once was, under the power and prestige of the landowning families and the economy of the *'izba*. In the memoir on her family, *The Cotton Plantation Remembered*, Mona Abaza concedes that the village of her family is no longer what it was even in the 1970s and 1980s. It no longer exists today (2013: 261). Back then, homes were not made out of red brick like they are today (because the Bek would not have allowed it; he would not have allowed there to be a higher house than his). Old mud-brick dwellings are now used as storage, or as secondary homes. Some homes remain empty because their owners live in Cairo. Bahjura, as with many other villages throughout Egypt, has changed.



Figure 12: (Left) A photo of a villa from the collection a family member now residing in Los Angeles, California. (Right) The Sidarous-Takla family villa in contemporary Bahjura. June 2017. Photos by author.

Today's Bahjura is demarcated along religious lines. The oldest part of the village, known locally as *Shig al-Nasara*, or the Christian area by neighboring Muslims, stands next to the canal. There, too, stands the oldest church in Bahjura, St. George, which was built in the late 1940s, as families began to spread out from the oldest part of the village, *Darb ad-Dar,* where the homes are made out of mud-brick. As you walk through the Christian area, you eventually come to what village Copts denote as *Shig as-Sou'*, or the marketplace area. This is the boundary with what is deemed "safe" by Christian villagers. "Bahjura is peaceful because Christians are all in one place and Muslims in another," one local clergy member told me. Among Bahjura's Copts, the Muslim neighborhoods are made the punch-lines of jokes, separating those neighborhoods off as the degenerates of Bahjurian society.

The separation of Bahjura along religious lines today is dramatically different from what the village plan was a century prior. Today, Bahjura is lined with the abandoned villas of former Coptic landowning families (the Muslim landowning families have remained). It is spotted in its newer sections by newly built red-brick towers—some of them four stories high—as well as by abandoned homes, whose owners now reside in Cairo or abroad. The older part of the village, *Darb ad-Dar*, is nearly abandoned, with many of the mud-brick homes on the verge of collapse. Bahjura is much larger than it once was, with construction on new areas of the village. Once the agricultural fields cultivated by *fellahin*, the first part of Bahjura is now the site of new buildings of red-brick—apartments and family homes. A descendent of the Sidarous-Takla family who

now resides in Alexandria noted that this area was originally a part of the land owned by the family, before selling it upon their departure from the village.[83]



Figure 13: A child walks through an alley of *Darb ad-Dar*. June 2017. Photo by author.

The physical reshaping of Bahjura mirrors the reshaping of sociality in the village. Prior to 1952, Bahjura was centered around agricultural production. The '*izba* was central to village life, and that is evident in the current neighborhoods of Bahjura—'*Ezbet Kamel, 'Ezbet Nasser, 'Ezbet Daoud, 'Ezbet Abu Eskander, 'Ezbet Tarkiz*. These areas comprise the majority of the village today. As Timothy Mitchell notes, "the '*izba* came to refer to the spatial and social organization of cultivators, supervisors, and owner that constituted the estate" (2002, 70). Importantly, the '*izba* has been documented and described as a "concentration camp" and "a private village, where the proprietor is the absolute master" (70). Overlooking its history of oppression and subjugation is not the aim of this chapter. Yet, the '*izba* and the landowning system provided a different, unequal tradition of sociality, one in which the relation among *fellahin,* the administration, and the plantation owner was not primarily guided by religion. The Sidarous-Takla family had many Muslim sharecroppers that leased plots and were dedicated workers. Their relation was not necessarily predicated upon a "Christian" family renting to "Muslim" sharecroppers. Such a tradition of sociality in today's Bahjura has been effaced by other logics of relationality.

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On a Tuesday around 6pm, George picked me up from Shig al-Nasara. We walked a short distance to the decorated gate of the Abu Eskander household, one of the last remaining Coptic landowning families in Bahjura that still receives the majority of their income from farming. We entered the grounds through a small turquoise door. Walking inside, it felt as if I was transported back in time. Nader, the grandson and heir of the Abu Eskander name, had kept the original

[83] Interview (October 15, 2017).

design. We sat on wood-carved furniture beneath an ornate chandelier. Before us hung an enormous portrait of his grandfather, who had lived in the same home nearly a century earlier. The similarities between the two men were quite striking, especially their large, sullen eyes. "Tell me about your family," I started. Nader began: "Before the 1952 revolution, we had power through our land. I remember my father telling me stories about my grandfather. In the summer, they would water the ground [*yroshoo maya*] in front of our house and take a couple of chairs and sit outside. Anyone who would pass got off their donkey and walked in front of them as a sign of respect, and many of them even worked for our family."

The Abu Eskander family still owns considerable landholdings in the surrounding agricultural areas, which keeps Nader in Bahjura. His nuclear family consists of his wife, Jackleen, and their children Christina, eight, and David, thirteen. Nader's mother also lives with them. Nader, who is close to fifty, was the first to marry someone outside of the predominant Coptic landowning families. Jackleen comes from a middle-class family in nearby Naj Hammadi.

Another evening later that week, Nader picked me, Jackleen, and Christina up from a youth meeting at a church in Naj Hammadi. He pulled up in a 1970s baby blue Fiat. We twisted and turned through the windy backroads and finally arrived at the Abu Eskander home. Sitting in the villa's garden, Nader started to grill burgers for dinner. As I conversed with Jackleen, a man wearing a brown-grey *galabaya* and white turban, or *'amma*, approached. The family needed some water from the nearby market, so Jackleen asked him if it would be possible to grab some for us. After the man left, Jackleen turned towards me and said, "That's Ahmed. His entire family has worked for us in agriculture. His grandfather, father, himself, and now his children work tending our fields. He's Muslim, but, I swear to you, he has gone to the Virgin Mary Church nearby and brought blessed bread, or *qorban*, back for us. No one at the Church looks at him strangely because they know he is a part of our family. He even enjoys eating *qorban* with us."

The next evening, we had dinner together again. This time, we grilled chicken. Ahmed stopped by again, right before the breaking of the fast, or *iftaar*, for Ramadan. "Do you need anything?" he asked Jackleen. "No, thank you, Ahmed," Jackleen replied. She turned towards me after this. "He checks on us every night because he just wants to make sure we're okay. He's an educated Muslim and knows the faith well. He's even a muezzin[84] that rotates throughout Bahjura. His sons are also set to enter one of the Al-Azhar[85] schools in the future."

An hour later, around Maghrib prayer, the call to prayer, or *adhan*, started loudly from the small mosque next door to signal the breaking of the fast. Jackleen held her hands over her ears and looked at me with disgust.

***

In Bahjura, there is a mixture of intercommunal closeness and distance. Jackleen relates to Ahmed as caregiver, employee, and family. He inquires each night about what he can provide for the Abu Eskander family. Jackleen relates his Muslim character to Ahmed's openness to

[84] A Muslim man who performs the call to prayer.
[85] Al-Azhar University is known as one of Sunni Islam's most prestigious universities.

enter Coptic religious spaces and traverse spatial lines of communal separation. Moreover, he is "educated," and Jackleen admires this pursuit for himself and his children's future. Ahmed and Jackleen relate to one another through shared life and flourishing—in a transactional relationship, but also one imbued with familial closeness. The *adhan* from the mosque next door lacks this relationality. It is a nuisance, a reminder of Islamic imposition, rather than openness—like Ahmed's entrance into Bahjura's Christian spaces.

Jackleen reads and experiences the *adhan* through sonic interference, also enmeshed in contemporary contexts of violence against Copts. Bombings, shootings, and stabbings occurred throughout 2017, during my fieldwork, in which assailants associated with ISIS killed dozens of Copts in attacks throughout Egypt. A sense of embattlement was voiced by Jackleen in many of our conversations, where she demarcated between those "violent" Muslims, Islamists, and terrorists and "educated" Muslims like Ahmed. There is distance from those that have set out to harm Copts. It is "those people," not someone like Ahmed. In semiotic determinations of "those people," religious signs mark possibilities of danger and digust. The *adhan* is a marker of threat; the presence of Ahmed, a source of comfort.

Sectarian divides guided who could and who could not become my interlocutors in the village. Because of these spatial and relational constraints, I experienced Bahjura through the Copts. Bahjura's Muslims were those members of the community I passed in the streets or who briefly visited Coptic families, such as Ahmed. In this possibility of meeting, it was clear that new traditions of sociality still loosely maintain that of old. Ahmed's ancestors have worked for the Abu Eskanders on their plantations. Christian feet and Muslim feet in Bahjura sometimes share patterns of movement, idleness, and intimacy. They interact with one another in streets, on the road, and at the local *feseekh*[86] dealer on the side-street near the old canal. Yet, what was lost in the breakdown of the plantation and what its lifeworld meant to Coptic landowners and their economies has been consolidated by and is now interpreted through the logics of sectarianism; those that govern inter-communal life in contemporary Egypt.

Inter- and intra-communal sociality has been reconfigured. For example, the marriage of Jackleen and Nader would have been impossible a century prior. Despite the fact that they are both Coptic, the differences in social class and family background would have made their union untenable. In a pre-1952 Egypt, class differences and status decided many relations, even within religious communities. The Abu Eskander family would not allow one of their own to marry someone outside of their social status, of same or greater wealth and landholdings. Today, the legacy of the Abu Eskander and Sidarous-Takla families is a form of shared heritage for all strata of the Coptic community of Bahjura—from the street children who play on the grounds of the Takla villa to the clergy members of Bahjura.

While the reforms under Nasser raised the living standards of many Egyptians, it was also an era when the Coptic elite were politically and socially marginalized, which had adverse consequences for all Copts in subsequent decades. Where class differences may have affected the possibility of a cohesive Coptic identity in the pre-1952 era, shared religious identity became a primary marker of Coptic-ness in post-1952 Egypt. Thus, the memory of the Coptic landowning families, despite the fact that they may have oppressed Coptic (and Muslim) *fellahin* on their plantations, is nowa source of pride for all Copts in Bahjura. Shared religious identity as collective memory and ethos has subtly encroached upon other forms of intercommunal identity and belonging, where at one time social rank or status may have connected more readily than

[86] *Feseekh* is a traditional celebratory Egyptian fish dish, fermented, salted, and dried.

religious affiliation. New interpretations of sociality are difficult to imagine beyond sectarian paradigms. This paradigmatic shift has affected the ways in which these memories are interpreted under contemporary political conditions.

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Edward worked for the Sidarous-Takla family, as his father and grandfather before him had. They were the secretarial staff of the Coptic landowning elite. Edward eventually moved from Bahjura and worked for the government. In his Alexandria apartment, he explained to me, with his wife listening in, why there was so much disdain among the families and those associated with them for the 1952 revolution. He noted:

"The 1952 revolution was centered around class difference [*mufariq bein al-tabaqat*] in Egypt. The workers that tilled the land became the fathers of the revolution. When Nasser formed the Socialist Union, saying raise your head my brother, servitude has come to an end, colonialism has come to an end. Those peasants that had the courage to rise up felt that they were protected, and they then began to enter politics, elections, and things like that. So, for example, a member of Parliament…this is so dangerous to say…his name is al-Ghoul, who was the president of the Committee on Youth. His father was the head camel jockey of the Kamal Takla household, and his nephew now is the secretary of the Human Rights Committee! This is a family that lives in a world of animals! Animals that are not civilized! These are people who have nothing in their brains, except a million evil and corrupt things! The problem now is that people are not concerned with principles or the person, they are more interested in 'this guy is from our group,' 'that guy is from this family,' 'he's Muslim.' If I brought the most elegant and learned Christian, like Botros Ghali, and ran him as a candidate against al-Ghoul, al-Ghoul would win. Why? Because al-Ghoul is Muslim and al-Ghoul is from a big family in today's Egypt."

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Where the Sidarous-Takla family in pre-1952 Egypt held economic power, and thus political power, al-Ghoul and his kin are a "big family" today not because of their elite rank through their economic success and, subsequently, political prowess. According to Edward, they are a big family, first and foremost, because they are Muslim—and through their religious identity, they have traversed the authoritarian regimes of power and have learned to be ruthless in their economic and political dealings. The Sidarous-Takla family surely had to make similar dealings in their era. Yet, sectarian presents have reconfigured the lens of legibility between Egyptian Muslims and Christians by which to understand a family's level of education, prestige, and refinement; all of these things having become shaped by religion. In Bahjura, as Edward describes, a Muslim (al-Ghoul's father) worked for a Christian (Kamel Bek Takla), and this was considered part and parcel of the economic structure. In contemporary Egypt, the descendent of that Muslim (al-Ghoul) became a political representative in Parliament. That would not have been possible prior to Nasser's time, simply because of his social rank.

The impact of economic transformation under Sadat on Coptic communities was less spoken of among interlocutors. Farming and agricultural development were the main sources of wealth for these Coptic landowning families. With the liberalization of the Egyptian economy, these traditional economies began to break down. The connection between economic transformation and down-turn, and the rise of intercommunal conflict and violence should not be overlooked. Collective memory of a time when Copts owned land and were the employers of

Muslims stands as a testament to an era when Copts are understood to have been economic powerhouses and holders of social capital. And despite the historical realities, whereby that economic success was limited to a select number of Coptic families, the memory of that influence is what has made Coptic residents of Bahjura remember and reflect. They reflect on the order and security of a past that, for many, was not their ancestors' history. But they still reflect, given the disintegration, yet continued presence of Coptic life in Bahjura.

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On a Wednesday, I had lunch in neighboring Naj Hammadi with local historian Shenoda al-Bahjouri. We looked over some documents together that I had collected from another Coptic family in the village. Flipping through the pictures on my laptop, he stopped at a land rental contract from 1924 between Ibrahim Takla and a handful of Muslim *fellahin*. "This is significant," said Shenoda, "pre-1950s land reforms, Copts held power [*al-qowa*]. Members of these Coptic families were the ones to mediate conflict, even between Muslims, because of their social status. They were extremely respected. That kept Christians connected to authority. Now, since those families have either traveled abroad or many of them have passed away, Copts have been lowered in social stature within the village; they have less clout." He paused for a moment before solemnly saying: "After the 1960s, Muslims made more money abroad, in places like Saudi Arabia and Libya, and then they bought our lands."

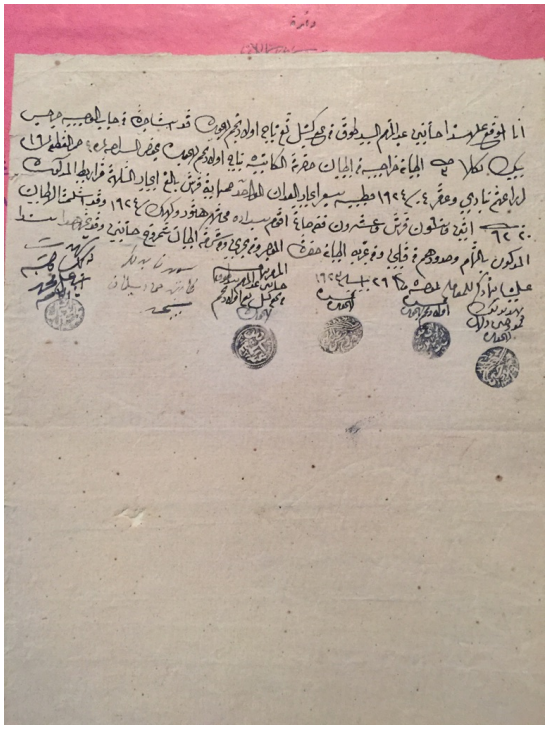


Figure 14: A land contract, cited by al-Bahjouri above. Photo by author.

Following my meeting with Shenoda, I returned to Bahjura and the Abu Eskander household. Nader recounted a time when he took a position at a bank in Naj Hammadi that provided him with a stable salary and a nine-to-five workday. His father scolded him then, for lowering himself to the position of a worker rather than an owner like the rest of his family; his superiors did not hold his family's social stature or historical position. Nader now lamented the current

state of his family and Christian life more broadly in Egypt: "In the early twentieth century, my family and others like us owned the land, had influence as Christians, and provided jobs for many generations of farmers, especially Muslims. Now, where once my family held much wealth, descendants of my workers own more than I do after traveling abroad to work in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. They have come back with more wealth than we have now."

His father's picture overlooked the table where we sat. I could not help, but think about the ways in which their house serves as a museum to their family's heritage; a legacy now mostly preserved in these shared memories. Walking through the halls of the estate, portraits of each family member adorn the walls, murals of a bygone era in Egypt cover each of the ceilings. On one ceiling, there is a felluca[87] traveling the Nile on a hot sunny day. Unlike the ground floor, for dignitaries and guests, the tiles on the residential floor squeak and crackle underneath the Persian carpet strewn across it. The room shakes if you walk too quickly. This home, with its baby blue exteriors, beautiful woodworked balconies and terraces, stands in the middle of what for many is now a no-name town in the middle of Upper Egypt.



Figure 15: A room in *Bayt* Abu Eskander. Photo by author.

Nader admitted that he has tried to emigrate from Egypt, through the United States' Diversity Visa, or Green Card Lottery. I asked him why he would apply for such a thing, especially when he remains so attached to Bahjura and to his family's history. "You just never know where this country is going economically, and especially as Christians, I want to be prepared." While Nader and his mother cleaned up dishes, I asked Nader's wife, Jackleen: "What do you think about what Nader said?" She grimaced and responded, "It's sad that such a great family lost this prestige [*heyba*]. The way that Nader describes it to me, I feel that loss too. They have blocked

[87] A wooden sailing boat.

us in, here [*sedoona hena*]. Look at what happened in Minya.[88] Look at how influential Coptic families like the Abu Eskanders were at one point in time.[89] To see Copts in this state today, especially in fear of being the targets of terrorist attacks, it's unthinkable."

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The loss of a moral universe, an ecology, in which Coptic landowning families held power and prestige is remembered today in its remaining artifacts in Bahjura—mainly homes, documents, photos, and neighborhoods. The remembrance is reflected in and interpreted through the contemporary conditions of Coptic life—mainly demarcated by incidents of sectarian violence and events of terrorism, which have targeted the Copts as a symbol of the state and as connected to Western Christendom.[90] Terrorism and incidents of sectarian violence are the new paradigms by which Coptic community is defined and constructed, with the Church as the central representative, moderator, and mediator in the wake of these attacks.

Under the consolidation of bureaucratic and institutional power in the late 1950s and 1960s, Copts became connected to one another, as citizens, through the Coptic Orthodox faith, above intersectional identifiers. They are now both symbols of national unity, and international representatives of Christianity, as a persecuted[91] Christian community. While violence has come to define the contemporary Coptic community, this was not always so. This chapter has described historically how Coptic community has varied, and how violence was not always the main analytic of relationality. There were other ways of inhabiting life.

"I ask myself…"

Bahaa' Taher's novel, "Aunt Safiyya and the Monastery" (1996) depicts life in an Upper Egyptian village, in, what is most likely, the early-mid twentieth century. An alliance forms between the predominantly Muslim village and the monks of a nearby Coptic monastery over a family feud. The novel's conclusion brings the reader back to the village some twenty-five years later. The monastery that once contained monks from the surrounding villages, now contains monks from around Egypt. Few of them speak the Upper Egyptian dialect, or know much about their neighboring village. Many Coptic tourists now visit the monastery to see the relics. Relations between the Muslims of the neighboring village and the monks is not what it was before, as the mass exodus of villagers to Cairo and abroad restructured local traditions of sociality.

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[88] On May 26, 2017, masked gunmen opened fire on a convoy carrying Copts from Maghagha in Egypt's Minya Governorate to the Monastery of Saint Samuel the Confessor, killing at least 28 people and injuring 22 others.

[89] At least in 1993, according to Saad Eddin Ibrahim, Copts owned 22.5 per cent of all the private investment companies that were founded between 1974 and 1993; Indeed, by 1961, Copts owned 34 percent of agricultural land, which slowly eroded and in subsequent decades took the form of private investment companies. See Saad Eddin Ibrahim and Ibn Khaldoun Center for development studies (Cairo), *The Copts of Egypt* Vol. 95. (London: Minority Rights Group, 1996).

[90] Shortly after the beheading of 21 Copts on the shores of Libya in February 2015, ISIS released their newsletter entitled, "Revenge for the Muslimat Persecuted by the Coptic Crusaders of Egypt."

[91] For more on the enmeshment of Coptic experience in the contemporary geopolitics of persecution, see Elizabeth A. Castelli, "Praying for the persecuted church: US Christian activism in the global arena," *Journal of Human Rights* 4, no. 3 (2005): 321-351; Melani McAlister, "The politics of persecution," *Middle East Report* 249 (2008): 18-27.

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"One of my cousins is forever sending me reproachful letters, asking me why we closed up the house, leaving it empty and abandoned. He says that the walls are crumbling and the foundations cracking, and that there's no longer any use in renovating, but the house will have to be rebuilt entirely.

'Anyone without a house,' he tells me, 'tries to build one, so how can you let your house fall to ruin?' He keeps urging me to rebuild the house.

When I receive one of these letters, all my memories come flooding back to me, and I see everything just as it was a quarter century ago.

And I ask myself, is there still a child who brings cookies to the monastery in a white cardboard box?

And I ask myself, do the monks still give their neighbors those small-pitted, sugared dates?

I ask myself…

Time and again, I ask myself…" (124)

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Bahjura offers a spatial example of the changes to religious, political, and socio-economic life in modern Egypt; changes that have left traces of before. Over the past seventy years, forms of life have been lost, replaced. Older traditions of sociality between members of the community, Muslims and Christians, have been made illegible. The separations and limits that constituted social relations then are not what constitute social relations now. The remaining landowning families in Bahjura narrate this loss through the language governing inter-communal relations today—of terrorism, extremists, and sectarianism. Their attempts and failures to narrate this loss is precisely the predicament of contemporary Bahjura's landscape. Villas line the canal, once belonging to Coptic landowning families, some occupied, others closed up as storage bins. The facades are dusty, the floors have collapsed, and the old mud-brick has cracked from the unrelenting heat. Villagers glance at them on their daily routes. They stand as living reminders.

Chapter 2
Minority Movements

Summer holidays occasion the return of diaspora Copts back to Egypt, visiting relatives and reconnecting with friends in the village. The village of Bahjura is spotted by the occupied and vacant homes of those who have migrated over the past one hundred years. Life in Bahjura is similar to many other urban landscapes in Egypt. Migration has had an impact on kinship relations and daily life. In a village, these effects are even more pronounced. During Ramadan 2017, I woke up in Amin's home. Amin is a church servant in the community, a Math teacher at the local public school, and a father to three children. Around 10:30am, after breakfast, Amin and I started walking through the village, heading to the primary school both him and his wife work at, closer to the old canal.

We arrived at the primary school after a 15-minute walk—weaving through the narrow and winding dirt streets. The Mounira Takla school was founded in 1906 by Daoud Takla, a prominent Copt from the Takla family. The school is the old home of Daoud and was converted into the primary school. When walking into the building, you enter a large room, with smaller classrooms connected to it. The desks appeared quite old, worn by decades of use. The last room to the right is the teachers' lounge. We entered, and I was greeted by three women in separate desks, one of them Amin's sister Marina. Marina's daughter, Amin's niece, lives in New Jersey, and attends the Coptic Church there. I asked Amin and the women why Copts want to immigrate to the United States.

Even though I noticed the women wanted to comment first, Amin interjected. "People travel abroad for two reasons—for the love of money because the economic situation here is…the opportunities for work are limited. They go to America for a better standard of living. Also, in America, there's more freedom. So, of course, anyone travels there because of freedom. These are the two most important reasons for immigration [*hijra*] to America. Okay, in order to travel, there needs to be an interview at the US Embassy [in Cairo]. So, I'll go there and say what in front of the consular officer at the Embassy? In order to receive sympathy [*'aṭif*] and get the okay to travel to America, we [as Christians] use persecution as a hanger [*ash-shama'a*] for our situation in order to travel to America."

International media, Western politicians and policy-makers, and Middle Eastern Christian diasporas themselves have argued that Middle Eastern Christians are facing extinction, and are fleeing for their lives from the forces of radical Islamic terrorism. Forced migration, displacement, and the influx of refugees to Western countries have framed discussions around the future of Middle Eastern Christianity. Yet, for Coptic Orthodox Christians, migration to Western countries has been discernably different. Migration to the United States has entailed either family reunification, the Diversity Visa (also known as the Green Card Lottery), or asylum. This chapter addresses the contemporary conditions and historical context of Coptic emigration from Egypt to the United States, focusing primarily on the Lottery. Despite increased Western attention to violent attacks against the Christian minority in Egypt, Coptic migration has been predicated on both religious discrimination *and* socio-economic conditions.

The intersections of religious-racial formation and class in Egypt significantly matter to discussions of migration, especially among a minority community like the Copts. By attending to the intersectional and institutional dynamics of migration, we can better understand how local conditions interface with geopolitical interests. US media outlets specifically focused on the

immigration of Copts after the revolution.[92] Reports correctly center their migration narratives on the precarity of Copts as a religious minority. Yet, these news reports are limited in their nuance of the interwoven communal interests and power structures that frame reasons for migration in contemporary Egypt.

Since the 1950s, the Coptic Church has expanded to all parts of the globe, as some Copts with government permission emigrated for jobs and education. Lack of economic opportunity led many Egyptians, particularly in the 1970s once restrictions were lifted, to travel abroad to the Persian Gulf or to Western countries like the United States seeking better jobs and social standing. For the U.S. government, the plight of Middle Eastern Christians has become a central policy issue, influenced by evangelical imaginaries of global Christian persecution.[93] Coptic migration have been translated through these geopolitical concerns. American religio-political discourses on the plight of Middle Eastern Christians and global Christian persecution have encouraged Copts to reinterpret histories and presents of persecution through a new awareness of their transnational connectedness. I argue, however, that while global flows and migration have led to increased mobility of people, images, and ideas, they also have led to the closure of identities which often used to be more permeable and diverse (Meyer and Geschiere 1999, 7). This chapter addresses this transnational feedback loop by examining the politics of Coptic immigration to the United States.

As part of the Immigration Act of 1990, the United States instituted the annual Diversity Visa (DV) Lottery, encouraging nationals of countries that historically sent few migrants to the United States to apply for one of 50,000 legal immigrant visas. Sparked by the advocacy of undocumented Irish immigrants in the United States in the late 1980s, policymakers created the Lottery as an instrument for legal migration outside of family, employment, and refugee admissions categories.[94] As of the 2018 DV results, Egypt ranked second in Green Card Lottery winners. At 1,274,751 entries, Egypt ranks as having one of the highest numbers of entries into the Lottery.[95] According to Pew Research[96], up to 75% of Egyptian immigrants to the United States identify as Christian, per The New Immigrant Survey (NIS). Over the past ten years, the number of Coptic immigrants, particularly those on the Diversity Visa, has increased exponentially, with more and more Copts applying for the Lottery from cities to the most remote villages of Egypt.[97] Many parishes in the New York-New Jersey area have felt the pressure, most notably since the 2011 Arab Spring, when dozens of families, especially from areas of Upper

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[92] One of many examples: Bruce Wallace, "Amid Instability in Egypt, Coptic Christians Flee to U.S.," *NPR*, January 4, 2013, https://www.npr.org/2013/01/04/168609672/amid-instability-in-egypt-coptic-christians-flee-to-u-s.

[93] Elizabeth Castelli, "Praying for the Persecuted Church: US Christian Activism in the Global Arena," *Journal of Human Rights* 4 (2005): 321-351. This idea is more fully discussed in Chapter 4.

[94] Carly Beth Goodman, "Global Game of Chance: The U.S. Diversity Visa Lottery, Transnational Migration, and Cultural Diplomacy in Africa, 1990-2016," (PhD diss., Temple University, 2016). More recently, anthropologist Charles Piot's *The Fixer* (2019) unpacks the experience of the Lottery in West Africa, specifically Togo.

[95] US Department of State official statistics. https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/us-visas/immigrate/diversity-visa-program-entry/dv-2018-selected-entrants.html.

[96] *Faith on the Move: The Religious Affiliation of International Migrants* (The Pew Research Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2012).

[97] These statistics are not published. I personally collected them from the Coptic Archdiocese of New Jersey and the New York and New England Diocese.

Egypt such as al-Minya, Assiut, and Naj Hammadi, came to churches right from John F. Kennedy International Airport each week, seeking shelter and work.

With such a large influx of Copts in such a short period of time, many clergymen of these parishes grew skeptical of the Green Card Lottery. Meeting in his narrow, cluttered office, with pictures, icons, and books strewn across the desk and chairs, Father Cyril, a priest in Jersey City, told me he was concerned about what the influx means for Copts back in Egypt: "Why does the Green Card lottery select so many people from Upper Egypt, and especially from such remote villages? It doesn't appear to be random in the least. A bishop told me 5 years back that he serves a village that has seen its Christian population decrease in half—from 80,000 to 40,000, which is quite shocking. All of them have received the Green Card Lottery. It makes sense to a certain extent—if the Christians leave, the Muslims will have the upper hand in these areas. Christians will be forced to sell their lands and Muslims will come and buy it all up. We have dozens of families from just one village that does not even have a church…It just doesn't make any sense to me."

For those in the US, the number of Copts that have come through the Green Card Lottery is alarming, and increased Coptic immigration may mean Christian vacancy in Egypt. The concern for Christian vacancy is that it will lead to the domination of the Egyptian landscape by Muslims. Father Cyril's fear of Coptic erasure in Egypt comes in the context of increased numbers of migrants and their families streaming into his parish on a weekly basis. The Green Card Lottery, at once an opportunity for those seeking a better life abroad, has also become a source of anxiety for transnational Coptic identity.

Transits and Returns

Every October, as the Green Card Lottery website opens and applicants start to submit their information, Copts around Egypt flock to their local church computer centers. There, the community gathers to have a church servant take their required photo and to submit all of their information correctly. Depending on the parish, they usually charge a fee for every applicant, including dependents. While Copts have the option of submitting their applications through a parish center, Egyptian Muslims do not have a similar system in local mosques. Some Muslims face side-eyes and grimaced faces entering these church computer centers, but they feel it is their only legitimate option for ensuring their application is submitted correctly. Out of suspicion and fear, Copts view Muslim presence in their landscapes as threat. Increased intercommunal tensions and the frequency of attacks against communities and their places of worship have driven a wedge between Christian and Muslim Egyptians.[98]

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[98] Demographics of migration have also had an effect on this wedge. Many Christians have permanently emigrated to Wester countries, including the United States, Canada, Australia, and throughout Europe (especially Italy, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom), depending on the availability of worker visas and opportunities like the Green Card Lottery. However, the majority of Egyptian emigration has been within the Arab World, to countries such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates, with more than 6 million Egyptian emigrants. Many more Egyptians, both Muslim and Christian, out of economic necessity are seasonal laborers in the Persian Gulf. As Pew Research has noted (2012), "About a third of Muslim migrants have come from the Middle East-North Africa, and a similar percentage have ended up there, including many who have moved from one country to another within the region." "Faith on the Move: Muslim Migrants," *Pew Research,* March 8, 2012. https://www.pewforum.org/2012/03/08/religious-migration-muslim-migrants/. For more information on Egyptian Muslim migration, see Gerasimos Tsourapas, "Egypt: Migration and Diaspora Politics in an

Muslim participation in Green Card Lottery entry at churches is also filtered through Egyptian state security's mandate to maintain an inter-communal gap between Christianity and Islam in Egypt. As anthropologist Angie Heo has noted, "the sectarian divide [in Egypt] is owed, not to essential, irreconcilable differences between Christianity and Islam, but to common points of overlap between Christian and Muslim practices…Sectarianizing the public is one key tactic for governing Christian-Muslim interactions" (204). In addition to these national contexts that surely have a local impact upon these processes of migration, Middle Eastern Christians, like the Copts, have become an important part of new trends in global Christianity, and Western governments have tended to voice favor in their entry than their Muslim counterparts; although this has not translated into preferential treatment.[99] The increased migration of Copts through the Green Card Lottery takes place within this context, and my Coptic interlocutors in Egypt viewed migration to the United States as an answer to their economic woes and social hardships *as* Christians. The Lottery has become central to Coptic life in contemporary Egypt, especially because the Coptic Orthodox Church, in its local parishes, has supported the enterprise and has jointly benefited from it.

In *Migrant Hearts and the Atlantic Return* (2015), Valentina Napolitano proposes the idea of the "Atlantic Return," by which she means the return of Catholics from the Americas to Rome, packed with colonial legacies of forced conversion, genocide, and indigenous decimation. These Latin American Catholics have become the life-blood for the Church in decline, in the heart of Europe. In this way, the Catholic Church is a global political subject that "…shapes global assemblages on transnational migration" (Napolitano, 3).[100] In a similar light, the Coptic Orthodox Church has become a global political subject shaping migration—as a facilitator in Egypt and in the United States. Copts enter the Lottery in Egypt at churches and are helped with shelter, employment, and immigration paperwork once in the United States. Napolitano's "Atlantic Return" focuses on the flow of once colonial subjects and converts to the former-imperial heart of power. Coptic Orthodox, once the subjects of French and British colonialism and Catholic and Protestant conversion, are "returning" not to the imperial church, but entering the heart of U.S. empire and the structures of power that shape Coptic life in contemporary Egypt, politically and socioeconomically.

British colonial influence in Egypt tapered off towards the mid-to-late 1950s, as President Gamal Abdel Nasser rose to power. Especially following the 1967 and 1973 war with Israel, as well as the oil embargo, the United States began to more directly influence and restructure the economies and societies of the Middle East. Colonial regimes ended, and American imperial power took the lead, shaping politics and policy, along with the Soviet Union (until the late

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Emerging Transit Country," *Migration Policy Institute,* August 8, 2018, https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/egypt-migration-and-diaspora-politics-emerging-transit-country; Samuli Schielke, *Migrant Dreams: Egyptian Workers in the Gulf States*, (Cairo, AUC Press, 2020).

[99] See Dan De Luce and Julia Ainsley. " Despite Trump's promise to protect them, Christian refugees struggle to enter U.S." *NBC News,* September 12, 2018, https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/immigration/despite-trump-s-promise-protect-them-christian-refugees-struggle-enter-n908501; Victoria Macchi, "US Accepts Record-High Percentage of Christian Refugees," *VOA,* June 29, 2018, https://www.voanews.com/usa/us-politics/us-accepts-record-high-percentage-christian-refugees.

[100] For more on other migrations facilitated by Coptic evangelism in Latin America, see Monica Mikhail's forthcoming dissertation entitled, "Transnational Production of Belonging and Care: Social Service Provision by the Coptic Church in Bolivia," (University of California-Santa Cruz).

1980s). Coptic migration to the United States, beginning in earnest in the early 1970s, exemplifies not a return, but a transfer from one colonial context to another. In Napolitano's case, Catholic Latin American migrants reshape metropolitan Europe in their return (8). Conversely, the Coptic Orthodox Church and its Coptic migrants[101] have been disciplined by this migration; acquiring new ways of understanding their faith and religious identity.

Beginning in the early 1940s, the Egyptian government sent graduates of what was then King Fouad, now Cairo, University abroad for postgraduate studies. A small group of Egyptians, both Muslim and Christian, began visiting the United States. Following the 1952 revolution, the Coptic Church forged its modern institutional power beyond the newly-formed national borders of Egypt.[102] In the summer of 1954, the Coptic Church took part in the second general meeting of the World Council of Churches in Evanston, Illinois. During that year, Father Makari El-Souryani (later known as Bishop Samuel) conducted outreach to Copts in the U.S., and kept a list of their addresses and telephone numbers. Many expressed their desire of having a Coptic Church nearby, since many were attending non-Orthodox churches. From this earliest period of immigration, clergy as ambassadors of the Church sutured Coptic identity to the Church's transnational institutional authority.

During the 1950s, Egyptians came to the United States for higher education and clinical training by permission of the government and through American scholarships.[103] Establishing a Coptic Church in the U.S. became one of the main goals of this small group, which formed the Coptic Association of America in 1962 with one of its stated goals "to meet the needs of the Coptic Church" (Boulos 2006, 30). The Church, through pastoral visits of bishops, made sure that Copts were connected back to Egypt, and became the central institution which defined Coptic life in America, just as it was establishing itself as a national church in Egypt throughout the 1960s.

A parallel process was taking place globally. While the Church in Egypt was securing its institutional power with the rise of Gamal Abdel Nasser to the presidency, it was also building its

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[101] I linguistically intertwine Copts with the Coptic Orthodox Church because this has institutionally and structurally—whether in Egypt or the United States—been the case. This does not mean that resistance to such a framing does not exist, but I aim to address the structural transformations that have taken place since the 1970s that have allowed the Church to become the "representative" of all Copts—nationally and transnationally. There are also challenges to this narrative from Coptic Catholics and Coptic Protestants. For more on Coptic Protestants, see "Interview with Mirna Wasef: Copticity Beyond Orthodoxy," *Coptic Canadian History Project*, December 29, 2019, https://thecchp.com/2019/12/29/copticity-beyond-orthodoxy/; Anna Dowell, "Landscapes of Belonging: Protestant Activism in Revolutionary Egypt," *International Journal of Sociology* 45, no. 3 (2015): 190-205. For more on Coptic Catholics, see McEwan 2002 and Fr. Aaron Michka's forthcoming dissertation entitled, "Un-Islamic: Christian Life and Religious Difference in an Upper Egyptian Society," (University of Michigan).

[102] This is in reference to the parallel development of the post-colonial Egyptian nation-state and the Coptic Orthodox Church as the Egyptian national church. There are of course alternative geographies that expand the Coptic Church's reach beyond northeast Africa, but those geographies are not tied to modern state craft. Rather, they exhibit the ways theology formed different kinship relations prior to ideas of nation and nationhood. See Joshua Thomas Georgy, "Fragmented Geographies: The See of Alexandria, Its Following, and the Estrangements of Modernity," (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2015).

[103] This small group of people were mainly from Cairo and Alexandria, and graduates of Egypt's top universities. Shawki Karas, from Sohag, later the spearhead of Coptic activism in the United States, was an exception. See Sami Boulos, *The History of the Early Coptic Community in the U.S.A (1955-1970)* (2006).

network among Copts in, what would later be known as, the "lands of immigration."[104] Despite strained relations between the U.S. and Egypt through the late 1950s and 1960s, as Abdel Nasser sought political and financial support from the Soviet Union and as the Arab-Israeli conflict intensified, the Church portrayed itself domestically as a partner in national unity while also spreading its ecumenical reach to churches in the West, producing new institutional and religio-political tensions.[105] For the Coptic Orthodox Church, migration has presented a fundamental paradox that has effected liturgical life, social institutions, and spiritual authority.

One the one hand, the Church has encouraged emigration from Egypt, as a means to spread its influence and authority globally beyond the national borders and boundaries of the Egyptian state. Thus, in spite of legal, administrative, and social discrimination that have oppressed Egypt's Copts, they have been given a way to circumvent such strictures, by leaving. This preserves the community and the Church as the representative of the Copts both in Egypt and elsewhere. On the other, once in the "lands of immigration," Copts have had to contend with different forms of life than in Egypt. The Church has had to adapt to its status as a minority within a minority. In other words, in Egypt, the Coptic Orthodox Church is the church of the Christian majority. In places like the United States, the Church is a minority of a minority of a minority—it is neither Protestant (the majority), nor Roman Catholic, nor Eastern Orthodox.

For the purposes of migration, Coptic movement to the West must be understood in relation to colonial legacies of mission work. From the 17th century, Catholic and Protestant missionaries from Europe and, later, the United States have sought to convert the Copts, in terms of theology *and* civilization.[106] Europeans and Americans came to the Copts. Since the mid-20th century, Copts are migrated West. This reversal has not meant the same for Copts as it once did for Westerners in Egypt—there is no imperial project nor spiritual or civilizational conversion taking place. Rather, in the strategies of emigration from Egypt and the processes of immigration to the United States, Copts are once again being converted to a set of civilizational principles and religio-political subjectivities by American imperial forces that have altered their frames of reference, political conditions, and religious dialogues.

"Do you want to go to America?"

To show me the annual Lottery entry first-hand, Amin brought me to the Coptic Center for Computer and Internet Services in Nag Hammadi on a cooler evening in mid-October. The Center is on the second floor of a church. Bola, twenty-six, is the head of the Center and the one who submits all of the entries for the Lottery. He has never won the Lottery himself, but takes pleasure in helping others. His two assistants Yacoub and Daniel, sixteen and eleven respectively, help Bola out by taking photos and assisting the numerous people that walk through their doors. As candidates started to fill the room that evening, I asked Bola how many people

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[104] Since 2015, under the leadership of Pope Tawadros, the Coptic Church established a triennial event, bringing together members of the, mainly Western, diaspora with the Church in Egypt. See http://www.landofimmigration.org/.

[105] Valentina Napolitano describes a related paradox for the Roman Catholic Church. The Romanization of the Catholic Church has produced new tensions when it comes to recent Latin American immigration to Italy. At once, clergy see Catholic migrants as "new blood" for a Church in decline across Europe. Yet, at the same time, immigration has been depicted as destabilizing European identity (2015, 37).

[106] See Alastair Hamilton, *Copts and the West: 1439-1822 (*London: Oxford University Press, 2006)*;* Heather Sharkey, *American Evangelicals in Egypt: Missionary Encounters in an Age of Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

applied from Naj Hammadi last year. He counted each of the files on his desktop and they numbered 833, which does not include dependents (the number could be much larger, maybe into the thousands). It's not just people from this church that apply. Because this particular church has a large success rate, with dozens of people winning the Lottery each year, many from the surrounding villages have flocked there to apply.

Some applicants looked like they had just come from work either in construction, with their clothing and hands covered in dust, or from the fields, wearing *galabayas*[107], covered in dirt and water. They believe that because this church has had success, percentage wise, that it will continue to have success, with people from neighboring Sohag and Qena coming to Naj Hammadi to apply, despite the fact that they also have computer centers in their respective areas more than capable of entering them into the Lottery. For each of these lottery entrants, Bola charges 20LE[108] per each family member. Some of the applications that Bola showed me had all of the spots for dependents filled and some even wrote more onto another application.

Bola explained that many people who come in don't understand the idea of the Lottery, thinking that as soon as they apply, they will win. "People come in here and think they are going if they merely apply. Right away they want to know who will help them when they get there, asking who will buy their tickets and provide them with work when they arrive in America."

With every applicant that entered the Center, Bola asked enthusiastically, "Do you want to go to America? ['*aiyyz troḥ Amrika*?]" One of the first groups to apply that evening were two women from neighboring Bahjura with their children. One woman's husband works in Kuwait. She's applying for the family because she says her chances from Naj Hammadi are better than if her husband entered for them in Kuwait. I spoke with her about why she wanted to emigrate to the U.S. "After all of the incidents that have happened here, it's better for us there. Yes, things will be hard, but at least they treat you with dignity [*karama*]. They treat you like a dignified person." Compounded with attacks, Christians also deal with the current economic conditions that have left all Egyptians without many options. They are both subject to government austerity measures and lack of employment opportunities that all Egyptians have to face, but they also face systematic discrimination as a minority community, vying for limited resources as much as the majority.

For many of these applicants, the Lottery is a way to ensure a brighter future for their children, especially as Christians in Egypt. Victor, a teacher in his late-40s, is another applicant from neighboring Bahjura. He applies every year. Now that he has a family and younger, growing children, he has further need to apply to make a better life for them. "I know the system here in Egypt. It will not be easy for my children to succeed. Through this new system, a formal interview will take place after their third year to confirm their placement in university. This is the worst thing that could happen to my children because it almost secures discrimination; once they see their name and confirm they are Christian. There is no escaping this, except through emigration. That's why we apply."

The current context of Coptic migration is one mediated by the consolidation of Christian identity in Egypt as discursively connected to violence and persecution, as well as national security. The transformation of religious identity into the primary marker of Egyptian-ness has reconfigured readings of intercommunal interaction.[109] In contending with and securing Coptic

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[107] A flowing long-sleeved, loose-fitting garment worn by men and women.

[108] Roughly one U.S. dollar.

[109] Similarly, in the case of the Alevi minority in Turkey, Kabir Tambar notes that their inclusion into the national fabric was premised on the violent repudiation of the ethno-religious pluralities that characterized

religious difference, the Egyptian state has negotiated with the Coptic Church, as institutional representative, to set the terms of their domestication.[110] The state monitors and regulates displays of collective difference.[111] To understand Christian-Muslim relations in postcolonial Egypt and the national contexts of emigration, one must excavate the affective sensibilities that discourses of national unity elide and that color the politics of emigration.

The increased recognition of Islamic religious and cultural symbols in public space since the start of the Islamic Revival in Egypt have dually developed an increased sense of spatial encroachment among Coptic Christians. It must be said that insomuch as a national polity is representative majoritarian norms and values, it stands in a necessary relation of tension with minority traditions and cultures (Asad 2003). This is not merely a function of Islamic societies, nor postcolonial contexts, but is characteristic of the nation-state form (Mahmood 2015; Hirschkind 2006, 211). That being said, majoritarian norms have encroached upon Coptic minority cultures and identity in contemporary Egypt (Ibrahim 2019; Shenoda 2011), and this encroachment plays out through ordinary affects—at school, at work, and in the street.

Over dinner one evening, Amin and I spoke about my day with the Abu Eskander family. His wife was studying with their son in the other room for an exam. I thought it was related to the Arabic exam that the Abu Eskander children were studying for that week. The previous night and that day, they showed me their materials for Arabic, which included sections to memorize from the Qur'an and particular Islamic phrasing. One of the things that they had to repeat for Arabic was the correct phrasing to appropriately name Muhammed as the Messenger of God [*rasool Allah*]; they must subsequently say "Peace be upon him" [*sala Allah 'alayhi wa-salem*]. Amin began to laugh, and recounted how at school, every morning, students must say two phrases "God is Great. God is Great" [*Allahu Akbar, Allahu 'adham*] and then "God bless the Arab Republic" [*taḥiyat gomhorriyat al-'arabiyya*]. Amin recounted that there was one principal who observed students mumbling the first part, reciting the second with a loud voice.

Ottoman social and political life (2014, 6). The inclusion of Copts into the Egyptian nation as the acceptable minority came about after Greek, Armenian, Italian, and Jewish communities were deemed unfit and "foreign" to the nation. The Copts became the minority to the Sunni Muslim majority in Egypt, under President Gamal Abdel Nasser. For more on this, see Joel Beinin, *The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996); Alexander Kitroeff, *The Greeks and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Cairo: AUC Press, 2019); Gerasimos Tsourapas, *The Politics of Migration in Modern Egypt: Strategies for Regime Survival in Autocracies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

[110] This particular relationship between Church and state has been paralleled by scholars to the millet partnership under the Ottoman Empire—in which a religious community was allowed to rule under its own laws in exchange for tax payment. During the Reform Era of the Ottoman Empire, inaugurated with the Edict of Gülhane in 1839, various confessional groups were first subsumed under the category of *millet* and the *millet* system *qua* system emerged. Quite quickly, however, the theological and ecclesial problems of dividing the non-Muslims of the Empire into three broad groups, with only the most general criterion for separating the Christians, led to cracks in the "big three" *millet*s of Jewish, Orthodox (Rum/Greek) and non-Chalcedonian (Armenian) Christians. Coptic Christians fell under the non-Chalcedonin, Armenian millet. For more on the "neo-millet partnership," see Paul Sedra, "Copts and the Millet partnership: The intra-communal dynamics behind Egyptian sectarianism," *Journal of Law and Religion* 29, no. 3 (2014): 491-509; Magdi Guirguis, "The Copts and the Egyptian Revolution: Various Attitudes and Dreams," *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 79, no. 2 (2012): 511-530.

[111] For more on this, see Chapter 5 of Heo 2018.

She corrected them, telling them that they needed to say the first part with a loud voice. Amin described her as "a little bit Muslim Brotherhood" [*ikhwaniya shwaya*], with a chuckle.

In Egypt, Copts are caught between the strange play of visibility and invisibility. They are of course visible in Egypt and in the West during violent attacks; their maimed bodies on full display in the fight against terrorism and in the production of Muslim enemies. Yet, as the revolution clearly showed through Coptic protest (Lukasik 2016; Delgado 2015), Copts desire a visibility that takes seriously their religiosity. It is the everyday life in an Islamic public sphere that many of my Coptic interlocutors found troublesome (Shenoda 2012). After some pause, Amin looked at the carpet on the dining room floor with misty eyes. He raised his eyes to me after a minute or two and asked, "What is the greatest miracle (*mo'agiza*) you have seen in Egypt?" After a long pause, contemplating the question, Amin responded, "…we [Christians] are still living here, in the middle of this society…Every time I think about emigrating, I think about what would happen to Egypt after I left. If we [Christians] all leave, Egypt will be like Saudi Arabia. I can't emigrate and see Egypt like this."

During my fieldwork, many Copts like Amin indicated through storytelling that they do not want to blend into an Egyptian identity that does not take their Christianity to be an integral part of it. To Amin, Saudi Arabia symbolizes the breakdown of such difference, in favor of homogenization. Thus, Copts are the bulwarks against the breakdown of an Egyptian mosaic. Christian presence is understood to moderate a shared sense of belonging, beyond religious difference. In many ways, the memory of Coptic landowning families, described in Chapter 1, gives example to continued Christian territorial belonging in contemporary Egypt. Objects of their presence—exemplified in district names, ominous, abandoned villas lining the village streets, and prominent descendants that remain—parallel the alternative realities of their control over the socioeconomic life of the village. As part of the merchant and agricultural classes, some of Amin's ancestors were most likely subjected to the oppressive structures of the plantation system in Egypt. Yet, these families continue to represent what Christian life in Egypt *could* again become for Copts like Amin.

"Draining the Middle East of Christians"

On a February afternoon, I walked through embassy row in downtown Cairo down a labyrinth of streets blocked by cement from revolutions past. At a café frequented by American embassy officers, I met with two officials who cover visa and public relations. Both organize the Lottery entry each year—answering questions online, recruitment at Egyptian universities, and the day-to-day operations of the program. I asked them about the Coptic perception that the Lottery is a conspiracy—to drain Egypt of its Copts. "The Lottery is a lottery, meaning they pull numbers. There is no thumb on the scale," one of the officers said. "People might register everyone in their group, which could later be an issue since it is prone to fraud. We know that organizations do this, but we caution against it." Referring to the Coptic Orthodox Church, the official emphasized the intimate way local dioceses enter Christians into the competition, without their knowledge. He explained away conspiratorial framings of the Lottery process: "Think about the odds, that's what's most important. Instead of thinking that the lottery itself is choosing people from areas effected by sectarian violence and 'draining the Middle East of Christians,' more people may very well apply after incidents of sectarian violence happen…If more Christians from a village apply because their church organizes information sessions, that simply increases their odds—their probability increases."

In *Motherland Lost: The Egyptian and Coptic Quest for Modernity* (2013), Samuel Tadros, Senior Fellow at the Hudson Institute's Center for Religious Freedom, describes Coptic immigration to the United States since the 2011 revolution as the only option: "The prospects for Copts in Egypt are, to say the least, bleak. Their options are limited…unlike the Jewish emigrants escaping Egypt in the '40s and '50s, for Copts driven out of their ancestral homeland, there is no Israel to escape to…The only option in front of them is to pack their bags and leave, putting an end to two thousand years of Christianity in Egypt" (211-212). The perspective of the Copts as "fleeing" from Egypt, of a Coptic exodus, is one shared by many within policy circles. Such a perspective does not attend to the particulars of Coptic emigration from Egypt, especially the structural modes by which it is happening. The Church has been a major conduit to migration, helping the socio-economic disparity of some of its most precarious communities in Upper Egypt and ensuring its own financial survival through remittances and transnational circulations of charity. To withstand political and economic turbulence in Egypt, the Church has become a source of social services, lacking by the state, and the center of Coptic identity, molding its possibilities and futures. To ensure its continued flourishing, in the form of buildings, complexes, and organizations, diaspora contributions have aided the expansion of the Church's institutional reach.[112]

While clergy in the United States, like Father Cyril mentioned earlier in this chapter, lament the number of Copts coming through the Lottery, the Church in Egypt is itself at the center of its operation, encouraging locals to apply and giving them the tools to do so. "When a whole village in Minya receives the Green Card Lottery, you have to ask, who received this and when? Who brought their family members? Did others migrate by different means?" the other US embassy official noted. "The reality is much different. It's natural to interpret such instances as conspiratorial, instead of analyzing how there are more organizations to help community members sign up." The Coptic Orthodox Church has helped Copts to migrate, which has led to the emptying of villages throughout Upper Egypt, where many Copts reside, and where local economies of have been decimated by urbanization, declines in agricultural labor, and youth heading to cities for education.

The efforts of local parishes in places like Naj Hammadi pales in comparison to the system at the Coptic Orthodox Cathedral in 'Abbasiyya, Cairo, though. At the Anba Ruweis computer center in October 2017, young Egyptians sat filling out Lottery applications, intermittently directing questions to the office secretary. The secretary told me that the office employs a full-time staff, especially during the time of the Lottery. "How many people apply every day?" I asked. "Anywhere from 200-300," she replied. Hundreds if not thousands of applications kept in plastic bags covered the desk, each with an identifying number at the top of the page. Even at the heart of Coptic Orthodox Christianity, Cairo's Cathedral, migration is an important part of Coptic identity. As with other lay matters over the course of the twentieth century, the Church has positioned itself as the scaffold of Coptic life. During the time of Gamal Abdel Nasser took, Copts began to emigrate from Egypt, and the Church followed them—cultivating such Copts as ambassadors of the new Egypt. The struggle over Coptic life in the United States between the Church and educated laity in the mid-twentieth century preceded and laid the foundation for later waves of Coptic immigration.

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[112] Per the Coptic Diaspora Survey (2012), respondents in the Coptic diaspora preferred the Coptic Church—whether in the United States/Canada/Australia/the UK or in Egypt—as an intermediary organization for their philanthropy.

De/Reterritorialization

Journalist Edward Wakin elaborated in 1963 that through migration and ecumenical connection, "the Copts have made it more difficult for any Egyptian regime to attack the Coptic Church without repercussions" (172). The emigration of Copts from Egypt had wide-ranging effects on the place-making of the minority in post-revolutionary Egypt. Wakin, aptly, frames the dilemma in this way: "In their historical refusal to emigrate, or even to enlist outside aid, the Copts have placed a geographic boundary (the banks of the Nile) on their critical test of Moslem-Christian relations. The problem and also the challenge to the Egyptian government is inescapable because of the commitment to remain—as Copts—and work out their future in the place where they have always been" (31). Coptic claims of belonging, according to Wakin, lay in their physical presence in Egypt. Yet, shifts in economic conditions following nationalization pushed Copts and other Egyptians to seek employment elsewhere. The nationalization of industries and businesses under Gamal Abdel Nasser, where Copts formerly had control and held the bulk of professional and skilled positions under colonial regimes, meant a shift in Christian influence throughout Egypt. "…the more the government controls, the less chance there is for Christians," one Copt in Egypt recounted to Wakin in the early 1960s (38).

During the 1950s, the U.S. government aimed to bolster relations with Egypt by offering scholarships for education and training. A dozen or so Coptic individuals and families came to the United States and congregated in the New York-New Jersey area. As recipients of such scholarships, they also became the surrogate ambassadors of Egypt in America, attending gatherings with U.S. politicians, Egyptian consulate officials, and other members of the Egyptian community in New York. As one Copt of the time explained, they "tried to introduce their mother land to the Americans who knew practically nothing about Egypt" (Boulos 2006, 27). Copts of the period describe how their emigration from Egypt was out of professional necessity as well. After nationalization efforts in Egypt, government hiring practices became more discriminatory against Egypt's Christians. Many of these new émigrés cited this as one of the main reasons for leaving Egypt.

Once in the United States, the dozen or so scholars began to congregate at the home of Saba Habashy Basha, former Minister of Commerce and Industry (1938-1940) under King Farouk. Habashy left Egypt soon after the 1952 revolution, given his support of the British colonial regime. Pursuing another livelihood from exile in New York City, his apartment on the Upper East Side of Manhattan became the first gathering space for Copts in the United States. The gatherings were not only for social comradery, but also stood in for liturgical services of the Coptic Orthodox Church. Along with the consolidation of Church institutional power in Egypt during the mid-twentieth century, the Church followed the Coptic émigrés, at their own request. Bishop Samuel (formerly known as Abouna Makari El-Souryani) was himself educated at Princeton Theological Seminary and led the Coptic Church's ecumenical efforts during the mid-twentieth century. During his many trips to the United States, he would meet with Copts at Habashy's apartment.

In 1962, the early émigré group established the Coptic Association of America (CAA) in the hopes of garnering support from the church back in Egypt to send a priest to serve the community. Bishop Samuel took on such a role, sending the group pastoral letters of spiritual encouragement to foster a sense of community in diaspora. One of these first émigrés, Sami Boulos, documents Samuel's role as such: "His [Samuel's] goal was to remind them [the Copts in New York] of their Coptic heritage and to advise them to remain steadfast in their loyalty to

that tradition" (Boulos 2006, 33). As representative of the clerical hierarchy of the Coptic Orthodox Church in the United States, Bishop Samuel helped to organize Copts and carve out a community, making sure that if someone heard of a new Coptic émigré to the US he would be made aware.

During this period of immigration, the framework of belonging was challenged by Coptic deterritorialization; their absence from the Egyptian landscape and the challenges of everyday life. Wakin posited the following question in 1963: "Are Copts primarily members of an ancient Christian church or members of a persistently identifiable community of Egyptians?" As with the electoral battles of the Coptic Communal Council of 1949-1950 (Bland 2019), these distinctions were not mutually exclusive in the United States. Coptic émigrés were tied together by a conception of a distinct Coptic community, represented by the Church through its spiritual character, ancient tradition, and pastoral duties. While Coptic émigrés desired the Church's pastoral care, it became increasingly clear that, as in Egypt, the Church sought to be the sole representative of Coptic life outside of Egypt as well.



Figure 16: Saba Habashy's apartment. September 1963. Bishop Samuel is dressed in black at the center of the photo. Courtesy of Elhamy Khalil.

Thus, the CAA looked to Bishop Samuel as a representative figure of the Church in Egypt, sending letters to its members informing them of the bishop's presence even when he was in Europe and planned to come to the U.S. afterwards. In one such letter from August 1963, the organization describes the bishop's travel plans and also informs members: "We are also pleased to tell you that we can provide you with books, pictures, and CDs about the Coptic Church as well as the modern renaissance of the United Arab Republic in its bright age [*'asrha al-zahr*]" (Boulos, 142). This small group of educated Copts in the New York-New Jersey area became the conduits to establishing the Coptic Church's presence in North America, as well as the ambassadors of Egypt's post-colonial image to the world. One major part of that revolutionary

phase was ensuring that the Copts back in Egypt, and especially the Church, solidified their role as an *essential* part of the nation. To be otherwise could have severe consequences.[113]

The CAA not only told members that they could send them recordings of hymns and the liturgy, to maintain connections to their Coptic religious heritage, but they also told members they could provide slides of churches in Egypt and of pharaonic Egypt, in particular—to showcase Egypt's civilizational strength and secure Egypt's national image in the world. Such slides were shown at local, predominantly white American churches or gatherings for American Egyptophiles. The CAA hosted a number of public lectures on topics ranging from Church history to Coptic politics after the 1952 revolution. In 1963, they invited Edward Wakin himself to come speak on his book. The organization even purchased 46 copies of the book and gave it to members.[114]

Bishop Samuel's pastoral trips to the United States aimed to cultivate Copts of the diaspora as servants of the Egyptian nation and the Church. In parallel with shifts in power and governance in Egypt, the expansion of the Church into Western countries offered new institutional opportunities beyond Egypt's borders. Boulos describes how such Copts were "thirsty for a taste of their Mother church" (2006, 37). Bishop Samuel sought to make sure that Copts remained within the Church, despite being outside of its new, national borders. From the bishop's June 1963 trip to the United States, the CAA recommended that on behalf of the Church in Egypt, the organization collect special tithes for missionary work in Africa. In May of 1963, the Organization of African Unity (known as the African Union since 2002) was established in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser became its second chairperson in 1964, and sought to make Egypt a leader of the Arab World and African continent.[115] Inspired by Abdel Nasser and colonial missionary organizations established throughout the continent, the Coptic Orthodox Church sought to further its spiritual and institutional influence in parallel with the Egyptian state. Copts in diaspora were implored to advance the needs of the nascent state and the emergent strength of the Coptic Orthodox Church.

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[113] For more on minorities and the nation, see the case of the Alevis and the Kurds in Turkey (Tambar 2014).

[114] One early Coptic immigrant now living in San Francisco, California recounted that everywhere he traveled he would find Wakin's book and purchase it. In his home library, he owns dozens of copies.

[115] "Firm African Unity is Urged by Nasser as Leaders Convene," *New York Times,* July 18, 1964, https://www.nytimes.com/1964/07/18/archives/firm-african-unity-is-urged-by-nasser-as-leaders-convene.html



Figure 17: University Gathering of Egyptian embassy officials and American businessmen, organized by Maher Kamel, member of the CAA, for the promotion of Egyptian industrial products in the United States. Fall 1960. Courtesy of Elhamy Khalil.

Shortly following this trip, the CAA issued specific aims of the organization as it pertains to religious identity and mission in diaspora. The "religious committee" emphasized that the main aim of the association was to "promote Christian life" and that each meeting should start and end with prayers. The CAA molded itself into a satellite organization of the Coptic Orthodox Church in diaspora. Two other resolutions of the committee focused on proper religious education—on doctrine, history, and tradition of the Church—for all members in order to "…be equipped with knowledge for presenting our church to the American community" (Boulos 2006, 39). There was a marked campaign to mold each Copt into a lay spokesperson for the community, in the absence of Coptic clergy.

Without clergy, Copts had the responsibility of carving out a diasporic pedagogy for their children. "Every home should be aware of its responsibilities toward the spiritual needs of the younger generation in a foreign land. We recommend therefore daily prayers, bible reading and meditation at home with the children. The necessary literature for the parent's orientation, such as Coptic Calendars, Prayer Books, and Sunday School material should be obtained from the Mother church," the third resolution stated. As was beginning in Egypt, the institutionalization of the Coptic Church also meant the clericalization of the community (al-Khawaga 1997). These efforts all aimed to promote the responsibility of the diaspora to the "Mother Church" in Egypt through "continuous prayers" (Boulos, 39). The CAA oscillated between bolstering the Church's primacy as Coptic representative in Egypt, but also quietly expanded the Church's reach beyond Egypt and into the ecumenical world. A form of support for the "Mother Church" was the ambassadorial role the laity in diaspora played, asking members to "contribute to the needy persons and organization outside our Coptic circles as a symbol of our Christian stewardship representing our Church internationally" (Boulos, 40).



Figure 18: Home gathering in New Jersey of CAA members. Elhamy Khalil, far right, holds two photos of Pope Kyrillos VI, then Patriarch of the Coptic Orthodox Church. Fall 1963. Courtesy of Elhamy Khalil.

The educated laity of this era, products of Abdel Nasser's revolution, stood in for the Church, yet also began participating in global Christian networks. Throughout the late 1950s and 1960s, in the lead up to the 1967 Six Day War, Western missionary organizations were phased out and Westerners eventually evacuated from Egypt. In Abdel Nasser's campaign for nationalization of all organizations, his efforts gave the Coptic Church strength it had not had previously under colonial, missionary regimes. Western missionaries, colonial writers and regimes, and news media framed (and continue to frame) the Coptic Church as archaic, ignorant, and decadent in its worship and community formation.[116] While forging the community as the origins of the Egyptian nation (its indigenous people) members of the clerical hierarchy such as Bishop Samuel simultaneously elevated the Coptic Church to the organizational circles of global Christianity, as one of the founding members of the World Council of Churches.

The CAA and the Church in North America changed their relational dynamic in the wake of increased immigration. Conflict arose when the group campaigned for a priest to serve the community. Abouna Morcos became the first priest commissioned to serve communities in Canada and the United States. The CAA arranged travel and finances for Abouna Morcos, which grew too much of a financial burden for the small community. Throughout the late 1960s, as the number of Coptic émigrés grew, the CAA outgrew the demands of the community. By 1969, Pope Kyrillos urged the CAA to merge with the growing clerical bureaucracy of the Church in North America. The CAA complied, transferring its remaining funds to the Coptic Church. In its final letter, the organization noted: "If, because of changing circumstances it has willingly elected to cease as a separate entity, and be absorbed in the greater body of the Church, this is because we believe that the C.A.A.'s main objectives can now be worked out through the whole Church membership in unity and singleness of purpose" (Boulos, 118). For a time, the CAA

[116] Colonial examples of this include Lord Cromer, *Modern Egypt* (1908) and Edward Lane, *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (1835). Today, Martin Mosebach's *The 21: Journey into the Land of Coptic Martyrs* (2018) implies this discourse, while also revering the faithfulness and simplicity of contemporary Coptic religious life.

curated Coptic identity in diaspora outside of the institutional authority of the Coptic Orthodox Church. It held on to the remnants of a period that allowed the Coptic laity to hold power, not simply as Coptic Orthodox, but also in molding what it meant to be part of a Coptic people.



Figure 19: Bishop Gregorius (then Father Bakhoum), companion of Bishop Samuel, with the CAA Board in front of Saba Habashy's Riverside Drive Apartment. Fall 1963. Courtesy of Elhamy Khalil.

By the early 1970s, Coptic churches were established throughout North America and became the center of Coptic life. Following the deaths of Abdel Nasser (1970) and Pope Kyrillos (1971), President Anwar Sadat and Pope Shenouda III forged their own itineraries of Egyptian identity. The departure of the CAA from Coptic civil society in the US left a gap in communal organization. As tensions arose between Sadat and Shenouda in the wake of increasing attacks against the Coptic community in Egypt and the structural reformation of the Egyptian economy, the American Coptic Association (ACA), founded by former CAA treasurer Shawky Karas in 1974, became a mouthpiece to pressure the Egyptian government. It is in this era that Coptic political activism in the diaspora developed. The growing Coptic community in the United States posited a foil against the Egyptian government, especially as many vocalized their opposition to a growth in discriminatory policies and violence against Copts in Egypt. This opened up a new problem space for Copts that harkened back to colonial legacies of Coptic "foreign-ness," in their shared Christianity with the West. In an era of migration, Copts saw an opportunity to help their kin back in Egypt by voicing their concerns about the Egyptian government to US congressmen and even the President of the United States. Where the capitulations of the Ottoman Empire left Copts, as well as other "foreigners" in Egypt, "protected," they also transformed indigenous communities into specters of empire. As human rights organizations gained steam throughout the 1970s, violence against Copts in Egypt was interpellated into the liberal expansion of American imperial formations.[117]

[117] In this sense, American imperialism refers to the globalization of Western ideas and frameworks, by which Western power structures govern, monitor, and arbitrate their application and enforcement. Backed



Figure 20: Shawky Karas and family, with Elhamy Khalil on the far left. Summer 1964. Princeton, New Jersey. Courtesy of Elhamy Khalil.

Seeing Egypt through the United States

In November 1972, fights broke out between Christians and Muslims in the Upper Egyptian village of El-Khanka over the use of a private home as a church. The violence escalated and the private home turned church was burned down. In defiance of such an act, Pope Shenouda (1971-2012) sent 100 bishops and priests to hold a vigil at its site, as a buffer between the two groups. In retaliation, Muslims destroyed Coptic homes and stores after the clergymen had departed. The government did not bring charges, and the failure to bring many Muslim culprits to trial weighed on the Coptic community.

In March 1980, in response to Sadat's passivity and inaction toward acts of violence waged against the Copts in preceding years, Shenouda canceled Orthodox Easter celebrations and withdrew to the St. Bishoy monastery in Wadi al-Natrun. This gesture was an affront to the government which wished to showcase its staged goodwill to the country's Christians during such a ceremony. This was especially important for Egypt's image with the United States after the Camp David Peace Accords of 1978. Pope Shenouda's defiance would have far-reaching consequences for the Church and Coptic activists in the United States. In September of 1981, Sadat annulled the 1971 presidential decision that approved Shenouda as pope. The Pope was confined to the St. Bishoy monastery for the better part of the 1980s. In addition, 170 bishops and priests were arrested and imprisoned for their defiance of the government's stance towards the Copts. To weaken the Church's institutional unity and power, Sadat built an alliance

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by the restructuring of the global economy according to U.S. economic and political interests, Western NGOs and governmental organizations focused on humanitarian efforts and the human rights agenda. See Samuel Moyn, *Not Enough: Human Rights in an Unequal World,* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018); Daniel Sargent, *A Superpower Transformed: The Remaking of American Foreign Relations in the 1970s,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Niall Ferguson, Charles Maier, Erez Manela, and Daniel Sargent, *The Shock of the Global: The 1970s in Perspective,* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010); Talal Asad, "What Do Human Rights Do? An Anthropological Enquiry," *Theory & Event* 4, no. 4 (2000).

consisting of the Coptic upper class—from traditionalists to reformers—who feared Shenouda's confrontational style would generate greater Muslim backlash (Hasan, 110), and appointed his own governing council of the Coptic Orthodox Church.

In the United States, Coptic activists, including and especially Shawky Karas, president of the ACA, sided with Shenouda, splitting the diaspora between the make-shift Church hierarchy, newly appointed by Sadat, and those imprisoned. Sadat increasingly became fixated on "immigrant Copts," also known as *al-aqbat al-mahgar*, during his presidency. Abdel Latif El-Menawy, who once headed the news division of the Egyptian Radio and Television Organization, catalogued the moments of frustration with this small group from New Jersey and in Washington D.C. "Why do these Copts want to turn the Christians of the world against me and Egypt?" Sadat complained.[118] Over the 1970s and early 1980s, in the lead-up to Sadat's assassination, the ACA placed ads in the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* condemning the inaction of the Egyptian government to quell sectarian violence and address Coptic concerns of justice. The ACA, with Karas at the helm, also formed new alliances with U.S. congressmen to advance the Coptic cause (in Arabic, *al-qaḍhiyya al-qibtiyya*).

Karas' efforts to tell American politicians and religious leaders about Coptic plight in Egypt were not necessarily new. In his book, Wakin notes that even under King Farouk, Copts were writing articles complaining about discrimination. So much so that a selection of said articles were published (most likely translated as well) in pamphlet form under the title, "The Cry of Egypt's Copts," by an "interested group" in New York in 1951 (Wakin, 19). Such journals that published articles on violence and discrimination against the Copts prior to the 1952 revolution, like the "Orator of the 1919 revolution," Qommos Serguis' *Al-Manara Al-Masriyya,* were suppressed in the early years of Nasser's regime, as with many other news media and commentary. Karas' renewed efforts in the diaspora engaged these older arguments, yet in a different imperial context.

[118] As cited by Salama Moussa (Maged Atiya), "Immigration and the Reinvention of Identity: Part I," *Salama Moussa: Reclaiming Egypt Blog*, March 17, 2018, https://salamamoussa.com/2018/03/17/immigration-and-the-reinvention-of-identity-part-i/.



مجلة المنارة المصرية

العدد ٦ — الادارة — شارع الزهار رقم ١٧ بالقلعة بمصر (بجوار كنيسة القلعة القبطية) — تليفون ٤٥٥٣٠

السنة ٢٤ — مجلة اسبوعية — الاشتراك ٥٠ قرشا عن سنة و ٢٥ قرشا عن نصف سنة (يدفع مقدما) — الثمن ١٠ مليمات

صاحبها: القمص جريس

الاثنين ٥ فبراير سنة ١٩٥١ — ٢٨ طوبه ١٦٦٧

اضطهاد الاقباط فى عهد النحاس أمر له دلالته !!

والتابعى واحمد حسين يشفعان فيهم لدى النحاس فيتغاضى !!

فما العمل للخلاص مما هو مبيت لنا ؟ !

ما كنا فى صمتنا واحتمالنا للذل والاضطهاد والظلم والاستعباد يا للجبناء الرعاديد لأن ليس من المعقول أن الذين يموتون كل يوم ميتات متعددة ويعانون كل ساعة ما هو أمر من الموت ويتحملون كل وقت الضيم والضغط والحرمان والسجن ، يخشون أن يموتوا مرة واحدة فى لحظة واحدة !! ولا يمر بخاطر المجاهدين ان الذين أتيحت لهم الفرصة مرات عديدة فعرضت عليهم الخيانة من دول مسيحية فرفضوها بل وطرحت الفرصة نفسها تحت أرجلهم سنة ١٩١٩ ولم تطلب منهم سوى أن يناموا فى بيوتهم مستريحين فلا يثاروا كرة اخرائهم فى الثورة ضد الانجليز فيتخذ حيادنا دليلا على أنها ليست حركة استقلال ولا حرية بل هى حركة تعصب اسلامى ضد الدول المسيحية ، فلم ينتهزوا هذه الفرصة ولا استغلوها بل راحوا يقذفون أنفسهم فى اتون الثورة مع مواطنيهم وشاركوا سعداً والنحاس فى النفى والتشريد وتوزل شبابهم الى الميدان فاختلط دمهم بدم المسلمين وكان نصيبهم فى الجهاد الوطنى أكبر نصيب بدليل أن عدد أعضاء الوفد من المسيحيين كان أكثر منه من المسلمين والذين حكم عليهم بالاعدام يوم ذاك كان أكثرهم مسيحيين !!

إذن كان صبرنا وكان احتمالنا للضيم والإضطهاد والظلم والحرمان دليلا قاطعاً على أننا أكثر وطنية من سوانا وأشد غيرة على بلادنا وأعظم أمانة لوطننا وأقوى حباً لمواطنينا !!

وكان من الطبيعى والمتوقع وواجب الانسانية والوفاء أن تشاركنا مواطنينا فى الحقوق كما شاركناهم فى الواجبات وأن يدعونا حتى لنتقط من تحت موائدهم الفتات لنتساقط من خيرات نحن عاملون معهم على الحصول عليها بكدنا وعرق جبيننا .

ولكن شيئاً من هذا لم يبد لنا منهم بل كأنهم نذروا التذور يوم قاموا يطالبون أنهم اذا نالوا بغيتهم وحصلوا على حريتهم واستقلالهم يقدمون على مذابح الحرية وفى صحارى نسيان الجيل وفى جبال النكران للجميل جماعة الأقباط خلال الوادى ذبيحة تقدم كل صباح استرضاء لهذه الآلهة التى لا ترضى الا بمثل هذه الذبائح الطاهرة التى لم تقترف ذنباً ولم تعمل إثماً سوى أنها أحبت فأصبحت مبغوضة وصدقت الوعود والعهود والتظاهر فأصبحت منبوذة لا تطاق رؤيتها ولا تحتمل أصوات عباداتها !

ولو أن الاضطهاد يشتد علينا نحن الأقباط فى عهود الوزارات غير الوفدية لقلنا أن تلك الوزارات معذورة لأن الأقباط لم يؤازروا احزابها بقدر ما اندفعوا بجموعهم الذى يكاد يكون كليا لمؤازرة الوفد والوقوف الى جانبه فى الوقت الذى لم يجد فيه أحدا ملتصقا به سوى الأقباط .

Figure 21: February 1951 Issue of *Al-Manara Al-Misriyya*. Title translation: "Coptic persecution in the al-Nahhas Era is a proven matter! Al-Tabaie and Ahmed Hussein intercede to al-Nahhas, yet he overlooks it! What can we do to avoid the inevitable?!" Source: Dominican Institute for Oriental Studies

Karas and other Coptic activists have written about charges of treason of the Egyptian government and both Muslim and Christian Egyptians in addressing concerns for Coptic welfare in Egypt. Such ideas of "foreignness" reference the possibility of ulterior motives to Coptic activism—be it the downfall of Egypt, sowing sectarian strife, or being imperial stooges of the United States. However, these arguments fail to account for the embrace by those in the diaspora of Coptic difference and the shunning of national unity rhetoric, which forces Copts (and the Coptic Orthodox Church) to proclaim intercommunal harmony, even in the face of conflict. When Karas and other activists emerged as voices of dissent outside of Egypt, the postcolonial rejection of foreign interference and influence in national affairs made it impossible for Copts outside of Egypt, especially in the West, to express their demands without mediation by colonial and imperial structures—whether through American governmental interests, the English language, or intra-Christian solidarities. "Why do these Copts want to turn the Christians of the world against me and Egypt?" is a question colored by colonial legacies of power.

By imagining Christian identity in Egypt as Coptic-ness, and not through the lens of national unity, diaspora activists like Shawky Karas faced a conundrum—they looked to Western governments and political organizations for support in pressuring the Egyptian government, with the risk of being deemed "foreign." Yet, they still understood that they were themselves foreigners in the West. Coptic voices of dissent, especially in diaspora, became an impossibility—impossible to disentangle from colonial legacies of power and contemporary imperial logics of domination of the Middle East. In making Coptic plight visible, they had to tap into a politics that opposed the postcolonial regimes of Nasser and later Sadat, and expressed that politics through a critique of the Egyptian state's "Islamicization" of law and life.

***

Shawky Karas was born in 1928, and graduated from King Fouad (present day Cairo University) in 1949. He became a mathematician in the governorate of Sohag, Upper Egypt, and eventually came to the United States in the late 1950s, and soon after his arrival began lobbying members of Congress for the Copts in Egypt.[119] In the midst of this, he was educated at Columbia University, receiving a master's degree in 1959 and eventually his PhD in 1964. In 1974, after participating in the aforementioned Coptic American Association (CAA), Karas established the American Coptic Association (ACA).[120] The formation of the ACA, by many accounts of close friends and colleagues of Karas, was directly influenced by the El-Khanka incident in November of 1972. His criticism of the CAA was targeted at its passivity over Coptic issues in Egypt (as well as matters of funding).



Figure 22: Stills from a home interview with Shawky Karas. Elhamy Khalil sits at the top right. Courtesy of Elhamy Khalil.

In the wake of El-Khanka, Karas was in communication with members of the Church hierarchy about the role of Copts in diaspora advocacy efforts; many bishops encouraged the founding of the ACA. The objectives of the ACA indicate the breadth of the organization, stretching beyond advocacy for Coptic rights and focusing on existential questions around Coptic identity and community in diaspora. The objectives were as follows:

[119] Over the years, he developed a close relationship with Abraham Ribicoff, the senator from Connecticut between 1963-1981, according to a colleague of Karas.

[120] The Canadian Coptic Association (CCA) predates the ACA by four years. Though geared more toward building community than political advocacy, the organization may have inspired Karas.

1) Promote the understanding of the Coptic culture, traditions, and history
2) Defend the human rights of the Christian Egyptians (Copts) in Egypt
3) Help the Coptic new immigrants to settle in the United States of America as good and productive citizens
4) Publish articles, books, magazines, and newsletters to develop a strong Coptic American community in the United States of America
5) Encourage the Coptic Americans to participate in the social and political life of the American society

Advocacy for the Copts in Egypt was but one of the founding principles to define a new community in the United States. Two particular strands of transformation defined the objectives of the ACA. The first and likely most influential being shifts in immigration, migrant communities, and identity after the passing of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, which opened entry to the US to immigrants other than Northwestern European and Germanic groups. Peoples from across Asia, Africa, and the Middle East came to the United States and organized communities and networks of migrant care. Egyptian Christians were one such people and became a part of the burgeoning Coptic community of Jersey City, where the ACA was established. These demographic shifts coincided with political transitions in Egypt under Sadat. The Islamic Revival of the 1970s and the perceived "Islamicization" of Egyptian society paralleled the rise of anti-Christian violence throughout Egypt.

On August 5, 1981, the ACA and Canadian Coptic Association (CAA) published an open letter to Sadat in preparation for his imminent visit to the United States and in the wake of the Zawyat al-Hamra violence in June 1981.[121] After the Camp David Peace Accords, Sadat held favor with U.S. President Jimmy Carter, and was particularly angered with Coptic diaspora protests and political actions against him during subsequent visits. An August 1981 ad in the *Washington Post*, for example, described how the "violation of the civil and human rights of Christians is a daily routine," with churches being "bombed and burned," Coptic men being "burned alive," and Coptic children "thrown off balconies."[122] The ACA and CAA, in English, sought to connect Sadat to figures like Qaddafi and Khomeini, who promoted "state-sponsored fundamentalism." The August 1981 ad describes such incidents in Egypt as a "Muslim fanatical onslaught on the Christian minority." Preceding the primacy of Islam and the Muslim world (particularly the Middle East) to American political policy and religious programming especially at the end of the Cold War, such frameworks of Islam versus Christianity/the West contributed to how Copts like Karas understood the predicament Christians in Egypt. American discourses of

[121] Violence broke out in this lower-middle-class district of Cairo, when a Copt shot at a group of Muslim vigilantes who had settled on his land and declared their intention of building a mosque there to prevent him from building a church. Security did not intervene as clashes related to the incident spread. Estimates of the dead range widely from 17 to more than 80 with hundreds injured.

[122] Led by the Coptic Orthodox Church of Queens, New York, churches throughout the United States and Canada sponsored a counter-ad in the *Washington Post* refuting the ACA and CCA's ad days prior. The ad states: The clergy and congregations of the Coptic Orthodox Churches in the USA and Canada "strongly denounce any false claims coming from persons or organizations, especially those who call themselves the 'American Coptic Association.'" It goes on to say that "The Coptics are united with their Moslem brothers for the security, peace, welfare and progress of Egypt to fulfill the aims and policy of President Sadat whom we support wholeheartedly."

civilizational conflict were particularly impactful upon Karas in his translation of Coptic collective memory onto a diasporic landscape.

"Strangers in their Land"

In a grainy home video from 1991, Elhamy Khalil, one of the first Coptic émigrés to the United States, interviewed Shawky Karas at his home in Connecticut. Karas sits next to Khalil in a tan polo with navy blue slacks, and a large gold ring on his middle finger. Before elaborating on the political efforts of the ACA, Karas ponders the nature of Coptic community—beyond the confines of the Egyptian national and territorial form. In the diaspora, he contends with disconnection from the physical land of Egypt and proposes new methodologies of connection:

> *We should make a connection with Egypt and with our mother church and our people there. We should exchange history, historical material, information. It would be a revival, not only a religious revival. It would be a revival in all aspects. Cultural, historical, scientific. This would be the revival of a whole people, not just the spiritual part of it.*

Karas proposes alternative frameworks of Coptic flourishing made possible outside of the strictures of the Egyptian nation-state. One of his colleagues in the ACA recounted to me that in the headquarters of the organization on Bergen Avenue in Jersey City, New Jersey, Karas established a library for Coptic history and culture on the second floor. The space was not simply a political gathering post after liturgy in nearby St. George and St. Shenouda Church; it was a community center for the Coptic people. Yet, Karas outlined a tension between the realization of a politics and a people outside of "religious" identification, and the impossible erasure of the Coptic Church as the mediator of Coptic cultural identity in contemporary Egypt. Karas emphatically stated to Elhamy:

> *I hope that in each church there will be a Coptic center that will provide scientific information about Coptic people, Coptic history, not only religious materials—history, music, traditions, art, the contributions of the Copts to civilization because we don't exist as a church only, we are people, we are functioning people in society. In Egypt, unfortunately, they try to confine our activities to the church, but we have our own tradition, our own culture, our own history that we should take care of. If anyone ignores their history, there is no future for him or her. In order to exist we should take care of our history. We should not only support by building, and support with chandeliers. We like them [Copts] to support churches. However, they should equally support research.*

For Karas, Coptic identity stretches beyond the church—in its physical structure, chandeliers, and power as a state institution. His main concern lies in the erasure of the Coptic people *as* a people. Instead of juxtaposing a diaspora, "cut off" from a "homeland," with the nation of migratory origin, Karas reimagines community within the national borders of Egypt, yet not confined to it. This is not an exilic understanding of return, but rather a trauma of disconnect from the land mixed with the possibilities of an otherwise outside of nationalistic constraints. Karas contemplates on the possibilities of forging a Coptic people, beyond territory.

While this private interview, in a mixture of both Arabic and English, opens up a space for Coptic identity as other than a religious character or one tied to tragedy, Karas' book, *The Copts Since the Arab Invasion: Strangers in Their Land* (1986), is much more sensational. It emphasizes urgency—that this is what the Copts in diaspora must do for Copts in Egypt to survive, comparing the Coptic struggle to the Armenian genocide and the Holocaust as the result of silence. On the back cover, Karas notes: "The story of a people who faced many holocausts which far exceed any holocaust in the history of mankind; and still in a continuous fear of annihilation. It is a story of survival under extremely adverse conditions." Here, Coptic identity *is* sutured to waves of violence, described as "holocausts" and "annihilation." The main aggressor in this narrative is the Arab and the imposition of Arab cultural identity, limiting the exploration of Coptic histories, sensibilities, and flourishing. More specifically, he argues that Copts should also be considered the "living victims of Arab imperialism."[123]


صوت الاقباط

Sunday June 10,1973

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رئيس التحرير : حكيم بديع سرجيوس

لا يقف في وجه الكلمة الحرة الصادقة إلا كل خائن في حق الله والوطن

الحملة الساقطة

THE DIFFERENT PLOTS TO ANNIHILATE THE COPTS

Figure 23: One of the first issues of the *Voice of the Copts*, a periodical started by Karas shortly after founding the ACA. The publication eventually transformed into *The Copts: Christians of Egypt* newsletter.

Shawky Karas reconfigured Coptic communal identity through his exilic experiences in the American diaspora. While Coptic uniqueness from the Muslim majority of Egyptians has its racial roots in the colonial period, the positionality of Copts as "living victims" of Islam became a central node of translation into American political advocacy. The Copts had something to say about what was happening in the Middle East today—they are the living remnants of such "timeless" battles. Coptic activists like Karas positioned themselves within the emerging discourses of religious freedom and persecution during the 1990s and early 2000s among American evangelicals and politicians. In issues throughout the 1990s, *The Copts: Christians of Egypt* newsletter, produced by the ACA, reprinted material from U.S. State Department sources, evangelical NGOs, religious freedom advocates, and news media that described incidents of violence against Copts in Egypt, in English. Some of the reprinted article titles include:

[123] See again Salama Moussa (Maged Atiya), "Immigration and the Reinvention of Identity: Part I." *Salama Moussa: Reclaiming Egypt Blog*," March 17, 2018, https://salamamoussa.com/2018/03/17/immigration-and-the-reinvention-of-identity-part-i/.

"Religious Freedom in Egypt: Does it Exist?" (July 1992); "The Decline of Eastern Christianity under Islam: The Origin of Jihad" (January-June 2000); "Documents of the Christian Holocaust in the Middle East Carried Out by the Muslim Arabs" (July 1988).



PRAYER & ACTION NEWS

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EGYPTIAN CHRISTIANS SUFFER PERSECUTION

by Holly Grey

Youhanna Abdel-Messih is a believer. When he discarded his family's heritage and converted to Christianity, he shed his Moslem name and chose one which would glorify his new-found Lord. Because his name translates "John the Servant of the Messiah", Youhanna was doomed to two years in a filthy Cairo prison.

Ten million Egyptians, almost 20 percent of the country's entire population, are Christians. Most of them are Copts, members of one of the oldest branches of Christianity, the Coptic Church, which dates itself from the apostle Mark's arrival in Egypt sometime between A.D. 48 and 75. The rest of Egypt's Christians are evenly divided between Protestant groups and Roman Catholicism.

Egypt imitates communist anti-Christian tactics.

Prior to its Islamization in the 7th Century, Egypt was a predominantly Christian province of the Byzantine Empire. But when Arab Moslems conquered the land in A.D. 627, centuries of anti-Christian persecution began.

Under former president Anwar Sadat in recent years, anti-religious suffering was intensified, even while Sadat entered into the famous "Camp David Accords" orchestrated by Jimmy Carter, the U.S. president who is also a life-long evangelical Baptist.

Sadat launched the Department of Coptic Affairs to monitor the Church's activities. Started as a branch of the Ministry of the Interior, the department actually is an arm of the Secret Police modeled by Sadat after the Councils of Religious Affairs found in communist lands.

Egyptian officials use many of the same methods employed by the communists against believers. Christians are pressured to cooperate with this department, and spies are present in almost all church services. Under this department, Pope Shenouda, the leader of the Coptic Church, was exiled and most Coptic clergymen were jailed.

With the arrival of current president Hosni Mubarak after Sadat's assassination, some concessions have come to the Church, such as the release of Pope Shenouda after four years of exile in the desert. Yet Christians are still discriminated against in hiring and promotions, and they are constantly denied leadership positions in Egyptian society. Since 1983, most Christians who are university graduates have been unemployed,

No one committing a crime against a Christian has been arrested in Egypt since 1977.

while their Moslem counterparts now hold important positions.

Mubarak violates U.N. pledge

In that same year, the Egyptian government signed the U.N. Declaration of Human Rights and Religious Freedom. But like their communist counterparts, the Cairo regime has failed to keep its promises, even when made in front of the entire world community.

The Department of Coptic Affairs was agitated recently over the discovery that 30 percent of college students in Egypt are Christians. To remedy this situation, the department wants to abolish written college entrance exams (which use a "secret number" as their only form of student identification) and replace them with oral exams guaranteed to expose the name and religion of each student seeking admission. Once this change is made, Christians can eventually be purged from Egypt's higher education system simply by failing their oral exams.

Islam rejects Christian claims

In Egypt, Islam is the state religion, and the Koran, Islam's holy book, the major source of civil law.

Since the Koran describes Christians as infidels deserving of death, national attitudes toward believers are quite hostile. The state-controlled television network regularly brands Christians as ungrateful infidels worthy of disgust — thus compounding the already prevalent hostility.

Under Egyptian law, the penalty for converting to Christianity is imprisonment, and 152 converts are presently jailed for "disrupting national unity" by believing in Jesus. New legislation is pending which would make the Koran the only source of Egyptian law. This would mean that all new converts to Christianity would face the death penalty. Pressure from the West has blocked passage of this bill to date, but even more pressure is needed to insure its permanent defeat.

Churches and homes torched

Branded as infidels, Christians suffer from a lack of police protection, while being exposed to constant terrorism and intimidation. Their homes, churches and shops can be destroyed by Moslem arsonists and vandals. Over one recent three-day period, 100 Christians were murdered, while five churches and all the Christian property in the village of Al-Zawyia Al-Hamra was destroyed. Local police looked on and failed to arrest a single perpetrator of these heinous crimes.

Figure 24: January 1990 issue of *The Copts*; Articles from Evangelical periodicals and organizations were frequently republished in the English sections of the newsletter through the 1990s.

Karas' book was published in 1986 at a crucial time for the ACA. Pope Shenouda was released from house arrest under President Hosni Mubarak, and the Church took a different tone with the Egyptian government. Pope Shenouda and Sadat's relationship was one of strain, given the patriarch's open criticism of the state's handling of violence against the Christian minority in Egypt. Following house arrest though, Shenouda's tone was one of accommodation. Karas and the ACA aligned with the interests of the earliest era of Shenouda—one where confrontation and calls for equality were well-established. Towards the mid-late 1980s, their interests diverged and Karas stood in opposition to the Church's official stance. He criticized the bishops that subsequently came to the United States to receive the Egyptian president saying:

> *I have looked at this charade/disco [discoliya] and did not find any indication that these behaviors are included in the duties of a bishop…Why do these bishops come to America only when the Egyptian president is here? Is the purpose of their presence to hide the Coptic problem and show clerical support for the racist Egyptian government?...I suggest buying a house next to the Washington airport where a Coptic bishop can reside [we can name him the 'bishop of the airport'] to greet President Mubarak instead of all of the bishops traveling 7000 miles.*[124]

Karas criticized the Church for distancing itself from any calls for equality and protested against discrimination. The problems of the Coptic people, he suggested, extend beyond the domination of Egypt's Muslims in public life and the discriminatory practices of the Egyptian government.

[124] *The Copts,* July 1989.

The Coptic Church and Copts themselves are responsible for their plight because they don't have the courage to fight for the Coptic cause. "The Coptic problem is caused not by the Muslims, but by the dislocated knees [*al-rakib al-mukhla'a*], or the lack of courage, among the Copts," Karas argued (Khalil 1999, 79).

According to those who worked with Karas in the ACA during the 1980s and 1990s, Karas' activist fervor stemmed from personal experience of violence in Sohag, which translated into what he saw as the historical trauma of the Coptic people, particularly in *modern* Egypt. While the title *The Copts Since the Arab Invasion* suggests that it would discuss Coptic history and tribulation from 641 A.D., the book starts in the twentieth century when Egypt was under British colonial rule, and focuses intensely on the 1952 revolution of Gamal Abdel Nasser and the rise of sectarian violence under Anwar al-Sadat. Aside from a brief overview of the Coptic Church's practices, theology, and history (parts not written by Karas himself), the majority of the text is divided into two parts on the political participation of Copts prior to the 1952 revolution and their suppression thereafter.[125] The year 1952 symbolizes a transition from an era of political influence among the Copts under British colonialism to postcolonial Egypt, where the rights and privileges of the elite—both Coptic and Muslim—were stripped away in favor of a more populist program. The remaining Egyptian government, Karas suggests, was comprised of or influenced by "Muslim fundamentalists" (Karas 1986, 96). Karas points to the 1919 revolution as the pinnacle of hope and the beginning of decline for equality and religious freedom for the Copts. The national unity of 1919 gave way to the decline of Coptic representation in public life following independence from the British, and opened up Copts to a new era of violence.

In the lead up to this new era, Karas recounts incidents of violence against the Copts to explain his position. He examines what he describes as the "Suez Massacre" of 1952 in detail (86). At 2pm on January 4, a group of Muslims, after hearing the Friday sermon, went after a group of Christians in the street. They dragged the Christians using butcher hooks and eventually burned them alive by locking them inside the St. Antonious Church. The Coptic Patriarchate cancelled the Christmas celebration on January 7, 1952. The perpetrators were never brought to justice. The murders were directly connected to the British occupational forces in the city. Rumors spread that Copts were working with the British against the local militia, and the attacks followed. Karas and other Coptic retelling[126] of the incident explain that the shared Christianity of the Copts with the British colonizers led the local Muslim community to suspect the Copts of

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[125] Karas notes that Copts, prior to the 1952 revolution, comprised 20% of Parliament and were 40% of the teaching staff at different institutions of higher learning. Additionally, he states that Copts constituted 80% of the staff of foreign banks and companies prior to nationalization. In commerce, he affirms, "Most observers agreed that the Egyptian economy was run by the Copts during the first half of the twentieth century" (Karas, 83). Karas does not discuss the role of the British colonial regime in placing Copts, as well as other minority communities, within positions of power in Egypt. He continues his listing of Coptic accomplishments by emphasizing that "Muslim regimes have tried to minimize or ignore [the Copts]" (84).

[126] The following example on Christian-Dogma.com argues that the incident was orchestrated by the Muslim Brotherhood. "The Massacre of Copts in Suez at the hands of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1952…the Massacre that Shocked the Entire World [*Madhbaḥat al-Aqbat bi-l-Suez 'ala yed al-Ikhwan Al-Muslimeen 'ām 1952…al-Mathaḥa al-lati Hazat al-'ālim kulu*]," 2019, https://www.christian-dogma.com/t1783113.

conspiracy. "It is customary in Egypt that any kind of conflict between Christians and Muslims in any part of the world, it will have spillover on the safety of Egypt's Christians," Karas argues.

At various points throughout the text, Karas argues that, under British colonialism, local Coptic Christians became icons of colonialism; particularly among elites a Copt became a *khawaja* (foreigner) (Mabro 2004). In this association, Coptic bodies became the site of resistance to colonial rule. In his book and throughout many issues of *The Copts,* Karas describes the conflation of "infidel" and "foreigner" in the figure of the Copt. In the reordering of "Christianity" in politics, economics, and religion, it can be surmised then that Coptic Christian identity in colonial and then postcolonial Egypt became sutured to Western Christendom; one of the major reasons for these associations was the widespread influence of Western missionaries that placed the Copts into a contradiction-laden predicament (Baron 2014). The Copt as the indigenous Christian, Copts as the "original inhabitants" of Egypt became at once true and false. The Copt comes to be understood as an icon for the West; thus, Christianity could not be "indigenous" to the region because it was the religion of the West for many communities deeply impacted by the colonial alteration of life. The paradox of Middle Eastern Christian identity in the modern era, then, is one that is entangled in the expansion of Western imperial power.[127] The Middle Eastern Christian has become an icon, "a form of relationality that binds the subject to an object or imaginary" (Mahmood 2009, 74), whereby a shared imagination is embodied; and a "civilizational struggle" is performed on the body of the Middle Eastern Christian—where a Christian West meets a Muslim East. Christianity has come to be inseparable from Western power.

Karas makes this clear in his section entitled, "The Grand Sheikh's Viewpoint." He mentions that in 1972, the Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar, Abdel-Halim Mahmoud, published "Faith in Islam,"[128] which discusses the role of non-believers in Islam and the impact of British colonialism on Sudan. Karas recounts from the book: "The Grand Sheikh indicated that they [non-believers] should not have any presence in a pure Islamic society. It is enough that they should be isolated as contagious disease so that they cannot corrupt others—whether they are students, farmers, or workers. They should stay in their isolation until they turn to Islam." The figure of the "non-believer" oscillates between the "Christian" and the "foreigner," leaving the Christian who is *not* a foreigner as an impossibility. Karas paraphrases Mahmoud below:

> *…in a remote village in Sudan there was a religious person who used to spend his time either at home or praying at the mosque; he never left his village, and*

[127] For example, many scholars have suggested that the sectarian divisions now evident in parts of the contemporary Middle East are not the results of long-standing communal hostilities, but of an aggressive British and French colonial occupation that categorized subjects by religion for its own purposes. Most recently, Ussama Makdisi (2019) has explored the "ecumenical frame" of coexistence in the Middle East amid Ottoman reformation, European colonialism, and the emergence of nationalism. Laura Robson's (2011a) work has examined British efforts in mandate Palestine to construct religion as a legal and political category in specifically colonial ways and Kais Firro (2009) argues that the persistence of these European-drawn national borders and religious divisions into the postcolonial period created permanent difficulties for Christians, who were often forced to declare their allegiance to a nationalist vision associated with elites and positioned against a much more populist Islamist discourse.

[128] Karas most likely is referring to *Al-Islam w Al-Iman* (1972). However, Karas' citations and paraphrasing of Mahmoud do not match the text. Of interest for our purposes here are the passages Karas chooses to retell and paraphrase, and the way he interprets Mahmoud.

> *thought that his village was the whole world surrounding him. And finally, one day the religious man left his village with a friend. When both of them reached the road, they met by chance a British officer with his military uniform. The officer had an affluent appearance and looked very handsome. The religious man had never had the opportunity of seeing such a sight in his village or the isolated world in which he has been confined since his childhood which consisted of the village, the home, and the mosque. The man stared in surprise at the officer, and asked his friend pointing to that strange personage, 'What is that?' Then his friend replied that he is a non-Moslem foreigner. Then the sheikh asked, 'What is the meaning of that?' Then the friend replied that he was an infidel. When the sheikh asked for the clarification of his infidelity, the friend replied that he did not believe in Islam. As soon as the sheikh heard that, he became so disgusted that he could not talk. Then the sheikh's condition deteriorated and he began vomiting from disgust at seeing an infidel (non-Muslim)* (159).

Karas leaves the reader wondering what the story is meant to tell us, in the context of a book on Coptic community and history in modern Egypt. The British colonial officer, a foreigner and a Christian, is described simply as an "infidel," denoting theological and cultural alterity to the Sudanese religious man's moral sensibilities. He literally vomits from disgust at the colonial officer's sight. Mahmoud, as paraphrased by Karas, is said to interpret this story as one in which the foreigner does not appreciate God as the Muslim does, and without repentance according to the teachings of Islam, this deserves punishment in death. The reader is left to wonder, however—does Karas presume this story to shed light on local Coptic-Muslim relations in Egypt? Do the reasons for violence against Coptic bodies at the time of Karas' writing (in the late 1980s) revolve around their infidelity? Karas infers as much. He continues with the following:

> *…the sight of a non-Moslem (infidel) should invoke extreme disgust; and the only solution is getting rid of the infidels and the non-believers. Such attitudes and teachings are communicated to the lower echelon of sheikhs in the different towns and villages. Consequently, the Muslim sheikhs in their Friday sermons exhort their followers to get rid of the non-Muslim who are the enemies of Islam and God, to seize their wives and properties, and to avoid any contact with the non-Moslems. As a result, after such sermons the Muslim mob headed by their sheikhs attacks the Christians, ransacks their properties, and destroys their churches in Egypt. Many of such incidents happened during the period of 1971-1972 and are still happening all over Egypt* (160).

The story of the Sudanese Muslim man seeing the British colonial officer is paralleled with communal violence of the 1970s and 1980s. Both contexts are assumed to parallel and contain the same power dynamics and a shared continuity of Islamic morality. Yet, in making this move, Karas also equates the foreigner, non-Muslim, colonial officer with the indigenous Coptic, non-Muslim, Christian. This logic is threaded throughout Karas' discussion of Sadat's speech to the People's Assembly in Cairo on May 14, 1980, where Sadat publicly state's that the Coptic Church has been committing sedition since 1972.

The Coptic Church, as state representative for the Coptic people, is accused of desiring power beyond its spiritual mandate. In the speech, Sadat recounts incidents of sedition throughout the 1970s. One of the main points of contention lies in Sadat's encounter with the Coptic diaspora in the United States. When Sadat left to sign the Camp David Accords in Washington D.C., he accused the church hierarchy in Egypt of instigating Coptic demonstrations against him:

> *Some still get together and say: Let us hold a press conference and speak out, the complex of the foreigner and the possibility of shaking Egypt from the outside continue to exist. I gave 1978 as an example. Sedition continued from 1972 and was still going on when I left for Camp David in 1978. The new leaders of the church, as I said, were going ahead with sedition* (161).

Sadat argues that there is a direct connection between the Coptic Church and the actions of the Coptic diaspora, asserting that the Church allowed acts of protest against the Egyptian president: "…the expatriate Copts therefore, demonstrated in front of the United Nations and the White House because the Copts in Egypt do not enjoy human rights. Not only that: Telegrams were also dispatched to President Carter. Why? Why should we do such a thing in Egypt? To what purpose and in whose interests?" (161). As Copts emigrated to the United States and mediated their demands for rights in Egypt through the American government, Sadat and others perpetuated the trope of the Copts as foreigners with questionable loyalty. During the 1970s and throughout the 1980s, until Pope Shenouda was released from monastery house arrest, the Copts and segments of the Church hierarchy, including Pope Shenouda, supported one another's efforts of protest.

In this 1980 speech, Sadat particularly targets the Church's cancellation of Easter services as protest against recent violence, which embarrassed the Egyptian president. "[Church] officials who had made the decision not to pray in order to find a story to tell the world against Egypt, against Anwar as-Sadat and Islam...Why does someone with a complaint escalate matters and then attack his country? *They set the Christians of the world against the Muslims in Egypt*. Why do they do this? You know, by God, all the Christians of the world cannot move one stone from its place in Egypt. This is because the matter is in the hands of the Egyptian people. I describe these things by summing them in one word. Extortion" (162-163; my emphasis). In Sadat's diatribe against the Coptic Church's role in Western criticism of the Egyptian state, the Christianity of the Copts is not explicitly mentioned. "They," the Coptic Orthodox Church, has set the *Christians* of the world against the Egyptian state and *Muslims* in Egypt. The idea of the Christian kinship of the Copts with the West comes into direct tension with colonial era Catholic and Protestant missionary legacies—Western Christians who refused Copts as their Christian kin, instead seeking to convert them. Yet, by the 1970s, new itineraries of Christian kinship had emerged with the ecumenical movements of the early-mid twentieth century.[129] The tension of

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[129] The Coptic Church was one of the founding members of the World Council of Churches in 1948. By founding the World Council of Churches in 1948 and then merging the International Missionary Council with the WCC in 1961, ecumenical Protestants created institutional structures that brought Western and non-Western Christians together for cooperative discussions and global planning. The WCC's international conferences focused on how to de-westernize Christianity by rejecting older distinctions between missionary sending countries and receiving communities, and instead celebrating the ways that a "Christian presence" could have positive effects on all six continents. See Carpenter and Shenk 1990;

Coptic identity between its Egyptian character and its Christianity emerged from French and British colonial contexts. Yet, within the postcolonial Egyptian state and following the expulsion—forced or coerced—of "foreigners" from Egypt from 1952 onwards (which included Greeks, Italians, Armenians, and most significantly Jews), the question of the Copts as the minority to Egypt's Muslim majority wavered between national ties and foreign conspiracies. Sadat even suggested that "Western states" wanted to use the Copts as a way to fight against Abdel Nasser (Karas 1986, 171). According to Sadat, Western powers devised a plan to encourage the Copts, by the authority of the Coptic Patriarch, to establish a Coptic state in Upper Egypt with Asyut as its capital, but this never came to fruition (Pennington 1982).

Karas recounts Sadat's 1980 speech at length, and it provides documentation to the transnational anxieties of a Coptic civil society organization in diaspora and the increasingly global focus of the Coptic Orthodox Church. Sadat asserts that the Church has "pitted the Christians of the world" against him in their protest. The "Christians" here refer to Western leaders, such as President Jimmy Carter. Coptic diaspora leaders like Shawky Karas were viewed by Sadat and others within Egyptian State Security as threats to the stability and national sovereignty of Egypt. Karas insists that the ACA is a necessary organization because Egyptian authorities have not listened to the needs of the Copts and that has encouraged them to "demonstrate [their] religious concerns abroad" (Karas 1986, 174). He envisioned the ACA as an advocacy organization not just for Copts, but as a bulwark against "the religious fanaticism sweeping the region" (177). In the struggle for equal rights in Egypt, Karas is acutely aware that this activism places Copts in a precarious position vis-à-vis Western power. The incessant focus on persecution and discrimination through this activism alters Coptic identity in the process: "The sad part of it all is that for many individuals who long felt subjugated and oppressed, [they] end up being obsessed with that one issue which totally colors their attitude and feelings towards the oppressors" (178).

As migration to the West persisted throughout this period, Coptic diaspora activism was communicated through and transformed by the demands of American empire—how they relayed their demands to the U.S. government for equal rights in Egypt became increasingly shaped by new vocabularies, new enemies, and securitized discourses on Islam. With the release of Pope Shenouda from house arrest on January 1, 1985, the Coptic Church became more inwardly focused, more conservative in its political language, which intensified strategies of protest in Western diasporas. Up until then, Karas and others put pressure on U.S. congressmen to influence Sadat, and appealed to the Catholic and Anglican churches for help in the matter. The enmeshment of Western religious and political institutions in the matter points to the power structures that bound Copts to certain histories and discourses, reorganizing Coptic trauma into a new economy of rights.

On February 15, 1984, the *New York Times* published a letter entitled "Doesn't Anybody Care?" written by the Egyptian Christian Organization and Dr. Raef Marcus. They write the following in their explanation of conditions in Egypt: "For Moslems in many lands, the crusades have not ended; they are still defending themselves against western invaders. Their overheated, venomous rhetoric about colonialism, Zionism, and the demonic west reflects this eleventh century outlook. The most obvious example is Iran, but the same psychology pervades Egypt as

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Hollinger 2017, 77-83; Hutchinson 1987, 177. Ecumenical Protestants clashed with evangelicals on a number of social and political fronts. Yet, by the end of the twentieth century, evangelical movement had become more prominent than mainline Protestant churches in the early/mid-century ecumenical movement. Also, see Lahr 2007; McAlister 2018; Sutton 2014.

well. And Christians, even Coptic Christians who lived in Egypt for centuries before Islam, are associated with the invading westerners" (Karas 1986, 276). After emigrating to the United States, Copts began to more intensely understand their positionality through Western lenses—seeking to more vehemently distance themselves from their former Egyptian Muslim neighbors. At the same time, these public proclamations revealed a tension within their own identities as Middle Easterners and Christians. Entering the new millennium, Coptic activism became enmeshed in new American political contexts of the post-Cold War era. The United States' victory over the Soviet Union meant that the world had one remaining superpower, and a new global enemy began to emerge in the wake of the First Gulf War. Islam and terrorism began to take center stage in America's national security strategy.

Commercializing the Copts

The 1990 Immigration Act provided a new outlet for Egyptian immigration to the U.S. It established the Green Card Lottery and Copts from lower socioeconomic classes applied and won. This new migration shifted the demographics of many U.S. Coptic churches, and such communities brought new politics along with them. Activists that emerged from this migration wave molded new strategies of political participation. During the 1990s, suspicion of the Coptic diaspora [*al-aqbat al-mahjar*] intensified as human rights and religious freedom discourse pervaded development and advocacy circles in Washington D.C. Under Karas' leadership during the 1970s and 1980s, advocacy for the Coptic cause was very much directed at Egyptian, Coptic-specific matters. During the 1990s, this began to change as a larger transnational formation blurring the domestic and the international political spheres started to take shape within minority advocacy circles. In so doing, colonial binds of Middle Eastern Christian positionality resurfaced in new ways. As discussed in this chapter, Middle Eastern Christians have been held suspect of being "foreigners," a "fifth column" for Western (Christian) imperial interests in the Middle East.[130] In the push for religious freedom advocacy following the Cold War and the turn towards Islam and national security, Coptic activists "moved with the events. We move with whatever the Middle East Christian topics are at the moment," as one Coptic activist who immigrated to the U.S. in 1995 described to me.[131]

In 2001, Paul Rowe questioned the causal relationship between Coptic diaspora activism and U.S. political power structures: "The distinction between mobilization based upon transnational organization and a neo-imperialist mode may be murky: how is one to distinguish between a truly authentic protest movement and an externally inspired one, especially in the new global context?" (91) While many have described Coptic activism as both a cohesive "lobby" (Yefet 2017; Marzouki 2016; Haddad and Donovan 2013; Zaki 2010) and others questioning whether it "four guys and a fax machine" (Rowe 2001), involvement with American political discourses, concepts, and frameworks has expanded over the past three decades. Copts, and other Middle Eastern Christian groups, have found themselves a central part of the international religious freedom and persecuted Christians movements that developed in the post-Cold War era—whether as symbols or as actors (Sedra 2009).

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[130] Even Edward Said argues in *Covering Islam* (1981) that scholarly and political interest in such issues as the Ottoman millet system and the status of Christian minorities in Middle Eastern societies has been a thinly-veiled proxy for defending Western interests in the region. See Edward Said, *Covering Islam* (New York, Vintage Books, 1997), 146-47.

[131] Interview (April 2020).

While in the late 1990s-mid 2000s, Coptic activists developed new organizations and coalitions to pressure the Egyptian government to be held accountable for violence and discrimination against the Copts[132], a convergence between Coptic activism and the persecuted Christians movement took place. Younger Coptic activists, such as Michael Meunier, focused their energies on an exclusionary policy from the Egyptian government, and contributed to the emerging movement in Washington D.C. of religious freedom advocates and think thanks that focused their attention on the persecution of Christians from predominantly Muslim countries (Mahmood 2015). The political involvement of Michael Meunier in Washington D.C. represented a new era of Coptic activism. Meunier immigrated to the U.S. in 1990 from the village of Abu Qarqas, Al-Minya, Upper Egypt. After graduating with a degree in mechanical engineering from Virginia Tech, he began to expand his involvement in Coptic politics outside of the traditional circles of Shawky Karas and the ACA. In a personal interview he described the strategies of the ACA as limiting—"The Copts used to cry to the Copts."[133] During the 1990s, Karas and others from the ACA collaborated with an evangelical pastor from the Midwest and other Middle Eastern Christian activists, like Walid Phares[134], to move the Coptic issue into the sphere of American foreign policy politics in Washington D.C.[135] Meunier, in his 20s at the time, sought to technologically transform the way the Coptic cause was disseminated in the emerging age of the internet. In 1996, he founded the U.S. Copts Association for the specific purpose of policy advocacy on behalf of the Copts in Egypt and in the diaspora (Brinkerhoff 2005). Using an email listserv of thousands of Copts, American politicians, and religious leaders, Meunier disseminated the Coptic Digest between 1996-2007. In comparison, *The Copts* periodical was compiled every three months and disseminated mainly to Coptic readership throughout the United States and Canada. In this generational shift, Coptic activism took on new strategies.

Between 1996-1998, discussions around the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) took shape, and Copts, according to Meunier, were central to those discussions. IRFA brought together a constellation of Middle Eastern Christian activists, like Meunier, American evangelical leaders, politicians, and think tank fellows such as Nina Shea (formerly Freedom House, now of the Hudson Institute), Paul Marshall (formerly Freedom House, now of the Hudson Institute), and Michael Horowitz (former advisor to President Ronald Reagan and

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[132] Between 2004 and 2007, International Coptic Conferences were held in Zurich, Washington D.C., and Newark, New Jersey to advance the Coptic cause and, in its final year, Middle Eastern Christian minorities more broadly. See Martyn Thomas and Adly A. Youssef, *Copts in Egypt: A Christian minority under siege: papers presented at the First International Coptic Symposium, Zurich, September 23-25, 2004,* (Göttingen, Germany, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006).

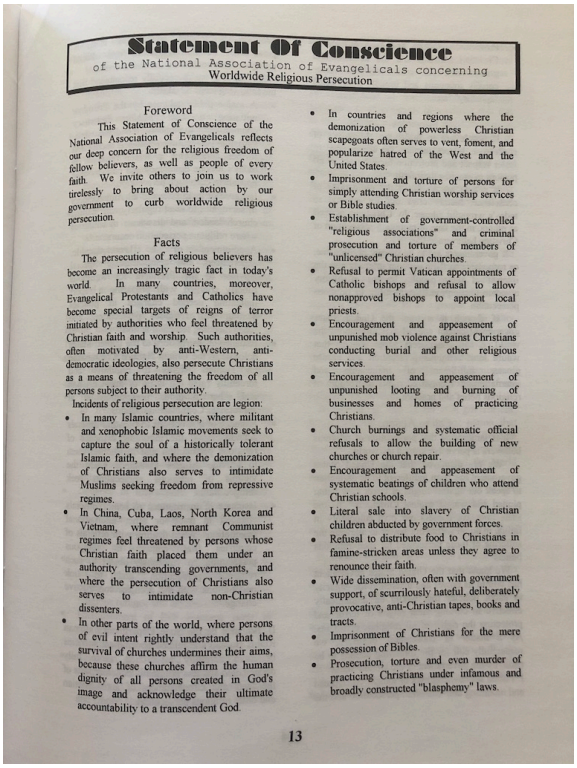
[133] Interview (April 2020).

[134] Phares is a Lebanese-Christian conservative who would later serve as advisor to Mitt Romney and Donald Trump presidential campaigns. He was also a Director for the Future of Terrorism Project in the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, a conservative think tank accused of anti-Muslim bias. See Bridge Initiative Team, "Factsheet: European Foundation for Democracy," *Bridge: A Georgetown University Initiative*, December 5, 2019, https://bridge.georgetown.edu/research/factsheet-european-foundation-for-democracy/.

[135] In June 2000, Karas along with Michael Meunier and Walid Phares established the Middle East Christian Committee (MECHRIC) to advocate for Middle Eastern Christian causes. See "MECHRIC Warns from Escalation of Oppression Against Christians in Egypt, Lebanon, Iraq, Others," *Mideast Newswire,* June 28, 2001, http://www.clhrf.com/walid/mechric3.7.01.htm.

former Senior Fellow at the Hudson Institute).[136] All three of these fellows have published on the plight of Christians in the Middle East, and continue to be fixtures at Coptic lobbying conferences and stand as expert witnesses in Coptic asylum cases in the United States.

As Shea described in 2008, a crystallizing moment for the persecuted Christians movement was at a summit on worldwide religious persecution for American religious leaders, organized in January 1996 at Washington's Mayflower Hotel by Michael Horowitz and Shea. At the 1996 Summit, the National Association of Evangelicals, a membership organization of over 42,000 congregations, released a *Statement of Conscience*, that pushed for the U.S. to take action to combat religious persecution. This meeting coincided with the creation of the U.S. Copts Association, as well as increasing Coptic participation in the movement. The movement was certainly encouraged by Washington D.C. think tanks and policy analysts, but its backbone was evangelical leaders from around the country.[137]



Statement Of Conscience

of the National Association of Evangelicals concerning
Worldwide Religious Persecution

Foreword

This Statement of Conscience of the National Association of Evangelicals reflects our deep concern for the religious freedom of fellow believers, as well as people of every faith. We invite others to join us to work tirelessly to bring about action by our government to curb worldwide religious persecution.

Facts

The persecution of religious believers has become an increasingly tragic fact in today's world. In many countries, moreover, Evangelical Protestants and Catholics have become special targets of reigns of terror initiated by authorities who feel threatened by Christian faith and worship. Such authorities, often motivated by anti-Western, anti-democratic ideologies, also persecute Christians as a means of threatening the freedom of all persons subject to their authority.

Incidents of religious persecution are legion:

- In many Islamic countries, where militant and xenophobic Islamic movements seek to capture the soul of a historically tolerant Islamic faith, and where the demonization of Christians also serves to intimidate Muslims seeking freedom from repressive regimes.
- In China, Cuba, Laos, North Korea and Vietnam, where remnant Communist regimes feel threatened by persons whose Christian faith placed them under an authority transcending governments, and where the persecution of Christians also serves to intimidate non-Christian dissenters.
- In other parts of the world, where persons of evil intent rightly understand that the survival of churches undermines their aims, because these churches affirm the human dignity of all persons created in God's image and acknowledge their ultimate accountability to a transcendent God.
- In countries and regions where the demonization of powerless Christian scapegoats often serves to vent, foment, and popularize hatred of the West and the United States.
- Imprisonment and torture of persons for simply attending Christian worship services or Bible studies.
- Establishment of government-controlled "religious associations" and criminal prosecution and torture of members of "unlicensed" Christian churches.
- Refusal to permit Vatican appointments of Catholic bishops and refusal to allow nonapproved bishops to appoint local priests.
- Encouragement and appeasement of unpunished mob violence against Christians conducting burial and other religious services.
- Encouragement and appeasement of unpunished looting and burning of businesses and homes of practicing Christians.
- Church burnings and systematic official refusals to allow the building of new churches or church repair.
- Encouragement and appeasement of systematic beatings of children who attend Christian schools.
- Literal sale into slavery of Christian children abducted by government forces.
- Refusal to distribute food to Christians in famine-stricken areas unless they agree to renounce their faith.
- Wide dissemination, often with government support, of scurrilously hateful, deliberately provocative, anti-Christian tapes, books and tracts.
- Imprisonment of Christians for the mere possession of Bibles.
- Prosecution, torture and even murder of practicing Christians under infamous and broadly constructed "blasphemy" laws.

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Figure 25: October 1996 issue of *The Copts;* The "Statement of Conscience" is reproduced.

While Coptic activists like Shawky Karas appear not to have been active in such discussions and deliberations around IRFA, others like Michael Meunier noted in a personal interview that he advised members of Congress on the Act and advocated for religious freedom

[136] Freedom House is one of the oldest think tanks (founded in 1941), and was prominent during the Cold War. The Hudson Institute (founded in 1961) is one of the most prominent conservative think tanks in Washington D.C. today.

[137] Nina Shea, "The Origins and Legacy of the Movement to Fight Religious Persecution," *Hudson Institute,* June 14, 2008, https://www.hudson.org/research/5690-the-origins-and-legacy-of-the-movement-to-fight-religious-persecution.

with the State Department as well as the Commission on International Religious Freedom.[138] Between 1990-2003, Shawky Karas' activism in Washington D.C. circles involved demonstrations in front of the White House during then Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's visits, faxes to members of Congress advocating for the Coptic causes, and the dissemination of *The Copts* newsletter. In the context of IRFA negotiations, Shawky Karas published articles in *The Copts* emphasizing the difference between Copts and Muslims in Egypt. While these articles were written in Arabic, their dissemination in the diaspora gestures toward the broader political contexts manifesting themselves in this period. In the September-December 1998 issue, Karas writes: "The Arab-Muslim colonizer [*al-musta'mir al-'araby al-islami*] wants to eliminate the Coptic character [*al-shakhsiya al-qibtiya*] and convert it to Islam. They want to marginalize the Coptic nation, the dynasty of the Pharaohs and the original owners of the country."[139]

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[138] "Michael Meunier (R-39)," *The Connection*, October 16, 2005, http://www.connectionnewspapers.com/news/2005/oct/16/michael-meunier-r-39/. Meunier also ran for the 39th district of Virginia in 2005 as a Republican.

[139] The idea of Islam as a colonial power in the 7th-9th century Middle East had been discussed by scholars of urbanism from the early 1990s, whereby they sought to expand the historical-spatial meanings of colonialism. For example, Nezar Al-Sayyad (1992) writes, "Appropriating and dismantling the religious and political buildings of earlier civilizations became a common Arab practice. The symbolism associated with such transformations cannot be considered anything but colonial. The takeover of churches, and their later transformation into mosques, and the construction of ruler's palaces in the center of new or existing cities, in relatively more articulated forms, represent colonial urbanism at work. The Arabs did not separate themselves residentially, but they did engage in colonial-like urban behavior which ultimately transformed the urban fabric of the cities they took over. The natives were often prohibited from expressing their culture, wealth, and, at times, their religion" (6-7). Yet, scholars note that these experiences varied between regions, and were varied and gradual. For example, Jonathan Berkey (2003) writes: "Several Christian communities continued on trajectories of growth established in late antiquity. In Iraq, for example, the conquests brought inevitable disruptions, including the sacking of ecclesiastical establishments and the killing of a number of monks; but it was not long before the Christian communities recovered. The Nestorian church in particular proved vital: new monasteries were constructed in the wake of the conquests, and the momentum behind the process of conversion to Christianity among Jews and Zoroastrians continued. Indeed, in the centuries which followed, the Nestorian church undertook an extensive (although ultimately unsuccessful) missionary program to the east, in Iran, Afghanistan, and Central Asia, one of the least appreciated aspects of early medieval Christian history. It comes as no surprise, therefore, to find a number of Nestorian sources from the period following the Arab conquest commenting favorably upon the new rulers, recognizing them as worshipers of the one true God and describing them as respectful of churches, monasteries, the clergy and their prerogatives within the Christian community. In Palestine, too, despite the complaints of churchmen such as the patriarch Sophronius that the 'Saracens' destroyed churches and pillaged monasteries, there is archaeological evidence for the continued construction of new churches in the period of and just after the Arab conquests, and the change in regime did not prevent a flourishing of monastic culture in the late seventh and early eighth centuries" (97). For more on this see the following: Robert Schick, *The Christian Communities of Palestine from Byzantine to Islamic Rule*, (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1995) especially 77–80, 96–7. See also Michael Morony, *Iraq After the Muslim Conquest*, (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2005); Garth Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 122-3. For contemporary Coptic communities, the Arab Conquest is read through current Muslim-Christian conflicts and geopolitical readings of Islam and Muslims. Yet, for scholars of the transition between Byzantine and Islamic Egypt, aspects of "hybridity, innovation, and continuity" characterize this era—oscillating between conflict and cooperation (Mikhail 2014, 2). In his seminal text, *The Arab Conquest of Egypt and the Last Thirty Years of the Roman*

In his seminal work on the Coptic diaspora [*al-Aqbat al-Mahjur*], Magdi Khalil notes that Shawky Karas cautioned against Copts participating in celebrations of Ramadan in the diaspora, labeling them as "heresy" [*bda'a*]. Karas argued that the participation of Copts in such festivals, especially outside of Egypt, diluted Coptic identity and its maintenance in the lands of immigration (1999, 79). The separation of Copts from Egyptian Muslims in the diaspora, then, was not simply related to traumatic memory and injury transposed from Egypt, but rather had more to do with the nature of diaspora identity. The maintenance of identity lines superseded the continuance of socio-cultural traditions from Egypt—that of Copts taking part in the festivals of the Muslim majority, among others. So much so that during the 1976 Bicentennial celebrations in Washington DC, Joseph, a Coptic interlocutor from Jersey City, recounted how a delegation of immigrant Coptic chanters performed separately from the Egyptian delegation, which consisted of Sufi chanters that sang hymns of praise to the Prophet Mohammed, recounting his miracles. Joseph joked, "They recounted one miracle, then tried to count off others, but couldn't. Instead, they chanted *Sali 'ala Nabi* over and over because the Prophet had no other miracles!" In the United States, Coptic identity has been forged through its separation and seclusion from Muslim Egyptians and other Middle Eastern Muslims, and inclusion into (white) American religio-political communities and causes advancing religious freedom and defending persecuted Christians around the globe. A Coptic activist (since the 1990s) stated affirmatively to me in 2020, "We are a part of the international Christian globe now. The Coptic cause is the global persecuted Christian cause now."[140]

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Shawky Karas passed away in October 2003 at the age of 75. At the height of Karas' activism of the 1970s and 1980s, the Coptic community directed its efforts to the beleaguered Pope Shenouda, under duress and house arrest. This dilemma centered Coptic efforts (either for or against the state of Egyptian affairs).[141] Throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s, the demographics and interests of the Coptic communities in America began to shift. American politicians, Christian organizations, and think tanks began to take up Christian plight to advance

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Dominion (1902), Alfred Butler documents the hybrid responses of Copts to the Conquest. For example, he notes that John of Nikiou (Coptic bishop and chronicler) wrote fifty years after the Conquest of his denunciation of Islam and Muslims. Yet, of 'Amr ibn al-'As, the conqueror of Egypt, he remarks, "While he exacted the taxes which had been determined upon, he took none of the property of the churches, and committed no act of spoliation or plunder; nay, he preserved the churches to the end of his days" (445). While distinctions between Muslims and non-Muslims (in dress, publicity of religious practice, and everyday movement) were variously set in place by different Islamic regimes in Egypt, in the earliest period of Muslim rule, these distinctions were far from implementation. Instead, it is noted that funding was provided for the building of churches and support was provided to the Copts (448-449). When finances grew tight however, discrimination toward the non-Muslim populations of Egypt certainly occurred. Butler notes: "It is thus probable that in fact, as well as in seeming, the burdens of the Christians grew heavier in proportion as their numbers lessened" (464).

[140] Interview (April 2020).

[141] Greek-Americans lobbying for the rights of Greek Orthodox in Turkey has also been fraught with dilemmas and tensions. Today, the largest lobby on their behalf is the Archons of the Ecumenical Patriarchate (discussed in Chapter 4). The Greek-American lobby also has roots in the 1970s disputes with Turkey. See Alexander Kitroeff, "The Greek-American Lobby 1970s-1990s," In *Greek Diaspora and Migration Since 1700: Society, Politics and Culture*. Dimitris Tziovas, ed. (Farnham Surray, UK: Ashgate, 2009).

ideas of religious freedom, democracy, and human rights around the globe.[142] Coptic political activism originally directed its efforts at erecting a barrier between state and religion in Egypt, and putting pressure on the Egyptian government outside of Egypt to do so.[143] Yet, the Copts most active in this movement forged a new kind of identity, one that centered the Coptic Orthodox Church as a gathering place for spiritual health and political action. Immigrants, like Karas, embraced a cherished Egyptian identity, but understood Egyptian-ness as Pharaonic and Coptic. As a deterritorialized people, the Coptic diaspora in the United States sought to define itself through its activism and the Coptic Orthodox Church.[144] In this new era of Coptic immigration to the United States, migration has been depicted through lenses of forced displacement, expulsion, and dispossession. This understanding of Middle Eastern Christian immigration to the United States is one that constructs such communities solely as victims of the Muslim majority. One Coptic activist noted that within current Washington D.C. policymaking circles, newer Coptic organizations, Middle Eastern Christian policy platforms, and government interests have utilized such communities to the detriment of their original goals—of advancing and guaranteeing rights for their communities back in the region—"These organizations are all businesses. They commercialize the Copts. This is the commercialization of the Coptic cause."

"When the Christians of Egypt feel cold the Copts of America sneeze"[145]

On a summer's evening in a Washington D.C. suburb, I sat with Amaney and Mark in their home. I was visiting from the New York-New Jersey area for Coptic Solidarity's annual conference. One of the attendees, a Coptic-American man had told me over lunch that day that he considered himself to be Coptic, and not Egyptian, since Egypt "expelled" his parents. Because of this, he believes that Egyptian identity for Egypt's former Christian inhabitants should be deemphasized and the Christianity of the Copts should be more greatly proclaimed by communities in diaspora. Distancing from Egyptian culture for many within the Coptic diaspora in the United States has helped to reorient the Western gaze away from Arab/Muslim/Middle Eastern connections and its racialized and securitized connotations. Amaney and Mark, both born in Egypt, scoffed at the idea of expulsion. "It's a tiny percentage of people in Egypt who

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[142] Especially since 2009, new organizations have emerged in Washington D.C. that have sought to specifically lobby for Middle Eastern Christian causes. Coptic Solidarity, for example, has lobbied Congress on behalf of the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act (2016), which sought to intensify political responses to religious freedom violations, and advocated for the designation of the Muslim Brotherhood has a terrorist organization (2019). Other such organizations include In Defense of Christians (founded in 2014), the Philos Project (founded in 2014), among others. For more on persecution politics in advocacy and lobbying circles in Washington D.C., see Miray Philips' forthcoming dissertation tentatively entitled, "Politics of Persecution: Middle East Christians and International Religious Freedom," (University of Minnesota).

[143] During interviews, Coptic activists noted to me that the Egyptian government since the mid-2000s and especially after the 2013 coup sought to squash diaspora efforts at advocacy.

[144] The Coptic Church, whether under Pope Shenouda or now Pope Tawadros, has never directly supported Coptic diaspora activism. Especially since the rise of President al-Sisi, the Church has urged those in the diaspora to end their activities. See "Pope Tawadros II denounces Coptic protests outside White House over sectarian violence in Egypt," *Mada Masr,* August 3, 2016, https://madamasr.com/en/2016/08/03/news/u/pope-tawadros-denounces-coptic-protests-outside-white-house-over-sectarian-violence-in-egypt/

[145] John Watson, *Among the Copts* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2000), 106.

have experienced this type of persecution. His parents were not 'expelled.' They came to the U.S. for a better life."

How are we to understand this dissonance between memory of persecution—the collective memory of a people (Halbwachs 1992)—and different perspectives of those from within the community? Or, what of the nuances of everyday Coptic life in Egypt—where ways to understand violence are continually negotiated?



Figure 26: Front cover of *The Copts*. "Bullets [fired] at the heart of Coptic life: the massacres of Abu Qarqas, Al-Bahjura, Al-Tamahiyya." July 1997.

Mina, the brother-in-law of my main interlocutor in Bahjura, showed me his business one hot June afternoon. Mina works in sugarcane extraction, which produces black honey—a delicacy of Upper Egypt—or *mo'assal*, used for smoking tobacco. After a tour of the extraction process, Mina showed me a storehouse far outside the village that contained two million Egyptian pounds worth of product. Winding through the side streets back to Bahjura, we crossed into 'Ezbet Kamel, known for its mixed Muslim and Christian population. Mina recalled the area as the location of a terrorist attack in 1997 (noted in Figure 26). Gunmen randomly fired into the surrounding neighborhood of Bahjura. I asked Mina whether the attack was meant to specifically target Christians. "No, Muslims live here as well," he responded. "They wanted to give the appearance that this place is not secure [*mafish amn*]." The image, published in *The Copts* magazine, associates the attack with the specific targeting of Copts *as* Christians. This narrative of Muslim on Christian violence is easier to digest among diaspora Copts and their political allies than the ambiguity of "insecurity." The attackers sought to sow chaos, to target the Egyptian state. Yet, neither of these narratives—of sectarian violence or insurgency—attend to the complexity of Coptic concerns in a place like Bahjura.

On May 26, 2017, masked gunmen opened fire on a group of buses carrying Copts from Maghagha in Egypt's Minya Governorate to the Monastery of Saint Samuel the Confessor, killing 29 people. I arrived in Bahjura an hour after the attack hit Egyptian news cycles. The family I was staying with gathered in the living room, with sullen faces, for tea. Coverage of

CTV, a popular Coptic broadcasting network[146], played in the background. The women of the household had to start getting ready for the wedding we were all set to attend that evening. Churches in the area had immediately sent text messages to the youngest ones informing them that upcoming monastery trips were postponed until further notice.



Figure 27: "In the Light" Program on CTV: Funeral Prayers for the martyrs of al-Minya. Photo by author.

During the wedding, the martyrs of al-Minya were on the lips of many, and some questioned whether to even allow dancing or music, in honor of the dead. Many of the men drank and danced throughout the night. A man was visibly intoxicated. One of the sisters whispered in my ear, "People are sad tonight because of al-Minya." Later, at home, a cousin of the family sat in the living room flipping through his Facebook. In his late 20s, Ishak expressed his frustration at the way Muslims were relating to the al-Minya events. On Facebook, his Muslim friends would comment: "*Baqa' fi hayatak*" or "*ila Allah w 'aleihu raja'ūan*"—both phrases of consolation. Ishak said sternly, "These phrases are used when someone dies from sickness or gets in a car accident, not for when people are murdered. It's like you're adding insult to injury [*ghasban 'anee*]."

For a nightcap, we made our way to the rooftop of the building. The conversation centered around al-Minya, and one of the women interjected with the following: "I think the problem is connected to the Pope and his support for the president [Sisi]. When he came out on July 3 with Sheikh Al-Azhar and Sisi, he was sending a message in support of the deposal of Morsi."[147] Her sister-in-law then spoke saying, "But I think he [the Pope] had to do so. The message of July 3rd was that Muslims and Christians are both supporting the deposal of Morsi." Another family member interjected saying, "But this is why it is so dangerous because the Islamists use this as a reason to kill Copts." An uncle responded: "We've been here for 2,017 years, and they've only been here 1,400 years. Who are the original inhabitants of this country?

[146] For more sources on Coptic media, see Armanios and Amstutz 2013; Elsässer 2010; Heo 2013b; Ibrahim 2015; Iskander 2012; Rowe 2009; Westbrook and Saad 2017.
[147] In July 2013, religious and political leaders joined then General Al-Sisi in a broadcast announcement of the deposal of President Mohammed Morsi.

[*min asl al-balad*]." The following day, a friend and I made our way to the St. Mary Church to meet with a priest. Sitting in his office, he asked us (me?), "Did you see what happened?" Abouna was referring to the al-Minya incident. He continued, "Of course, many people are emigrating, with the state of the country and the persecution [*iṭihaḍ*]."

Yet, other Copts from Bahjura insisted that the narrative of persecution does not encompass all aspects of life. Even in spite of the horrors of the al-Minya incident, Coptic interlocutors in Bahjura emphasized that discrimination [*tameez*] was not solely between *all* Muslims and Christians in Egypt. Rather, discrimination also occurred between Christians, based on class divisions [*tabaqat*]. "It's not just Christians and Muslims," a friend insisted. "al-Minya is a political incident, and it will continue to occur because those terrorists [*irḥabeen*] attacking are hitting Sisi's weak spot—Christians. They have supported him. So, targeting them is targeting Sisi." Muslim-Christian relations in Egypt are not clearly defined based on persecution politics. Rather, the ambiguities of intercommunal tension and shared life offer a new way to think about the politics of migration beyond a binary of socioeconomic factors and forced displacement and dispossession.

The oscillation between a politics of friendship and conflict (Tambar 2019) defines Muslim-Christian relations in an Upper Egyptian village like Bahjura. Where in one instance a Muslim mother might tell her child, "Don't eat in the Christian area [*shig al-nasara*] because they'll poison you," in another she might take her child to the church for the St. George festival every November—to receive blessings, or *baraka*. In June of 2017, I was walking through Bahjura with Armia, a local teacher. As we began to walk, I noticed a falafel restaurant at the end of the street was open and serving food. I peeked inside and saw that there was a "There is no other God except God, and Muhammed is his messenger" decorative portrait, indicating that the place was most likely owned by Muslims. I was a perplexed, given that it was Ramadan and in places like Cairo, cafes open during the day have been forcibly shut down by Egyptian police.[148] As we walked further, I noticed that, on the predominantly Muslim street, there was also a sheesha shop open for business with customers, smoking cigarettes and sheesha, and drinking tea. I became even more perplexed. I inquired on these scenes to Armia. "Things are different here in the village," he said. "I would say only about 50% of Muslims fast during Ramadan." I noted that in Cairo, the police would come and shut down these businesses themselves if they were open. He responded, "We don't have anything of the sort. [*ma'andnash al-kalam da*]. We have a shared life together [*al-hayat al-mushtarika*]. We decide what is permissible and what is not." The local politics of the village, a politics of shared life, has become muddled by an ever-increased migration of Christians to the United States through such means as the Green Card Lottery.

Emigration of Roots

"Emigration does not worry me. It is the emigration of Copts within themselves that does; the culture of fear."[149] Egyptian-Christian columnist Soliman Shafik argues that it is not the physical movement of Copts that is a concern, but rather the movement of Coptic communal life from the everyday to the event—the bombing, the incident [*ḥadth*], the attack. Since the 2011

[148] "Egyptian police raid cafes during Ramadan fast," *Middle East Eye*, June 10, 2016, https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/egyptian-police-raid-cafes-during-ramadan-fast

[149] Hanan Fayed, "Are Copts Fleeing Egypt?" *The Cairo Post,* September 30, 2014, https://egyptianstreets.com/2014/09/30/are-copts-fleeing-egypt/.

revolution, Copts emigrated—temporarily and permanently—to the United States in fear of the political future of Egypt. The Coptic Orthodox Church's facilitation of the Lottery has helped to further this narrative of exodus. As one US embassy official mentioned to me regarding the involvement of the Church in the Lottery: "For the long term, though, and this is less clear as to if the Church is actually thinking about this out-loud, but maybe, just maybe, they are thinking about their future existence in Egypt."

The recent immigration of Copts to the United States has produced new sites of concern in the places they leave behind and the places they reside in the lands of immigration. As this chapter has illuminated, one of the major concerns of this migration has focused on the effect it has had on maintaining Coptic identity transnationally. This maintenance has been mediated by American geopolitical forces, which have affected Coptic political formations and religious community over the past three decades. The push for greater policy attention on the plight of Middle Eastern Christians has intensified this configuration. As in the colonial pasts, Coptic Orthodox Christianity's kinship with Western Christendom is relevant here, but the post-9/11 context gives it a new charge. The narrative of Arab Muslim victimization of native Copts is but one example of Islam's essential tyranny and intolerance unleashed on the global stage, which Americans have now come to experience first-hand. Copts stand as the original witnesses to Islamic evil, in this framing. What was previously a Coptic experience has now, following 9/11, become one shared between the Copts and American Christians. In *Religious Difference in a Secular Age,* Saba Mahmood describes the predicament of Shawky Karas and his diasporic descendants in this way: "Copts are no different than other minorities in that any attempt to draw attention to their plight inevitably sets them apart from the identity of the nation. The postcolonial nature of their predicament is apparent in that their call for Euro-American protection sets up an unstable synergy between the security this affords and the insecurity it engenders with respect to their relationship to the nation. Their dependence on supranational forms of support requires them to amplify their difference to a certain degree. This is not simply a case of the victim's hyperbole, but a necessary feature of making their discrimination legible in terms of Euro-American geopolitical interests" (Mahmood 2015, 102).

The suturing of Copts to persecution politics does not merely operate in the political theatre of Washington D.C. In the everyday lives of the Coptic diaspora in the United States, this framing of their collective identity is institutionally mediated by the Coptic Church and aims to set them apart from other Middle Eastern Muslim communities. One interlocutor in New York suggested the following to me over tea:

> *The Church would do itself good if it defined a Copt as having a broad interest with the Coptic situation in Egypt…A) because the situation is going to change very slowly so there will always be points of concern, and B) because it gives you a lot of power and inclusive reach and it allows you to define an identity that is not narrowly religious, but still has a connection to the more advanced culture of the West. In terms of the number of books, the number of plays, the number of symphonies, Copts are backward. They just have less cultural output. If you define it broadly, you're going to allow yourself more cultural output of all these people who define themselves in this way.*

Forging the Coptic diaspora around Christian persecution and Islamic violence has far reaching consequences for the ways Copts define themselves and are defined in the United States,

especially after 9/11. The Arab Spring in places like Egypt reinvigorated the necessity of post-9/11 logics of securitization and racialization. While the Green Card Lottery has increasingly helped Copts immigrate to the United States, the Egyptian revolution of 2011 also ushered in a new era of Coptic asylum seekers compelled to frame their stories through new legal grammars of persecution. In the following chapter, I examine the contours of the asylum process for Coptic Christians after 2011 that expose the legal techniques of community fashioning in a new era of the War on Terror.

Part II: Traumatic Fragments—Law, Politics, and Theology

Chapter 3

Muslim Monsters and Christian Victims

In the short film, The Emigration of Roots [*Hijrat al-Jathūr*],[150] Egyptian writer and researcher, Soliman Shafik, describes how concerns of a Coptic exodus from Egypt after the 2011 revolution were shaped by geopolitical coordinates:

Ninety percent of the Christians who emigrated, due to religious reasons [asbab diniyya], have never experienced injustice [al-'asf]… A Coptic organization stated that 100,000 immigrated in 2011, and that 50,000 of them immigrated to the US, and 50,000 to other countries. But these numbers were not true and the total number of people who were given visas to the US in 2011 and 2012 did not exceed 14,000. So, I think these numbers, with all due respect to who compiled them, was part of the campaign against the previous regime. The concern here is that this is more of an exaggeration [sana'a ta'weel] than an actual fact.

After the ousting of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak on February 11, 2011 and the ensuing power vacuum, many Copts began immigrating to the United States to seek asylum. After thirty years in power, the U.S.-backed Mubarak regime was replaced by a military junta that ruled the country until elections in 2012 when Mohammed Morsi, former member of the Muslim Brotherhood, took power in a head-to-head election with Mubarak regime crony, Ahmed Shafik. The rise of Morsi created much anxiety among Copts and the Coptic Orthodox Church as the government tried to pass a new constitution with overtly sectarian language that threatened to marginalize Christians, as attacks against Christians increased throughout the year.[151]

In 2013, following the deposition of Mohammed Morsi, 3,407 Egyptians were given asylum in the United States—fourteen percent of all individuals granted asylum—up from 531 in 2010.[152] In most of Coptic asylum cases in the United States after 2011, decisions have been made based on pattern and practice persecution—being part of a social group with a well-founded fear of future persecution. This chapter addresses the paradoxes of persecution through the lens of the U.S. asylum system. By contextualizing the taken-for-granted coordinates of geopolitics, we may better understand why writers like Shafik critique the reasons given for Coptic emigration from Egypt after the revolution. The mechanisms of post-revolutionary migration are enmeshed in power dynamics that shape the self-understanding of Copts and the field of action in which they operate. Specifically, this chapter highlights how Copts have transformed from legal subjects of discrimination to legal subjects of persecution since 2011, and unpacks the rationalization of Coptic suffering. Weaving together legal, geopolitical, and theological perspectives of persecution, I examine how Copts have been discursively sutured to persecution in ways that have marginalized them from other precarious communities (in the U.S. and Egypt) and have foreclosed solidarities.

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[150] "*Hijrat al-Jathūr* [The Emigration of Roots]," Youtube, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3nANMgctwC0.

[151] Jason Brownlee, "Violence against Copts in Egypt," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, November 2013, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/violence_against_copts3.pdf

[152] Department of Homeland Security's Office of Immigration Statistics, https://www.dhs.gov/immigration-statistics/refugees-asylees#. These statistics do not include religious affiliation.

Western news media described post-revolutionary Coptic migration from Egypt as an "exodus," and focused on the suffering of Copts at the hands of Islamist groups, the Egyptian government, and Muslim neighbors.[153] Such media narratives and discursive formations—of the Christian victim and Muslim "monster"—have impacted upon the adjudication of Coptic asylum cases in the United States. What I describe as "common sense legality," also described to me as "judge-made law," has shifted in identifying Copts from discriminated to "persecuted." Shifts in legal rationalization altered how Coptic cases were made to be persuasive. The shift from discriminated to persecuted in American legal parlance has far reaching consequences. The particularity of the Coptic case lies in the context of current geopolitical interest on the plight of Christians in the Middle East after the Arab revolutions. From the mid-1990s and through the early 2000s, the persecuted Christians movement in the United States among American evangelicals and politicians showed the "border-spanning power of visions of the body in pain" (McAlister 2018, 174). Attention to persecution has been a form of transnational solidarity, by highlighting the suffering of Christians in the Middle East and elsewhere and hailing such Christians as stalwarts of the faith. The images of their bodies, wracked and damaged, has propelled policy-makers, religious movements, and in the last few years, the U.S. asylum system.

While persecution has framed Coptic identity for centuries in Egypt, at the hands of Roman and Byzantine imperial rulers and Islamic empires, the political imaginary of Copts and Muslims alike at the turn of the twentieth century had become saturated with European depictions of Islam and Christianity. Western portrayals of Islam as barbaric, a "monstrous race," and Muslims as "frightening figures," have impacted upon Coptic framings of suffering (Arjana 2015). Similarly, the fact that the fate of "Eastern Christians" has indelibly been sutured to European and now American beneficence. The Western gaze on such communities has been crucial to how Copts have articulated their cause, transnationally, in the contemporary contexts of the War on Terror and the configuration of the global Muslim terrorist (Mahmood 2015, 72). In defining *Islamic* terrorism as a threat to national security, U.S. policymakers and the persecuted Christians movement positioned Christians as simultaneously victims and warriors. Focused on those who were suffering and endangered, persecution politics presented itself as a matter of international social justice (McAlister 2018, 174). In making persecution a political concern, American evangelicals and politicians have carved out a special place for Middle Eastern Christians and their plight in the broader image of Islam as barbarous and Muslims as terrorists. Evangelical political interests and theologies of persecution have impacted upon and altered the ways Copts today are made legally legible within U.S. "asylum game."[154]

The way in which specific religio-political discourses mobilize and direct the behavior of people within given situations matters in how we can think about the legal transformation of Coptic Christians from discriminated individual asylum seekers to a persecuted social group (Asad 1986, 153). The coherence of the logic is that which makes its social and legal effect powerful. In *Philosophical Investigations,* Ludwig Wittgenstein speaks of the conditions for establishing the truth of a confession as lying not in the correct *description* of a process, but

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[153] See Gracy Olmstead, "A Coptic Exodus from Egypt," *The American Conservative,* September 6, 2013, https://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/a-coptic-exodus-from-egypt/
and more recently, see Amira El-Fekki and Jared Malsin, "Anti-Christian Violence Surges in Egypt, Prompting an Exodus," *The Wall Street Journal,* April 26, 2019, https://www.wsj.com/articles/anti-christian-violence-surges-in-egypt-prompting-an-exodus-11556290800

[154] This phrase was used a number of times in conversation with a prominent lawyer of Coptic asylum cases.

rather, in the special criteria of *truthfulness;* a game, if you will (1963). Coptic testimony at asylum trials is carefully curated by a lawyer versed in the specific legal logic required of the asylum system. The system requires that applicants recognize the right way to answer questions—a "dangerous game of truth management" (Ordóñez 2008, 58). Moreover, the common sense understanding of Copts as a persecuted people matters in these cases. Most judges I interacted with during fieldwork *knew* about the Copts and their plight. The common sense of the U.S. asylum system in regard to the Copts has positioned their persecution as a given. Their persecution is depicted as "inherent in the situation, intrinsic aspects of reality, the way to go" (Geertz 1983, 84). Common sense legality determines how the plight of certain groups are more recognizable and their familiarity is represented by the judges and lawyers who argue for and simply note their matter-of-factness. By ethnographically unpacking the way Coptic persecution has become part of common sense legality, this chapter examines how this particular idea has been rationalized and with what effects (Englund 2005, 12; Malkki 2007, 336).

Common Sense Legality

Persecution is a particular legal category within asylum law around the world associated with refugee status. Importantly, persecution is rather vague within U.S. asylum law, yet it determines if an asylum case is worthy of approval.[155] The legal parameters of the "fear of future persecution," a nomenclature needed to secure group status, persuades the applicants to efface specifics and attend to "country-wide conditions." The suffering of specific Coptic individuals and the intentions of particular perpetrators of persecution melt into the background, in favor of listing country-wide events—this bombing here, that ISIS attack there (Kelly 2011, 5). Within this legal space, the processes of determining Coptic eligibility for asylum are left to classification—that the person before the judge is a Christian from Egypt—and their fear of *future* suffering or persecution is prioritized for approval. In modern Egypt, Christian-Muslim relations have been weaponized by the British colonial regime and under postcolonial authoritarian regimes for political gain. Egyptian sectarianism is reimagined by Western legal regimes such as asylum, translating events for coherence—to make plain how Copts are a persecuted people for matters of judicial adjudication. While such events are already sectarian within the national context of Egypt, attorneys and judges in the United States bring together incidents of violence—this shooting with this stabbing and this fight between a Muslim shop owner and a Christian customer—that end up further entrenching practices of separation between Muslim and Christian Egyptians in diaspora.

Exemplified within academic literature, news media, and policy discourse, Copts have been discussed and framed as passive victims and not actors in their own right.[156] In post-revolutionary U.S. asylum proceedings, Copts are incited to stress on their victimhood, in order

[155] Seemingly acknowledging the lack of specificity regarding this concept, the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals said that, "Persecution covers a range of acts and harms," and "[t]he determination that actions rise to the level of persecution is very fact-dependent." (See *Cordon-Garcia v. INS*, 204 F.3d 985, 991 (9th Cir. 2000)). On the other hand, the Seventh Circuit has noted that, "actions must rise above the level of mere 'harassment' to constitute persecution." (See *Tamas-Mercea v. Reno*, 222 F.3d 417, 424 (7th Cir. 2000)). And the First Circuit added that the experience "must rise above unpleasantness, harassment and even basic suffering." (See *Nelson v. INS*, 232 F.3d 258, 263 (1st Cir. 2000)).

[156] For more on this, see Paul Sedra, "Writing the History of the Modern Copts: From Victims and Symbols to Actors," *History Compass* 7, no. 3 (2009), 1049-1063.

to preserve their claims to persecution—which are particularly vague. To secure this position, lawyers stress immediate Coptic suffering and victimhood through the listing of particular events rather than an engagement with the broader political and economic processes that produce the infliction of violence (Ticktin 2006). In many ways, these events must keep up with the pace of the trial, ensuring that there "was a shooting at a church *just last* week," as one lawyer argued in his debate with a government attorney. The urgency is vital. The need to continue the documentation of suffering apace with the American legal system reinforces Coptic life to its death, limiting other ways of being even in diaspora. By translating thick political problems into thin legal representations like "persecution," Coptic life and struggles for equality in Egypt are flattened by U.S. asylum law into a civilizational rift between barbaric Muslims and civilized Christians (Hastrup 2003). From this perspective, asylum language simplifies complex and ambiguous situations, erasing important differences among both victims and perpetrators (Kennedy 2004, 14; Wilson 1996). Within the forging of a story, legal actors rationalize persecuted personhood within the limits of common sense legality. It is here where Coptic subjectivity is reshaped by the transformation from discriminated person to persecuted social group.

"There's something going on somewhere"

In an office covered in Egyptian pharaonic memorabilia, Gabriel[157], an immigration attorney in his late 50s, explained that the approval rate of Coptic asylum applicants is upwards of ninety-five percent, particularly since Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi took power in 2013.[158] Why has the approval rate changed so drastically since then? Gabriel explains that the consistent nature of attacks against Copts in Egypt, or at least greater international focus on them, has transitioned Coptic cases away from "having a story." In most asylum cases, the applicant must include a declaration, considered a supplementary document, which narrates the events that led to a person's migration or forced displacement. The declaration constitutes the sworn testimony of an asylum seeker's version of the facts and explains their personal history. The document is important as the asylum officer will draw questions in the interview from it that will prove or disprove a person's account (Ordóñez 2008, 41). Since 2013, Coptic declarations have become less about the cohesive presentation of personal circumstances and more focused on the immediacy and severity of structural conditions.

Gabriel: It's easier to win an asylum claim [in the Coptic case] if you don't have a story. That's counterintuitive, but it makes sense if you understand the dynamics of how the law works. It works because first of all you don't have a credibility issue…If you are making a claim that X and Y and Z happened, you need first corroboration which is not always easier to get. But even if you have it, it's questionable if it's legitimate and the asylum officer is always dubious if they're familiar with how corrupt the system is. And then there's the credibility. Is it true, is it not true? So, if you start your story by saying 'I have never been persecuted. Certainly, never threatened. And never violently attacked. But I don't want to live in my country because of the patterns, because of the possibility [of violence].' That's called the reasonable possibility test or the well-founded fear of future persecution…This is the bible on asylum law…it's a black letter law,

[157] This is a pseudonym.

[158] In early 2020, Gabriel noted that his approval rates have increased further. 99% of his cases are now approved, with most of his clients now originating from the Persian Gulf. He described it to me this way: "It has never been better for Copts applying for asylum."

membership in a particular social group. And as long as it's not half of the population meaning females or whatever, as long as it's reasonably small, but not two or three! You have a group, and then the question is: Is this group being targeted?

Prior Coptic asylum cases mostly relied on the typical asylum case issue of credibility. Do you have a credible *story*? The story was personal and specific, and documented a chronological narrative of events.[159] Persecution was not determined to be systematic, at least under US Immigration proceedings, and instead such cases relied on their cohesiveness, believability, and authenticity. Subsequent political upheaval following the Egyptian revolution of 2011 placed Copts into a precarious position. Various stages of the revolution and the transition back to authoritarian rule following the 2013 coup resulted in a shift in common sense legality. The Egyptian revolution and its collapse was on the evening news in the United States, and the Obama and Trump administrations have been keen on continuing political relations in the form of consistent military aid and security collaboration. These geopolitical shifts also impacted upon Gabriel's Coptic cases. Coptic cases were increasingly understood through the legal lexicon of persecution, whereby as a *religious community* there is a *reasonable possibility* that, in the future, they may experience persecution in the form of violent attack. The politics of probability centered on the scaling of suffering from the level of the person or individual incident to the level of the community.

Me: But even before the revolution, in the 70s, 80s, 90s, and early 2000s, you had major incidents that happened…

Gabriel: But it was localized, to some extent. I don't think you would say it's countrywide and the United States government came out with reports each year, so did Amnesty [International], and they often had this refrain that 'the majority of Coptic Christians remain unaffected and live normal lives.' And that may have been politically motivated too. You didn't have the same kind of evidence then…You had pockets. The question would always come up: why couldn't you relocate? You see asylum is country specific it's not city specific. Clients will often like to tell me 'There was this attack that happened on my block and there's a mosque across the street from me and every time I would walk out, they would call me names and threaten me.' The first question the asylum officer would ask is: Why don't you move? Now, things are relatively consistent. There's not a week that goes by somewhere in Egypt, from Port Said to Luxor, there's something going on somewhere. And that makes it easier to convince the court that this is a pattern and practice that is countrywide, and that there is nowhere they can reasonably resettle without fear.

Within the U.S. asylum system, incidents prior to 2011 were understood to be isolated, and cases were decided based on such.[160] Localized incidents involving Muslims attacking their

[159] This is not to say that Coptic applicants do not continue to apply based on a personal story. However, Gabriel has persuaded clients against this, arguing that it is more difficult to win as the government deconstructs the story, poking holes in the narrative. By focusing on structural conditions, Gabriel and other lawyers avoid the possibility of denial.

[160] For example, Farid Ghaly applied for asylum in the mid-1980s, claiming that Christians were subject to discrimination and violence because of their faith. At a 1987 merits hearing on Ghaly's asylum case, an immigration judge admitted a March 1986 State Department report that concluded that Copts faced

Christian neighbors, or church attacks not covered by Egyptian national media were unable to rise to the level of common sense legality used to decide such cases based on persecution. Within the logic of this system, daily discrimination is constructed as localized, and cannot be elevated to the level of *persecution*. Asylum officers between 2011-2013 began to understand Copts as persecuted, *countrywide*. Countrywide is the antithesis of the local. The local is probed and questioned for details of the event, by the chronology narrated on the applicant's declaration. In this legal rationality, maps are rewritten and the character of Muslim-Christian relations in Egypt is scaled upwards.

Measuring Persecution

Back in his office, Gabriel explained how the legal system has measured persecution since the late 1980s:

Gabriel: And do you know what the standard, the burden of proof is? The burden of proof in a landmark case, a Supreme Court case, Cardozo-Fonseca vs. INS, is that a well-founded fear is a reasonable possibility that one will be subjected to persecution, and in a footnote in Cardozo-Fonseca, the court said even a ten percent possibility is enough to establish the burden of proof. That constitutes the reasonable fear. And if you flip that, if there is a 90% that nothing happens, you win asylum in America because of the ten percent chance that there could be something. It is an incredibly, incredibly low burden of proof. When you talk to other lawyers about this, in criminal law, it's beyond a reasonable doubt, which is an extremely high burden of proof. It's hard to get that. And in civil proceedings, it's a preponderance of the evidence which still is relatively high. But for asylum law, it's only a reasonable possibility. And that quote in Cardozo-Fonseca is a ten percent chance.

Me: How do you measure that ten percent?

Gabriel: It's hard to do that. The way I put it to clients is that if it's reasonable and documented you're probably going to show it's a legitimate claim; that it's countrywide.

In *Cardoza-Fonseca vs. INS* (1987), the court rejected the government's contention that those who are up for deportation under section 243(h) of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952, which requires an undocumented person to show that he or she is more likely than not to be subject to persecution, is also the section that governs applications for asylum. Justice Stevens argued that Congress used different, broader language to define the term "refugee" as used in section 208(a) on asylum in the Immigration and Nationality Act. The Refugee Act of 1980, an amendment to the Immigration and Nationality Act and the Migration and Refugee Assistance Act of 1962, was created to provide a systematic procedure for refugees of special humanitarian concern to the U.S. Congress' purpose in enacting the Refugee Act of 1980 was to give the

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prejudice and occasional acts of individual discrimination from Egypt's Muslim majority, but denied that these acts were systematic or officially inspired. Both the Board of Immigration Appeals and the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals based in San Francisco found that while Copts are subject to discrimination in Egypt, this was insufficient as a basis to grant asylum. Both upheld the judge's decision denying Ghaly's asylum. As narrated by Louis Gordon, see "Christians in the American Court System," *Middle East* Quarterly (Winter 2001), 71-81, https://www.meforum.org/19/christians-in-the-american-court-system. For more on the case see Ghaly v. INS, 58 F.3d 142 (9th Cir. 1995).

United States flexibility to respond to situations involving political or religious dissidents around the world; the Court's decision in *Cardoza-Fonseca* would further Congress' purpose by increasing that flexibility (Soltero 2006, 142). As a result of *Cardoza-Fonseca*, if a person establishes a "well-founded fear," even if less than a fifty percent chance, then an immigration judge can grant asylum at their discretion.

Deborah Anker, professor of law at Harvard Law School and leading expert on US asylum law, has noted that the Board of Immigration Appeals shifted their focus away from personal credibility determination in asylum cases. Rather than discretion or credibility, the Board has utilized another basis for denying many asylum claims; namely, a narrowing conception of persecution and political opinion under the statute (Anker and Patty Blum 1989, 70). In the aftermath of *Cardoza-Fonseca*, the Board focused specifically on the claim of persecution itself, rather than on personal credibility and testimony. Thus, cases have focused on specific country contexts of violence in assessing the merits of applicants' claims (76). In the case of Coptic asylum applicants, their actual beliefs as Christians has lessened in relevance. There is no line of questioning imploring the applicant to recite the Nicene Creed or recount Oriental Orthodox Christology. Rather, Copts are legally reasoned as an ethnos, where their racialized Christian bodies are identified in distinction from their Islamic damnation.

Carved out as an ethnic, persecuted body, violent attacks against Coptic Christians are reasoned as imminent by the U.S. asylum system. In his opinion in *Cardoza*, Justice Stevens notes the following: "There is simply no room in the United Nations' definition [of persecution] for concluding that because an applicant only has a ten percent chance of being shot, tortured, or otherwise persecuted, that he or she has no 'well-founded fear' of the event happening. As we [the Court] pointed out in *[INS vs] Stevic* (1984), a moderate interpretation of the 'well-founded fear' standard would indicate 'that so long as an objective situation is established by the evidence, it need not be shown that the situation will probably result in persecution, but it is enough that persecution is a reasonable possibility."[161] The "objective situation" is determined by the observer (in asylum cases, this is either the immigration officer or the judge at trial), demarcating the fine line between persecution and discrimination. For example, in the *Matter of Mogharrabi* (1987), the Board of Immigration Appeals upheld an Iranian asylum claim where there was minimal evidence of any individual political activity by the applicant. The Board also required little, if any, affirmative proof of Iran's persecution of persons in circumstances similar to Mogharrabi's. The Board simply stated, "The Service does not dispute that opponents of the Ayatollah Khomeni are often persecuted for their opposition" (Anker and Patty Blum, 80). Negative perceptions of the Iranian Revolution were pervasive, particularly in Western media, and it is likely that such images influenced the Board's decisions.

In the Coptic case, common sense legality is premised on images circulating globally of their maimed and bloodied bodies, through the mainstream media, and Facebook and Twitter shares. Judges, lawyers, and bureaucrats engage this common sense in the adjudication of their cases. Gabriel explained how increased perceptions of Copts as *persecuted*, by way of media and policy focus, have influenced the decisions of immigration officers and judges at trial.

Gabriel: …since Sisi's ascension to power. The situation got demonstrably worse for the Coptic community there. As a consequence, with the evidence we present…our claims were in the

[161] INS v. Cardoza-Fonseca, 480 U.S. 421 (1987).

upward range of about ninety five percent success at the asylum level, and therefore we had very, very few cases to take to court…

Me: Are you saying before 2013 cases were easier?

Gabriel: No, to the contrary, beginning with the first revolution, with Mubarak and then once the al-Ikhwan [The Muslim Brotherhood] assumed control in 2012…when Morsi was elected…it was all speculative, but it became much, much easier to win claims. It dramatically shifted. We were winning fifty percent on the first level, and then it went up significantly after the second revolution when Sisi assumed control through this coup d' etat, then it got violent. We had more empirical evidence to present to the courts and to the immigration service and then dash [D'aesh, or ISIS]. This is only over the last year [since 2016] literally once they started a series of horrific attacks in Cairo then Tanta and Alexandria and in Al-Minya. In court, it became unprecedentedly easier.

Through the transnational reverberations of such attacks, Gabriel persuades his clients that their communal affiliation to such murdered and martyred Copts satisfies the burden of proof necessary to grant them asylum. Thus, the granting of asylum is not determined by each Coptic applicant's specific memory of personal events, but rather if their application adheres to the logics of what is legally recognizable. Where the authority over the legitimacy of representations of suffering is left solely to the asylum officer or judge's discretion, people must fit the legal understanding of what the causes and effects of violence and persecution are, even if they are not familiar with them (Ordóñez 2008, 43).

Gabriel: I spend most of my initial consultations with the client trying to convince them that their story is fabricated. In most cases, they are. Very, very rarely will a client maintain 'No, this really, really happened and it's true.' But they're usually not.

Me: So, they think that their personal circumstances are what is going to drive the case?

Gabriel: They think that. That's the underlying assumption. That doesn't mean that Christians are not being persecuted. It's just that the people who are getting out are not usually the ones who are suffering. The people that are winning their claims here are basically riding on the backs of the people that are really suffering in Egypt because those people can't get out. People in Upper Egypt. The small farmers. Or the people that have hardly enough to eat. They are the ones not getting the visas, and they are the ones who are being pressured and persecuted. And the people who are living in Cairo, or not even in Cairo! I have a lot of clients who lived in the Gulf, Qatar, Dubai. Their fingernails never get dirty. They travel first class and they come to the United States and they file for asylum and they win because their membership in a particular social group is a legitimate and enumerated basis for asylum…They are here because of those people back there.

"…Because of those people back there"

Persecution is legally reasoned as pattern and practice, where there is nowhere to go inside of the country of origin without feeling fear. Thus, much of what determines successful asylum cases is awareness of this condition by the immigration officer or the judge. Specific

political discourses mobilize or direct the behavior of the legal system (Asad 1986, 153). This functions in similar ways in other asylum courts. For example, anthropologist Didier Fassin has argued the following on the French asylum system:

> "In 2010, the French government granted the highest percentage of favorable asylum decisions (75 percent) to people from Mali, a country without a recent history of persecuting ethnic groups, religious minorities, or political opponents. By contrast, among asylum seekers, Russians, who are Chechens in a proportion of 80 percent, had a 14 percent rate of asylum granting; citizens of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where the lives of civilians are probably the most exposed to violence worldwide, culminated at 12 percent; and applicants from Haiti, where a natural disaster in 2010 added its toll to chronic political insecurity, did not exceed 10 percent. The reason why Mali is an exception to this general severity resides in the recognition in 2001 by the National Court of Asylum of a 'social group,' according to the official terminology, composed of women who feared female genital mutilation were they to return to their country — and this protection was extended to parents who oppose traditional circumcision for their daughters and thereby invoke for themselves the risk of persecution. As this jurisprudence came to be known, a growing number of couples, often in France for years as undocumented, sought asylum, arguing that were they to be deported, their daughter would have to submit to the ritual cutting (Fassin 2005, 47)."

The reconfiguration of the perimeter of persecution to include FGM in France shows how the category is quite an ambiguous one, and dependent upon the intersection of knowledge production and translation—how a particular group is made legible to Western legal systems (Asad, 164).[162] The group, now legally defined, conforms itself to definitions that exceed the matrices of self-understanding for the purposes of migration and legal status. Of course, it should not be overstated that there are asymmetrical tendencies and pressures that push asylum seekers to mold their communities into the languages of the dominant society they have submitted applications to. It is in the processes of translation into the registers of asylum law that defines and limits the possibilities of existence. It is those asylum seekers that know how to navigate these legal proceedings and be shaped by the state's representations of their social existence that succeed. Cases are adjudicated on the political economy of suffering made legible by way of common sense legality of the immigration officer or judge making the decisions as well as proper legal rationalization by lawyer and applicant. The messiness and ambiguity of such a system unfolds in the transnational lives of Copts between Egypt and the United States, reordering traditional ways of sociality and creating barriers to shared life.

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In Naj Hammadi, Upper Egypt in October 2017, I sat with Andrew and our mutual friend John at a café close to the train station. Andrew moved to Boston, after temporarily residing in

[162] It should be noted that Coptic women applicants have also included FGM as an additional reason for asylum. As Fassin notes above, the FGM group designation is an exception within the system since this group is not one based on race, religion, etc. In cases of extreme and unusual abuse such as FGM, "humanitarian asylum" is invoked. See Rebecca H. Gutner, "A Neglected Alternative: Toward a Workable Standard for Implementing Humanitarian Asylum," *Colum. J.L. & Soc. Probs* 39 (2005).

the United Arab Emirates (UAE) for work. In the UAE, he obtained a tourist visa to visit the U.S., and returned from the UAE to Egypt around 2012 to mull over a decision to permanently immigrate to the U.S. During that time, he decided that he wanted to move there permanently and heard from others in Naj Hammadi and his neighboring village of Bahjura that he could claim asylum [*lugu' dinee*] there. In 2013, he left for New York, and stayed with a friend, originally from Bahjura who immigrated to Queens. He approached an asylum lawyer for help. From 2013 until 2017, Andrew waited patiently for a decision in his case. After finally receiving his Green Card, he was able to return to Egypt after four long years to see his family, and sit with me sipping Nescafé as the Egyptian Railway train heading for Aswan sped by us.

Andrew's case never went to trial, but during his interview, the asylum officer asked him specific questions to measure and prove his persecution. His lawyer prepared him thoroughly with scripted answers prior to the appointment. "He [the lawyer] knows that you need to say specific things," Andrew said in English. "I told the officer that the *Ikhwan* [Muslim Brotherhood] was attacking us, and now ISIS is attacking us. The lawyer told me to say this." The collective Christian "us" communes together Copts from different socio-economic classes, regions, levels of spirituality, and connectedness to the Coptic Orthodox Church. Yet, Andrew has never experienced personal attack by the Muslim Brotherhood or ISIS. The Coptic "us" has. That "us" is brought together through discursive reinforcement at the national, Egyptian level—where the Coptic Church is the representative of all Copts (even all Christians, to one degree or another) in Egypt—and at the geopolitical level—where Copts are collectively framed as all awaiting a martyr's death, waiting for the next bomb to go off or the next shooting to take place. Copts are collectivized as an "us" through the legal parameters of U.S. asylum procedure, as well.

Continuing our conversation, I asked Andrew whether the officer had asked him about specific things that happened to him, like they had with other aslyees I had spoken with. "I told him about an experience I had in high school. Once a Muslim teacher slapped my Christian friend in the face. This happens a lot in Egypt. However, my friend then slapped the Muslim teacher back. All of the Muslim students in the class would not accept that a Christian student slapped the Muslim teacher, so they decided to fight all of us [Christians]." It is not uncommon to hear of teacher abuse against students in Egypt—whether they are Muslim or Christian.[163] Yet, the officer's line of questioning incites the asylum seeker to religiously demarcate these incidents—that his friend was slapped in the face only because he was Christian, not because of wider systemic abuses in Egypt's education system. The line of questioning forces the respondent to separate Muslim from Christian. These intercommunal distances are not dissimilar to embodied Coptic separations from Muslim neighbors in Egypt.

An interlocutor in Bahjura would switch to English to describe his Muslim clients; "they are un-Christian," he noted on a car ride. Other scholars working in Cairo have described how Copts lower their voices when saying the word "Islam," sometimes rephrasing to say "other religion," instead. Or, mouth the word "Muslim" instead of voicing it aloud (Ha 2017, 140). Separation also operates in a number of other ways—in university organizations based on religious identity, demarcated neighborhoods, as well as speech. In the summer of 2015, I attended courses on Church history, political participation, and theology at the Coptic cathedral

[163] "Egypt schoolboy dies after teacher beating, ministry says," *France 24,* September 3, 2015, https://www.france24.com/en/20150309-egypt-schoolboy-beating-corporal-punishment-death-teacher.

in Cairo. A course administrator asked why I had not attended the previous week, and I told them that I had been sick. They looked shocked that an illness gripped me for that long duration of time in the summer, and I replied "*wallahi*" (I swear to God). Taken aback, the administrator responded, "We, Christians, do not say such things. Say *sada'ini* or *bimana*." Both roughly translate to "I swear," "believe me, by my faith." Such linguistic separations also operate in the way of daily greetings. From my first trip to Cairo in 2007, I was told by a member of my Coptic host family that you could tell who a Christian was if they said *sabah al-kheir* (Good morning) instead of *assalamu 'aleikum* (Peace be upon you), a more Islamic greeting.

Linguistic differences, such as these, have manifested through the sectarian logics of post-colonial Egypt, which intensified during the presidency of Anwar al-Sadat (1970-1981) (Galal 2012; Shenoda 2010). Those committed to religious revival among Egyptians since the 1970s have been intent on making differences apparent. In her seminal work, *Politics of Piety* (2005), Saba Mahmood recounts a lesson of a *da'iya* [a female teacher] wherein she implores her Muslim listeners to make themselves distinct from their Christian neighbors:

> "Look around in our society and ask yourselves: who do we emulate? We emulate the Westerners, the secularists, and the Christians: we smoke like they do, we eat like they do, our books and media are full of pictures that are obscene. When you enter the homes of Muslims, you are surprised: you can't tell whether it is the house of a Christian or a Muslim. We are Muslims in name, but our acts are not those of Muslims. Our sight, dress, drink, and food should also be for God and out of love for Him (44-45)."

Muslim distance from the non-Muslim other and Christian distance from the non-Christian other has equated to both spatial distance as well as to linguistic and cultural difference. In the case of Mahmood's interlocutors, this meant the cultivation of bodily aptitudes, virtues, habits, and desires that serve to ground Islamic principles within the practices of everyday living (Mahmood 2005, 45) and that are juxtaposed with what this *da'iya* understands to be the secularization and/or Westernization (the Christianization?) of Egyptian society—where visible demarcations between Muslim and non-Muslim have become less apparent. Coptic Christians in Egypt have also been incited to socially distance from their Muslim Egyptian neighbors. Anthropologist Anthony Shenoda recounts how he frequently heard about Coptic Sunday school teachers imploring their pupils to act in the world in a way that highlights them as different, that shows them to be Christian (2010, 158). This difference takes on semiotic form in the way Muslims and Christians in Egypt decipher one another through speech, expression, and essence.

Such semiotic ideologies of intercommunal determination and differentiation in Egypt developed in the latter half of the twentieth century, when post-colonial transformations and religious revival among Muslims and Christians took root. These revivals produced new reading practices of the self. For example, the beard did not become symbolic of Islamic counterpublics in Egypt until the 1970s (Hirschkind 2006), when certain Muslims began to embody the Islamic revival by marking themselves with beards. Before that the beard had been a marker of distinction or dignity in some circles (Gaffney 1994: 90). In the erection of partitions, establishment of distance, and the imposition of prohibitions, sectarian logic has led to a more simplified and enclosed world. Narratives of sectarian strife elaborate prejudices and try to eliminate ambiguities (Shenoda 2010, 178). These particular separations have manifested themselves within the Coptic diaspora in the United States and are reconfigured by U.S.

imperial, racial, and religious formations—and these intersections are illuminated by the asylum process. Yet, these reconfigurations do not end within the U.S., but circulate back to Egypt, creating new modalities of difference and separation.

Andrew was mindful of his new legal status, as an asylee, after nearly four years of his absence from Bahjura's landscape. Asylum, as a semiotic-sectarian mode of separation, has circulated even in Egypt's rural South. On our way to the café in October 2017, I spoke with Andrew about his new status and how his recent return to Bahjura has impacted him. I used the Arabic term for religious asylum—*lugu' dinee*. He hushed me and responded, in English, "Don't mention this term out loud in Egypt, just in case other Muslims hear. Say 'asylum' in English instead." Becoming a religious asylee performs the work of affirming that "they" Muslims are categorically considered a collective whole as well; they are the ones the asylee has sought shelter from in their country of resettlement. It at once affirms Christian difference from Muslim others, and further inscribes their connection to Western powers that recognize Middle Eastern Christian identity through the paradigm of persecution at the hands of the Muslim collective.

Bodily Hermeneutics

During the asylum process, applicants must affirm Christian difference from Muslim others in Egypt through recitation of sectarian incidents and performance of Coptic victimhood for a Western gaze. In the interview, the immigration officer incites the Coptic applicant to identify incidents, marks, and scars as evidence of the barbarity of their Muslim persecutors. The hermeneutics of the Coptic body has become woven into common sense legality, whereby the body must re-inscribe persecution; as a persecuted people, Coptic bodies must produce evidence of suffering. But, such hermeneutics also presupposes that what appears on the surface is not the entire truth. Through bureaucratic interpretation, "it converts absences into signs" (Asad 2007, 31).

Abanoub is a Coptic man in his early 30s, tall, with dark eyes. While staying with his mom and sister in Alexandria, Egypt in the summer of 2015, I heard about Abanoub's work in Algeria as an oil engineer. His mother would point to items in the house—this television, that top-of-the-line fan—and let me know that her son was taking care of her. By the time I started transnational fieldwork, Abanoub had been in the U.S. for a year or so, trying to forge a new path for himself outside of the grueling and lonely labor of the Algerian desert. Over a buffet meal in Belleville, New Jersey, we talked about his asylum application process. He has a large scar across his left cheek and some on his hands from his engineering work. During his interview, the immigration officer asked him to identify his scars as signifiers of persecution:

'Did you experience any physical harm ['atada' gasady/physical assault] from Muslims?' she asked. I told her, 'No.' [She replied] 'But I see you have marks on your face and hands.' I laughed, 'No, these are from car accidents [ḥawadith].' The only thing I said in my case was that I was nervous about what could happen in the coming period [in Egypt]; that the situation will not turn out well [al-wada' ma yba'sh cues].'

Many times, asylum officers will incite the applicant to conform their stories around particular definitions, such as genocide (Ordóñez 2008, 46). Abanoub's officer read his body, interpreting his scars to confirm legally legible and acceptable claims of conflict and persecution—of Muslim monsters and Christian victims. Yet, Abanoub tells her that the interpretation is incorrect; it is

more mundane, more ambiguous, and outside of the purview of asylum proceedings that perform the maintenance of acceptable narratives of proof.

Didier Fassin (2007) has argued that the great majority of persecution accounts are perceived as untrue, at least within the French asylum system. This has led asylum seekers, lawyers, and officers to look for new evidence of alleged persecutions on the body. Where testimony has proven insincere or simply not quite enough, the body has become the object of scrutiny in search for scars attesting to violence. While Copts are part of a persecuted group making it easier for them to apply and win asylum since the 2011 revolution, the applicant must still establish such suffering in their declaration. Because applications must fit the definitions of persecution established by law and interpreted as such by officers, the information therein must be set up to emphasize elements in people's accounts that make them eligible as asylum seekers. So, during the asylum interview, their approval or forwarding to trial is left up to the asylum officer's discretion. Applicants must fit the officer's understanding of persecution. In other words, to successfully be a victim of persecution, they have to remember a specific argumentation around Coptic identity, persecution, and violence in post-revolutionary Egypt, to make it intelligible to the asylum officer and not necessarily correct in terms of the applicant's personal experience. Abanoub's body became both the place of an inscription of power—as the site of persecution and an inscription of truth—insofar as the body bears witness to persecution for the U.S. asylum system (Fassin and d'Halluin 2005, 598).

While all asylum cases are predicated on some form of evidence—regarding credibility or countrywide conditions—legal procedures molded by newly accepted knowledge of Copts as a persecuted people have incited applicants to reinterpret intercommunal relations and translate interactions, relationships, and forms of violence and prejudice into essentially religious encounters; ones predicated upon a (persecuting) majority and a (persecuted) minority. This discursive form contradicts the politics of national unity within the Egyptian context, in which the Coptic Church, as a body of Coptic faithful, is an active part. National unity rhetoric understands sound Muslim-Christian relations in Egypt as an essential part of the national fabric. Advocates of this discourse deny the existence of a Coptic minority within Egyptian borders, conceiving of Copts as so fully and harmoniously integrated into Egyptian society as to be indistinguishable from Muslims (Sedra 1999, 221; ElSässer 2014). For the Coptic Church, the promotion of this rhetoric has meant the downplaying of sectarian violence and attacks against Coptic places of worship and Coptic bodies.

Since 2014, under al-Sisi, church bombings, shootings, and stabbings resulted in dozens of Coptic deaths. This has produced a structural problem for the alliance between the Coptic Church and the Egyptian state. As greater numbers of Copts have protested against Sisi's lack of protection for the community, the clerical hierarchy have found it more difficult to rally Copts across the Atlantic in support of the Egyptian president.[164] Each September since 2014, bishop after bishop has visited the New York-New Jersey area for circulations of *iftiqad*, or pastoral visitation, and to garner support for al-Sisi during his appearance at the United Nations General Assembly. In September of 2016, Pope Tawadros sent Anba Yu'anis, the bishop of Assiut, and Anba Bieman, the bishop of Naqada and Qus, to the New York-New Jersey area to gather Copts for the welcoming delegation of al-Sisi.

[164] Johannes Makar, "How Egypt's Copts Fell Out of Love with President Sisi," *Foreign Policy,* December 9, 2016, https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/12/09/how-egypts-copts-fell-out-of-love-with-president-sisi/.



Figure 28: Bus from Jersey City to carry Coptic and Muslim Egyptians into Manhattan during the UN General Assembly. September 2017. Photo by author.

On the first Thursday of their visit, the bishops attended the weekly Thursday meeting of Anba David, bishop of New York and New England, in Staten Island. Following the spiritual lecture, local Copts from Staten Island and the surrounding areas flooded the archdeacon collecting questions with their white pieces of paper to be delivered to the table where the three bishops sat. Anba Yu'anis opened up a piece of paper and read aloud the following question, "Why should Copts in the U.S. care about welcoming the Egyptian president?" After a short pause, the bishop looked up to the crowd and responded, "Don't forget the days of the Muslim Brotherhood [*matinsoosh ayam al-Ikhwan*]." He repeated this statement three separate times looking at each corner of the church. "We are living our best days [*eḥna na'eesh aḥsan ayamna*]. I've been the bishop of Assiut for two years now and I haven't dealt with a [sectarian] problem in those two years, and we're next to al-Minya...[*we* haven't dealt with a single problem] because we have strong relations with everyone. Listen, once there was an issue with a church in the diocese and the security [*al-amn*] wanted to close it. I spoke with the head of security [*mudariyat al-amn*] by telephone and we finished the problem in a minute and a half, and no one was harmed!"

Bishop Yu'anis references the personal relationship between the clerical hierarchy and the Egyptian security state to "finish problems" through individual contact. Under the al-Sisi regime, the Church-state relationship has been likened to the personal relationship between former Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser and Pope Kyrillos VI of the 1950s and 1960s. The relationship's pinnacle came with the consecration of the 'Abbasiyya Cathedral on June 25, 1968. This personal relationship was very important for the emergence of an informal entente between the church and the state, one that entailed the state offering the church leadership concessions in return for its political support. The concessions granted included approval of and financial support for the construction of St Mark's Cathedral. Nasser dispensed half a million pounds from the government's budget for the construction of the new cathedral and participated in its inaugural festivities. Because the security apparatus granted church-building permits, which were by no means easy to obtain, Nasser's intervention certainly facilitated the process. Moreover, because the patriarch was elevated to the position of the representative of the Copts,

he was granted important political concessions regarding Coptic representation in public life (Tadros 2009, 272). The Coptic Church became an essential part of the body of the nation.



Figure 29: (Left) Nasser and Kyrillos hand-in-hand. May 10, 1967. Wikimedia Commons. (Right) Sisi and Tawadros shaking hands during the Christmas liturgy. January 6, 2019. Photo by Mohamed el-Shahed / AFP.

On January 6, 2019, Sisi inaugurated a new cathedral in New Cairo, one that is said to be the largest Christian church in the Middle East. Commentators noted that the Nasser-Kyrillos covenant was renewed through a holding of hands, as Sisi called for national unity between Christians and Muslims, echoing the words often used by Nasser in his public speeches. Yet despite the Church's official statements praising the government for its protection, attacks and incidents of sectarian violence have continued. Lax security, a dearth of progress on church construction and permits, and violence against Copts and other minorities have led many in the community to criticize the Church's unwavering loyalty to the Egyptian president. However, the official stance of the Coptic Church has been one of support because symbolic gestures like the building of the cathedral and the attendance of al-Sisi at the yearly Christmas liturgy represent strong *institutional* relations between church and state. Bishop Yu'anis' emphasis on this during the meeting in Staten Island is indicative of this logic, and its transnational reach within the Coptic body.

Coptic diaspora comprehension of events on the ground in Egypt has mainly been left to the Church's political determination. In the circulations of bishops between Egypt and the United States for political meetings, medical treatment, and fundraising efforts, the Church's transnational institutional authority as administrative body and spiritual protector is solidified through their imposition on diaspora dioceses. But, beyond this, the Church's institutional stance

in Egypt has been perceived as a bulwark against further bloodshed[165]; bloodshed that many in the Coptic diaspora see as imbibed with spiritual affects.[166] From this perspective, the Church in Egypt, as spiritual mother, is both injured and strengthened through each attack because members of its kin are being killed, and bishops are the emissaries of such a body. This body is a spiritual one in the sense that the Church is the minister of the Body of Christ, and thus, the body makes decisions for the preservation of its parts, its people. But, as part of the Egyptian state, the contemporary Coptic Church also operates through the regulation of transnational religious life. Coptic religious life is not carved out and compartmentalized by rituals, education, and liturgy. Rather, Coptic religious life entails the totality of Coptic identity, which the Church has continued to define through its allegiance to the state.

Bureaucratic Measures

For asylum seekers that are not active in church life—whether that be liturgical or otherwise—obtaining proper documentation for their cases can prove a challenge. Despite migration, the transnational reach of the Coptic Orthodox Church continues to operate through the political and bureaucratic maintenance of its people. To prove the Christianity of the Copts, they must prove their *presence* in a local Coptic church by obtaining a certificate affirming their faith. During fieldwork, Copts noted that there was a fear of among priests that the person claiming to be a Copt before them was really a Muslim. One Copt recalled that a person who described themselves as a Christian approached the American Coptic Association (ACA) in Jersey City for a letter to prove their Christianity in their asylum case. After some initial conversations, it was revealed that the individual was a Muslim. Such stories of suspicion also have the possibility of adding to applicant difficulties in obtaining a letter from a local Coptic church affirming their Christianity, especially when they are not well-known in the community because of their employment schedules or deeper issues with clerical politics. The difficulty then, for any Coptic asylum seeker, is that they must look to the Church to authorize their Christian identity and guarantee their position within the Coptic group, a persecuted community in Egypt.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the Coptic revival movement in Egypt spatially reoriented communal life around the Church—from social gatherings to religious services, and even employment. The clericalization of the Coptic community bolstered the Coptic Orthodox Church as a state institution that represents *the* Coptic people (El-Khawaga 1997). The Egyptian state defines its citizens based on religious affiliation and regulates religion through bureaucratic agencies, administrative courts, and ecclesiastical institutions (Oraby 2018). These mechanisms set the terms of Coptic relationships to themselves, to the community, and to the state. The administrative significance of Coptic identity meant that its religious status would be subject to verification by the state. The linking of religion with citizenship was intended to ensure communal integrity and internal coherence. As Hussein Agrama has argued (2012), the state's power to determine religious and secular domains helps to "consolidate and expand the state's

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[165] Bård Kårtveit, "Are Copts at risk because of their Sisi support?" *The New Arab,* March 14, 2017, https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/comment/2017/3/14/are-copts-at-risk-because-of-their-sisi-support.

[166] Samuel Tadros, "The Continuing Tragedy of Egypt's Coptic Christians," *Washington Post,* May 30, 2017, https://www.hudson.org/research/13648-the-continuing-tragedy-of-egypt-s-coptic-christians. For Coptic dissent of this relationship, see "Coptic activists criticize church's support of Sisi's New York visit," *Mada Masr,* September 19, 2016, https://madamasr.com/en/2016/09/19/news/u/coptic-activists-criticize-churchs-support-of-sisis-new-york-visit/.

sovereign authority to decide what counts as religious and what scope it should have in social life" (73-4). In Egypt, bureaucratic agencies, administrative courts, and ecclesiastical institutions all affirm the state's sovereign authority to decide what qualifies as religion and the proper place of religion in public life (Oraby 2018). Egyptian identification cards label someone either Christian or Muslim, and that person is understood to be that wherever they go. Even in negated spaces like bars, sheesha cafes, and prisons, however, Copts are still Copts, despite the belief that such spaces separate one from God (Ibrahim 2019). Unorthodox spaces mark Coptic otherness in Egypt, and the Church disciplines its people into understanding such spaces as outside of *proper* Coptic identity.

Similarly, Coptic churches in the United States also regulate Coptic life, and particularly determine whether a Copt is able to claim asylum or not. While structurally similar to church-communal relations in Egypt, migrant Copts, in escaping the legal, social, and political constraints of the Coptic Orthodox Church's institutional force in Egypt, are pulled back into its authoritative structure, as they secure their documented livelihood—whether immigration status, job, or marriage—in the United States. This similar movement, transnationally, speaks to how the secular state and its institutions (whether Egypt or the United States) regulate religion in modern life, regardless of the degree to which certain countries are understood as improperly, or incompletely, secular (Agrama 2012; Mahmood 2015). Despite this formulation, secularism has a globally shared form of religious regulation, and the secular state has sovereign power to stipulate what religion is, assign its proper content, and disseminate related subjectivities (Asad 2011). While the state claims to maintain the separation of church and state, modern governmentality involves the state's intervention and regulation into many aspects of socio-religious and political life (Mahmood 2015, 4). The Coptic Church operates as an Egyptian state institution, transnationally. Its regulating authority follows Copts in migration.

The administrative power of this construction binds Copts outside of the geographical confines of Egypt to spaces, places, and identifications that are normative to religious authority and geopolitical interests. If the applicant's argumentation is not legible to the asylum officer's understanding of persecution, then the applicant is referred to trial. It is at the asylum trial where judges take up the mantle from asylum officers to give the final answer—if Coptic persecution is legible to them or not. In lines of questioning and legal deliberation, the Coptic body is bound by Coptic Christianity and Islamic persecution; identifying victims and monsters.

Trial Performance

Abanoub's trial took place on a Monday. Before the trial, Gabriel, Abanoub's attorney, and I met to discuss what to expect. "They might ask whether he [Abanoub] is really a Christian or not," Gabriel noted. Knowledge of faith would not evidence Abanoub's Christianity. There needed to be *proof*. During trial, the line of questioning would provide the evidence. Underlying such bureaucratic measures lies what Hussein Agrama (2014) terms "legalized suspicion." Suspicion of the applicant is directed toward their potential motives of material interest—that they are not "persecuted," but rather just want better economic opportunities in the U.S. As Agrama argues, in the context of the freedom of religious belief, it becomes imperative to determine whether act or expressions of belief are *genuinely* religiously motivated (2012, 305). Legalized suspicion presumes the power to probe and determine one's character. In defending persecution based on religious affiliation, a distinctive form of suspicion is performed during the trial.

Together, we sat in the waiting room mulling over potential questions from the government's attorney and the judge. "The main focus needs to be on issues of identity," Gabriel told me. During our rehearsal, the government's attorney came in to the waiting room; Gabriel recognized him. He approached us, and began fielding potential arguments he would make in the courtroom. "But the [Egyptian] government isn't doing anything about this?" he asked. After a short interaction with Gabriel on the question, he left the waiting room. "We might be in trouble if he wants to fight this," Gabriel said nervously. "If he pushes that the Egyptian government is doing things to prevent this persecution, then there couldn't be a totality of fear crippling the Copts."

As we entered the New York courtroom, Abanoub was visibly nervous. The past three years of waiting rested on this trial determining whether he would stay in the United States or leave back to Egypt; on whether he is persecuted or not. The judge entered the courtroom and asked the two sides if they would like to converse without her present before the proceedings began. They agreed. Gabriel turned to the government's attorney as the judge left the courtroom, "This is an easy case. It is based on a well-founded fear claim." The government attorney responded, "What has the [Egyptian] government response been?" "Their efforts have been ineffective," Gabriel answered. "Look at what recently happened in Helwan.[167] Videos have surfaced evidencing the complete lack of security around the parameter of the church complex."

The judge returned a few minutes later, and the trial began. Gabriel gestured to stacks of papers on his desk that contained a plethora of news items on violent attacks. "Would you like to hear from our expert witness?" he asked the judge. Gabriel's expert witness is Paul Marshall, one of the chief architects of the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) who helped galvanize American churches to get it passed in the U.S. Congress. Along with Nina Shea,[168] Marshall has been an "expert" on Christian persecution, especially in the Middle East.[169] Expertise within this policy community does matter. Not because a single expert on Christians in the Middle East helps shape a single policy response, but rather because of the collective power these experts wield in shaping and reshaping the "conventional wisdom" in D.C.—and through it the underlying assumptions, values, and ideas that then drive U.S. policy decisions (Razavi 2018) as well as shape common knowledge legality that determines asylum cases and guides judgments during trial.

Expertise demands a simplification of context, whereby violence at the level of persecution can be confirmed and translated through legal bureaucracy. Incidents presented as

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[167] Nine people were killed after an armed man opened fire on a Coptic Christian church and a nearby shop near Cairo in December 2017. The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant claimed responsibility for the attack. See the following: "Egypt's Coptic Christians targeted in deadly attacks," *Al-Jazeera*, December 29, 2017, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/12/casualties-feared-gunman-attacks-helwan-church-171229095924671.html.

[168] Shea's *In the Lion's Den: A Shocking Account of Persecution and Martyrdom of Christians* (1997) has been widely used in religious freedom policy circles in Washington D.C. Shea is also a Senior Fellow at the Hudson Institute, a conservative think tank in Washington D.C., and is the Director of the Center for Religious Freedom there. She is a regular at conferences on religious freedom and Christian persecution, and has spoken at a number of Coptic Solidarity meetings. Shea and Marshall's co-authored book is entitled, *Persecuted: The Global Assault on Christians* (2013).

[169] For more on Washington D.C. and the industry of expertise, see Negar Razavi, "The Systemic Problem of "Iran Expertise" in Washington," *Jadaliyya,* September 4, 2019, https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/39946.

evidence in interviews and at trial are surmised to constitute the danger each Copt faces in Egypt, regardless of class differences. Incidents in al-Minya or even the 21 martyrs of Libya, however, are class specific, meaning that those targeted were already some of the most vulnerable of society.[170] The Copts sitting in courtrooms and interviews for asylum throughout the U.S. are not of the same socioeconomic group as those experiencing the brunt of sectarian violence documented by Coptic organizations, NGOs, and international networks. If the Libya martyrs were still alive in Libya or their hometown of al-'Aur, they would not have the socioeconomic ability to travel to claim asylum in the United States on the basis of persecution. For many Copts who make it to the U.S. on tourist visas, who then claim asylum, their personal stories matter little. Instead, the stories of the 21 martyrs of Libya[171], the martyrs of Botrosiyya[172], of Tanta, of Alexandria[173] provide the evidence necessary to grant Copts in the U.S. asylum.

During Abanoub's trial, Marshall's services were not necessary, nor during any of the other trials I sat in on; his expert affidavit was sufficient. The judge rustled through the papers in the file noting, "I have no issue with country conditions." Gabriel began his line of questioning with Abanoub:

> *Gabriel: How famous is your name?*
> *Abanoub: It's a Christian name in Egypt.*
> *G: So, it reflects your identity? People would know you are Christian from your name?*
> *A: Yes.*
> *G: How else would they know you're a Christian?*
> *A: I have a cross tattoo on my right wrist [Abanoub holds up his tattoo for the court].*
> *G: When is the last time you attended church and why?*
> *A: Last week. For Christmas.*
> *G: What groups are specifically targeting the Copts?*
> *A: ISIS, the Muslim Brotherhood*
> *G: That's all. Thank you, Abanoub.*

Gabriel's line of questioning aims to mark Abanoub as a particular Christian subject. The name, tattoo, religious observance, and, most importantly, the perpetrators of violence against the Copts (Islamist organizations) all come to define Abanoub in U.S. asylum law, and contextualize him as a part of the Coptic community, a community defined as a "disadvantaged social group." They are brought forth as a collective community under persecution, and they are sutured, in their collective trauma, to Muslims, and are defined as objects of violent attack by Islamist organizations like ISIS and the Muslim Brotherhood. A Copt is not simply a Christian from

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[170] Nadia Ahmed, "Why Egyptians are risking their lives to work in Libya," *The Guardian (for Mada Masr)*, February 20, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/20/egyptians-risk-lives-work-libya.

[171] Philip Jenkins, "Christian martyrs in orange jumpsuits," *The Christian Century*, June 28, 2019, https://www.christiancentury.org/article/notes-global-church/christian-martyrs-orange-jumpsuits

[172] Declan Walsh and Noor Youssef, "ISIS Claims Responsibility for Egypt Church Bombing and Warns of More to Come," *New York Times*, December 13, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/13/world/middleeast/egypt-isis-bombing-coptic-christians.html

[173] Arwa Gaballa and Ahmed Tolba, "Palm Sunday bombings of Egyptian Coptic churches kill 44" *Reuters*, April 9, 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-egypt-violence/palm-sunday-bombings-of-egyptian-coptic-churches-kill-44-idUSKBN17B06U.

Egypt. They are a part of a broader community of persecuted peoples constructed by asylum officers, judges, persecution experts in Washington D.C., American politicians, and news media.

That day, Abanoub was granted asylum. Following the decision, I approached the bench to speak with the judge. "When did you start presiding over Coptic asylum cases?" I asked. "Since 2011, Coptic asylum cases have become pretty regular," she noted. "However, it's only been recent changes where most of the cases were decided based on well-founded fear claims. Prior to this, cases were based on a personal story." Coptic applicants have been interpellated into a group, not individuals, whereby the Coptic community has been constructed by and imagined through frames of persecution. No longer decided by personal stories of discrimination and violence, Copts rely on the stories of other Copts to frame their cases. Instead of actors in their own right, they are legally understood as symbols, metonyms of a persecuted people. Fleshy and descriptive markers bring together Copts, beyond class and regional divides, and the Church stands as the transnational, institutional gateway that authorizes their inclusion into the community.

I hitched a ride with Abanoub back home. Sitting in wintry traffic in one of the tunnels out of Manhattan, I jokingly asked him if it was difficult to answer questions related to Church attendance, knowing full-well his disinterest. He said, laughing, "I haven't been to Church in a while. I feel like everything is about politics. Nothing the Church does is for the people. The bishops all just show off for Sisi, and could care less about the people. That's why if I do go to Church, I'll go and stand in back and leave right after." Amidst the snow falling down around us as we sat in the car, Abanoub voiced his disagreement with the Church's political stances—its official support for Egyptian President al-Sisi and general denial of Coptic rights outside of the confines of church walls. Yet, it is a gateway institution, both in Egypt and now in the United States, whereby Abanoub networked to find housing, a job working at a gas station, and most importantly that letter *verifying* he was a Christian. He is at once tied to it by necessity, but also stands in opposition to its political practices. For many Copts in Egypt and in diaspora, the Church is an institution that has structured its politics in parallel with the authoritarian regimes of Egypt, in many ways mirroring their practices (Heo 2018, 14; 207-234). For asylum seekers like Abanoub, the Church authorizes and defines Coptic identity, even in diaspora.

Stories and Suspicion

I observed several other asylum trials, including some that lasted no more than a few minutes. "Much of this has nothing to do with the law," Gabriel would tell me. "And more to do with circumstance. Most cases are a sham." This is not to say that Coptic asylum cases are not merited, as many Copts do genuinely have concerns about returning to Egypt. Rather, Gabriel's description sheds light on the importance of performance, a legal game of truth telling, that determines those worthy of asylum and those who are not. Indeed, successful applicants are determined by their ability to navigate legal proceedings and language with the aid of a well-networked lawyer, who knows the judges and the government attorneys they will face at any given trial. Applicants who have the ability to seek out legal counsel that can manage and shape the state's representations of Coptic existence, cater to the political economy of suffering upon which their specific case is based, and contribute evidence to solidify common sense legality of a persecuted group are successful (Ordóñez 2008, 58).

During one trial, a judge stopped Gabriel's elaborations mid-sentence and said, "I know the Copts, I'm aware of what they have experienced over the past several years with increasing attacks from Islamist terrorists." Quick approval times have shocked other asylum seekers I came

into contact with in the courtroom waiting areas. After a rather speedy trial in New York, a Nepalese man who had been an asylee since 2010 waited for a decision in his brother's case, and said that he has "never seen anything like that"—that the speediness of Coptic asylum trials was jarring. The assuredness of Coptic asylum cases operates off of the argument that while there was no past persecution, there is a fear of future persecution. This gesture towards the future frees the Coptic asylum seeker from wading through the sludge of suspicion.

Proof of group membership and country conditions are all that seem to matter—in most cases. However, if past persecution does come up (if a Coptic applicant submits a declaration with a personal story or slips up during testimony), the government's ethos regarding such asylum claims becomes dominated by suspicion. People's case histories are questioned, facts are challenged, and evidence is disqualified. The story of the past must be verified by others. The value of the story is present in the documents of corroboration, which hold the legal value (Fassin 2005, 606). Filled with content to parse, Coptic trials are turned into interrogations, where legalized suspicion seeks to systematically determine ulterior motives from genuine intentions; to find out whether the applicant's motives are genuine and religiously motivated—that they are fleeing because they are Christians and not for material interest or worldly power, that they are not solely seeking economic opportunity in the United States.

In 2018, Monica was a woman in her mid-30s from Luxor, Upper Egypt. There, she worked as a nurse at a government hospital. In 2015, Monica traveled for the second time to the United States and filed for asylum. Her case bounced around between Vermont, Boston, and finally Newark, New Jersey, as she switched lawyers trying to find one best-suited to guarantee her approval. I sat in a private space in the waiting room area of the court with Monica's extended family—her brother who came to the US on the Green Card Lottery nearly two decades ago, her parents who came through the family reunification process, and her son, born in the United States. In cramped quarters, Gabriel told Monica he was not comfortable with her current case. Prior to Gabriel's representation, Monica filed for asylum and initially submitted a statement testifying to past persecution along with it. The original statement said that after exiting church following Palm Sunday liturgy, a boy on a motorcycle stole her purse, and she argued that he stole it because she was Christian. "This is not a reason for asylum," Gabriel told her. "There are so many holes in your story. How do you know he was a Muslim? Maybe he was just hungry!" Monica's mother interjected: "We know [*eḥna 'arifeen b-seraḥa*]."

Gabriel encouraged Monica to de-emphasize past persecution, and instead focus on a future fear or possibility of attack:

You want to say look, I'm a Christian. I'm willing to suffer discrimination to some extent, but look my family is here, my church is here, my community is here I have a lot of things to live for. I was very active in church. You can tell them it was a meaningful life. There are rich traditions, the community you're involved with there. You didn't actually want to come to America!...But at some point when your life really became not personally threatened, but when you felt like you couldn't walk the streets without being afraid, you couldn't go to church without being afraid, without fearing you could be blown up, that's it! I came. There was no specific event in other words that triggered your decision to leave. It was a cumulative effect of all of these attacks that were occurring on a week by week basis. It's very intimidating knowing ISIS, and what they represent and what they did in Syria and Iraq, [is] threatening the Christians in Egypt.

Similar to American fears of terror following September 11th, legal logics of persecution define possible events that may or may not happen. Fear of future persecution operates on the possible; it could happen *anywhere*. Yet, during her questioning, Monica not only pointed to incidents of personal attack because of her identity as a Christian, but specifically stated how her Christianity heightened sexual harassment; something she did not mention in her official declaration. Gabriel's initial line of questioning (abridged below) focused on identity, as Abanoub's case before:

Gabriel: You have a long name Monica Iriny Karas, is that correct?
Monica: Yes.
G: Is this name a Christian name?
M: Yes.
G: Do you have any symbols on your body that might reflect your identity as a Christian?
M: [Holds up right wrist] I have the cross on my hand. I've had it since I was a child.
G: When's the last time you went to church?
M: Today, for Jonah's fast.
G: Why did you leave Egypt in 2015?
M: Persecution; because there was no security, I was very scared of what was happening in Egypt ['ashan mkansh fi amn ana kunt khayfa gedan men eih illi byṣal fi masr]."
G: Can you be more specific?
M: Attacks, sexual harassment.
G: Who was perpetrating this persecution?
M: Muslims.
G: All Muslims?
M: The Muslim Brotherhood, the extremists [al-muta'sibeen].
G: Are there any other extremist groups that would target Christians?
M: ISIS
G: How do you know all this information?
M: From the news.
G: Were you ever targeted in Egypt?
M: Yes.
G: How?
M: Not bodily, but psychologically.
G: What kind of psychological abuse?
M: Persecution [iṭihad]; the feeling that you're persecuted just because you are Christian.

After Gabriel's questioning, the government focused their intervention on Monica's testimony of sexual harassment as a form of persecution. The indication of past experience with such persecution was the main route of suspicion.

Government: Was your husband aware of the persecution or harassment you experienced, as outlined in your written statement?
Gabriel: Objection. The respondent testified that she feared persecution, not that she is a victim of persecution.

Government: You testified that in Egypt you suffered psychological harm and abuse. Since being in the U.S., have you sought any counseling?

Government: Can you explain what you meant by sexual harassment in your statement?
Monica: We would be walking on the street and people on motorcycles would come by grab my hair or hit my back.
G: How many times did this happen?
M: Many times.
G: Is this the only type of thing that happened?
M: No, also cursing.
G: Let's stick with the touching first. You were harassed physically by having your hair pulled, is that correct?
And that happened often?
Did you ever need medical attention?
Did you ever go to the police for help?
How long did this harassment last?
How many times were you harassed physically?
More than 10, more than 20?
Did your husband or sister witness any of these incidents?
Why didn't you talk about this type of harassment in your asylum claim?

Monica: Because I thought when I'm talking about persecution, you understand that it's happening to all of the Christians; that's what's happening to all of the Christian girls.
Government: I understand that, but you were asked if you ever experienced physical harm and the statement I have says you haven't, but you just testified that you were physically pushed and your hair was pulled. So, how come you didn't mention any of those things in your statement?
M: I mentioned a few things to my lawyer. I mentioned that someone stole my purse from me, this was one of the incidents I considered to be persecution because I was exiting my church at the time.
G: We're talking about the things that happened to you. You just testified to me that you actually had your hair pulled, you were actually pushed from behind on many occasions.
G: How come we don't have that listed in support of your application?
M: The basis of my case is persecution. It is known everywhere; those details are known everywhere. This is how Christians in Egypt are persecuted.
G: I understand that, but you just mentioned things that specifically happened to you.
Ma'am, you also testified that you were verbally harassed.
Were you specifically verbally harassed?
Can I have some examples?
M: Yes, I would walk on the street, and people would say infidel [kafra] and Christian [nasraniya]
G: You're testifying that this is Muslims threatening the Christians?
M: Yes.

The judge interjects:

Judge: What I'm trying to understand ma'am, is that all of the Coptic Christians in Egypt—to the extremist groups, ISIS, the Muslim Brotherhood, and others—do they discriminate in their killing between men and women?
M: They kill the Christians.
J: So, it doesn't matter, right? They're both infidels in their eyes.
M: Yes.

J: When did you begin having the fear you claim you have now? When did that fear begin in Egypt?
M: Since the explosions, the attacks, and the persecution started, when Morsi was deposed from power. The Brotherhood felt that the cause was because of Christians.
J: When you came in 2012, did you have this same fear?
M: When Sisi promised we would have safety and stability, I had hope, but these were empty promises.

At issue for the judge and the American government was the lack of signed affidavits attesting to Monica's claims under oath, and the fact that Monica had visited the U.S. in 2012, yet did not claim asylum then. While Gabriel hoped the case would solely focus on fear of future persecution, Monica described the cases of physical and psychological intimidation she experienced back in Luxor, Upper Egypt—whether that be work discrimination or social intimidation, like men shouting inflammatory words at her on the street. Because of her description of such incidents, the government's lawyer seized the opportunity to scrutinize them and evaluate them under normal asylum proceedings—to assume suspicion rather than truth.

Gabriel: We appreciate the court's offer to give us time to obtain the affidavits, and we will certainly take that opportunity, if that will satisfy the court and the government. Our theory of this was that this case should be predicated primarily, if not exclusively, on a future fear of persecution. Although the respondent used the term persecution to describe her experiences, it appeared later that what she had meant by that was more along the lines of discrimination.

[During the proceedings, Monica mentioned a lack of promotions at work and Muslim patients preferring a Muslim over a Christian.]

Judge: Even though the respondent used the word persecution based on questioning by the government and by the court it was clear that was not persecution the way we understand it. But it was certainly discrimination, harassment. This is the type of case where I believe country conditions speak for themselves. Country conditions are also fairly fluid. There was also a shift in country conditions, categorized as a worsening of conditions between her two trips (2012-2015), which troubles the court as to why she didn't seek asylum in 2012, but there was the whole election, Morsi's deposal, the coming of Sisi etc. There was a change in country conditions. Nonetheless, I do think it's important for her to corroborate her claims to the extent that it is possible.

The court adjourned for a master calendar at a later date. Outside of the courtroom, Gabriel explained how the debate between himself, the government's lawyer, and the judge was centered around legal logics of truthfulness—of the correct deployment of the state's representations of

Coptic existence and suffering rather than a "correct description" of the personal story of the applicant. Success revolves around the elimination of legalized suspicion and the accurate navigation of particular words and concepts. In the lobby of the courthouse following the trial, Gabriel was frustrated with the deviation from pattern and practice to past persecution corroboration.

Gabriel: These letters are total nonsense because there is nothing to corroborate. The judge wants to grant this case; he just needs to sound like he's doing his duty. He's basically giving you an opportunity to corroborate with these letters that explain they pulled your hair, to corroborate what you testified too. Once he gets his pound of flesh, he's going to grant this case. He knows about the problems in Egypt you're facing. He knows there has been an increase in violence against Christians. This case was not based on past persecution until you started talking about it. If you stuck to the script—it's just verbal, it's just verbal—there would be nothing to corroborate. The judge is going to look at these letters. Say thank you. 99% he just going to say 'okay see I made her squirm, I made her cry, I got my star.' Then he's just going to grant it. He didn't want to hear from [the expert witness] Dr. Paul Marshall and that's the key. He knows the country conditions.

Suspicion around Monica's testimony—her lack of understanding in the legal difference between discrimination and persecution—is not simply an ahistorical phenomenon. The decline of asylum as a legitimate category justifying the protection of the international community has been a result of an increasing logic of xenophobic suspicion (Fassin 2007, 306).

In the French case, the asylum figures of the 1970s—the exiled Chilean or communities from Vietnam—rapidly deteriorated as asylum seekers increasingly came mainly from sub-Saharan Africa, Kurds, Afghanis, Kosovars. Similar to France, in the U.S., feelings of solidarity and compassion gave way to suspicion often mixed with racial prejudices. Although the majority of refugees live in Asia and Africa, asylum became the central issue in European, and more recently American, debates on the presence of refugees and the possibilities of threat to demographic or economic equilibrium. The obsession with the false refugee haunted institutions in charge of managing asylum. The narrative, which until then had been the cornerstone of proof, no longer sufficed. Physical and psychological marks began to be sought to uphold declarations of abuse. In one of the last interviews he gave before his death, Michel Foucault insisted on how much the "ethos" of a time articulates "games of power" and "games of truth" (Foucault 1997; as cited in Fassin 2007, 325). Through the intersection of practices of the self and technologies of power, Foucault asks: how are free individuals constructed through these technologies of power, and how do they play truth games? How do asylum applicants navigate a system, a game if you will, that rewards them based on familiarity with legal bureaucracy and its inner workings? In the case of Coptic asylum seekers since the 2011 Egyptian revolution, the game of power and truth has been centered on the shift in legal legibility—from Copts as a discriminated people to Copts as a persecuted people, which has dually effected the everyday understanding of Coptic life and intercommunal conflict both in Egypt and in the United States.

Anthropologist Liisa Malkki has argued that the technologies of controlling the movement of people into the wealthy North are driven to an extraordinary degree by the search for "impostors," "fakers," "inauthentic refugees," in order not to be "tricked" (2007, 342). This begs a difficult question: Who, then, might be classified as "the fakers"? Those working on behalf of asylum seekers might understandably be reluctant to even raise this question; but it is

useful to think about it critically. Gabriel described such technologies of power and games of knowledge through the metaphor of the "pound of flesh," as a legal rationality whereby the applicant much exhibit mastery of the game that rewards correct navigation.[174] Each Coptic asylum seeker must show their cross tattoo, produce the letter from a clerical official "proving" their religious affiliation (despite the fact that they might not even be consistent church goers), or affirm their second class, persecuted status in Egypt. In cases like Monica's that oscillated between country conditions and the "story," asylum seekers must perform worry on their faces, and in some case tears, to prove their worthiness; they must show their sincerity to ward off suspicion of motives of material interest or worldly power. They must prove in every case their belonging to the persecuted body. *That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*[175] Coptic asylum seekers are granted for their weakness, and in their success, they are strong.

Transnational discourses of persecution have become central nodes of contemporary Coptic identity. Asylum cases since the Arab Spring have legally sutured persecution to Coptic legal status in the United States. Yet, as Gabriel mentioned, the poorest of the poor Copts are not the ones applying for asylum. Asylum has been reserved for those who are financially capable**.** Those that face incredible poverty and differential treatment based on religious identity—from attacks to murder[176]—are not the ones capable of travel to the U.S., like Abanoub, Andrew, and Monica. Instead, Western rationalities of persecution have incited Copts in diaspora—for means of legal immigration or political advocacy—to particular narratives of their dispossession, displacement, and suffering. This is not to say that such narratives are not genuinely felt and experienced; but the ways they are scaled up in the service of empire and are mediated by imperial formations of power, this is of particular concern. The increased number of Copts who applied for asylum after the Arab Spring have effected new separations between Christians and Muslims in contemporary Egypt and have aided in the policy-oriented knowledge production on Middle Eastern Christians that help to mold the criteria of interpretation for conflict. These mechanisms of power have placed Copts back in Egypt into precarious circumstances.

During British colonial rule, Copts and other Christian minorities (of elite socioeconomic status) were segregated, privileged, and elevated at the expense of their Muslim counterparts. By the influence of colonial and Western missionary projects, communities were categorized and separated on the basis of religion. The persistence of these colonial borders and divisions has led to permanent difficulties for Christians like the Copts in Egypt. Copts are stuck in the postcolonial allegiance to a nationalist vision of community, whereby diversion from such a vision (of bringing grievances to the majority) is translated as a neo-imperial threat. Thus, advocacy in the Coptic diaspora—free from the everyday constrains of interaction, conflict, and cooperation—places Coptic communities in Egypt into precarious circumstances. Egyptian Copts must pledge allegiance to the nation, and also answer to queries of loyalty given the

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[174] This phrase is originally taken from William Shakespeare's play, *Merchant of Venice*. The pound of flesh infers a lawful, but unreasonable recompense; it also entails vengeful behavior by the demand of flesh.

[175] 2 Corinthians 12:10.

[176] For example, the al-Minya governorate is one of the poorest in Egypt, where many attacks have happened. See "EIPR warns of increasing sectarian attacks in Minya governorate and urges state institutions to enforce the law and initiate social dialogue on the church construction law," *Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights,* July 18, 2016, https://eipr.org/en/press/2016/07/77-incidents-sectarian-violence-and-tension-minya-governorate-january-25-2011

specters of imperial referees who mediate proper forms of community, deprioritize local forms of knowledge, and standardize value systems of their own making. Although, in spite of these binds of power, there still remains forms of friendship, relationality, and ambiguity between Christians and Muslims in Egypt that defy the neat logics of empire, be they articulated through the U.S. asylum system, or by Washington D.C. experts and policymakers.

"Here in our village, they know us"

Since 2015, Copts in Egypt began telling me that the U.S. embassy in Cairo was denying their applications for tourist visas because they were Christians. Even for temporary trips, Copts regardless of region or class were being denied. In 2017, I met with an embassy official affiliated with non-immigrant and immigrant visas, and asked about this accusation. "How can I frame this without getting in trouble?" they responded. "We take everything into account during our decision-making process, which includes the personal condition of the applicant, as well as the social and political conditions in the place they are applying from. I think that's all I can say on that." The official's response indicated that they were in fact taking the increased numbers of asylum cases in the U.S. into account in the decision-making process. "We are in communication with DHS. If they tell us, 'hey, we've seen an increased number of asylum cases among this group of people,' we're going to respond." During the conversation, another official chimed in, "If a young man comes to me, I see he doesn't have a job, but has a brother who lives in Revere, Massachusetts, I'm going to have to deny him because of the possibility that he would stay in the U.S. There's too great of a risk." While the number of Egyptian asylees has increased between 2016 and 2018,[177] there is no ethnographic indication that the U.S. embassy in Cairo has lessened their denials of temporary travel.

The politics of asylum in the United States are marked by class difference, and privilege one narrative of the Coptic experience in Egypt—of Christian victims and Muslim monsters. While conflict and violence characterize some intercommunal experiences, everyday life is much more ambiguous. One of the main issues in Coptic asylum cases following the Arab Spring is the shift to the legal determination of persecution as "country-wide." Shifting away from local dynamics in such logic cements a kind of deterritorialization from the space of human relations. The lines between the "realistic" and the fictional landscapes depicted are blurred; so, the further away audiences are from the direct experiences of local life, the more likely they are to construct "worlds" of persecution (Appadurai 1990, 299). By shifting away from local dynamics, the nuance and ambiguity of intercommunal relations is lost in a geopolitical sea of war, violence, and conflict by which the United States has significant material and cultural investment in maintaining. The local dynamics in a place like Bahjura offer a different way to consider the legal rigidity of asylum determinations in the U.S., which re-inscribe passive victimhood onto Coptic identity.

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On a hot June morning, myself, Youssef, and Gregory made our way from Bahjura into Naj Hammadi. Gregory is Youssef's brother-in-law, and the two are particularly close; sharing in the trade of local black honey. The transition between Bahjura and Naj Hammadi is a gradual one. After you drive over the canal, you encounter sugarcane agricultural lands to your right and the small marketplace to your left. Driving, the town starts to take shape with newer buildings

[177] "Refugees and Asylees 2018," https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/immigration-statistics/yearbook/2018/refugees_asylees_2018.pdf.

and even government-commissioned artistry (at the entrance to Naj Hammadi, there is a tiled depiction of Upper Egyptian men playing musical instruments). We entered March 30th street, the main street of Naj Hammadi, and parked the car in front of a gold shop, owned by one of Youssef's brothers. I sat down on a tattered black leather chair lining the wall of the shop. After drinking the required Pepsi of hospitality, two women entered in niqab from a neighboring village. They were carrying twins. The sisters wanted to sell some of their gold and get the twins' ears pierced. Youssef would tell me after they left that they were from a nearby village where a feud between two families of villagers had intensified as of late. However, he emphasized that the violence was only between the villagers themselves: "If I came to the village looking for a particular person from one of the families, and I asked a member of the opposing family for directions, not knowing of the feud, any villager would lead me directly to the person I requested without harm."

Youssef, a Copt, explained that there was a difference between the internal relations of a village—of conflict and cooperation—and those from outside of the village, even if they were Christians like himself. Youssef explained that issues between Muslims and Christians do not lie in matters of theology, but rather, are dependent upon the interactions, comradery, and the strength of communication [*tabadūl*] between Muslims and Christians in any given locale. Youssef clarified further saying that, for example, in Bahjura there are many Christian farmers who hire Muslim workers, and since they are giving them a salary, there are really no issues because there is *tabadūl*. Shared life produces an ethical thematization of difference (Mahmood 2015, 213).

After the gold shop, we traveled to the Bahjura hamlet of 'Ezbet Kamal for a lunch of hawawshi[178], rice, and baked chicken with Youssef's extended family. Youssef's mother, Vivian, a widow in her early 40s, spoke of the al-Minya bus attack that took place earlier that week. "The terrorists came from (neighboring) Qena, not Libya. They were helped by the neighboring Arab tribes, because those tribes want the land of the monastery. When you ride the metro in Cairo, you take the women's car, don't you? But even [Muslim] women will harm you, even in the most ordinary of times. These terrorists are from this country itself. They live among us [*ya'ishu ḥowalna*]." Her daughter, Rola, sat next to her, and nodded in agreement. But Vivian was also quick to dismiss the idea that all incidents and negative interactions that occur between Muslims and Christians are "sectarian" in nature.

When speaking about the kidnapping of youth in Bahjura and Naj Hammadi, especially after the 2011 revolution, Vivian noted that these were not sectarian acts. "They kidnap anyone that may be rich. That is why they kidnapped the children of some rich Coptic families here, not because they're Coptic. If they were kidnapping all Copts, no matter what their class, then it would be a sectarian matter, but they are not." Vivian's older brother, Karas, interjected: "You know, it was (poor) Copts who directed those Muslim thieves to the rich Copts." Vivian replied: "The economy is the reason for all of this nonsense [*al-iqtiṣad howa al-sabeb kol al-bilawa di*]."

I asked Vivian and Karas about relations with their Muslim neighbors in Bahjura. "They know their limits with us," Vivian replied. "But, if we left Bahjura for another area, people would question who we were and where we came from. Here in our village, they know us." Shared life in the village produces bonds of friendship and familiarity that build forms of social responsibility to the other. Sectarian difference does manifests itself within Bahjura—in spatial

[178] Hawawshi is an Egyptian dish, which consists of a pita stuffed with minced meat and spiced with onions, pepper, and parsley.

separations between Christian and Muslim neighborhoods and the boundaries of relationality and sexual separation (to avoid intercommunal, romantic entanglements).[179] Yet, there are Christian-Muslim social bonds that exceed the rigidity of American legal frameworks. Such frameworks foreclose other possibilities and lived relations within everyday Bahjura and throughout Egypt. While in some cases, such bonds burst into conflict; in the most mundane ways, they also offer comradery in economic and social hardship, and intimacy with Bahjura's dirt roads, the local corner store, the gold shop, and the sunset over the agricultural fields.



Figure 30: 'Ezbet Kamal at dusk. May 2017. Photo by author.

[179] Mahmood 2015, Chapter 3.

Chapter 4
Empire of Blood

One winter afternoon Romany Melek Hetta, a Coptic Christian asylum seeker, visited the Museum of the Bible in Washington, DC.[180] Waiting for a friend from the local Coptic Orthodox Church to arrive, he sat on a bench on the museum premises, whereupon a woman and man from the managerial staff of the museum approached and began questioning him. Romany grew uncomfortable, ended the conversation, and entered the museum without his friend. A while later, security officers approached Romany and directed him into a private room. The managerial staff and security officers began interrogating him about his friend, why he had not come, and who he was. The museum eventually advised the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) that Romany was a possible terrorist and security threat, and opened a counterterrorism investigation into him. To preserve his asylum claim, he agreed to an interview with the FBI to clear his name. During the interview, Romany was informed that the museum believed him to be a possible security threat in part because he used both legal surnames (Hetta and Melek)—a usage, they claimed, was particularly common among Muslim terrorists.[181] Romany filed a lawsuit against the Museum of the Bible in early 2019 on the grounds that it had spuriously caused his personal information to be entered into FBI counter-terrorism files. In a subsequent interview on the case, Romany lamented that the museum staff would "never be able to comprehend there is a Christian person who doesn't look like them."[182]

Over the past three decades, Copts have been increasingly made legible to American (particularly evangelical) audiences through the moral imaginary of the "Persecuted Church," a theological trope used to designate what contemporary evangelicals take to be a global phenomenon (Castelli 2005). Once the objects of American missionary efforts in colonial Egypt, Copts have now been reimagined as Americans' Christian kin in their suffering for Christ. In post-9/11 America, the Persecuted Church model has connected global Christian communities despite their theological differences, building on various (Western) ecumenical efforts of the twentieth century.

This moral imaginary has flourished within the context of longstanding Orientalist and current War on Terror logics representing the Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim (Naber 2008) as dangerous and Other. While Christian conservatives and U.S. politicians have embraced Middle Eastern Christians as exemplary victims of Islamic terrorism and intolerance, such communities are also targeted by post-9/11 racial infrastructures that do not differentiate between Copt and Muslim, such as Romany Melek Hetta (Rana 2016). In this chapter, I attend to two different, but related tasks. First, I illustrate how Copts have contended with War on Terror racial-religious power structures. Many Middle Eastern Christians have had to renegotiate their communal identity within American society (Hanoosh 2019; Naber and Stiffler 2013). While such communities have their own specific histories in Muslim-majority societies, the political

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[180] The Museum of the Bible was founded and funded by Hobby Lobby CEO Steve Green. The Green family are prominent American evangelicals.

[181] The narrative is based on Romany Erian Melek Hetta, Plaintiff v. Museum of the Bible, Inc., Jane Doe, John Does A and B, and Officer Does 1 and 2. This particular description on the part of the plaintiff's attorneys is noted on pages 2, 3, and 5.

[182] "A Middle Eastern Man Is Suing the Bible Museum for Racial Profiling and Reporting Him to the FBI," *Buzzfeed News*, January 18, 2019, https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/dominicholden/bible-museum-lawsuit-racial-profiling-fbi.

imaginary of these communities in the US has become saturated with American depictions of Islam and Christianity. To examine the specificity of the Coptic case vis-à-vis other Middle Eastern Christian communities in the U.S., then, my second task is to locate how Copts, as part of a transnational diaspora, engage whiteness as a pervasive logic that reorders how they imagine Islam and experience Egypt, the homeland, differently.

By studying Coptic experiences of racialization in post-9/11 America, we can better understand how the pervasive logics of whiteness alter everyday interactions and reinterpret histories of trauma through new contexts of empire expansion (Rana 2019; Beliso-De Jesús 2015). As Arab American studies has shown, some Middle Eastern communities have benefited from the privileges of whiteness (Abdulrahim 2008). Yet, in the wake of various U.S. military incursions in the region throughout the 1990s and especially after September 11th, 2001, the whiteness of Middle Eastern communities has become variegated. White supremacy and imperial power structure Middle Eastern diasporic life by rewarding the suppression of emblems of Islam and Arab-ness, even when one cannot phenotypically pass as white (Naber 2014). Such disciplining of Middle Eastern personhood is a key strategy of empire and whiteness.

Scholars of the earliest Middle Eastern migrations to the US have examined how legal cases for naturalization of Middle Eastern Christian communities tended to stress their Christianity and its proximity to whiteness and the West (Gualtieri 2009; Majaj 2000). In similar fashion to those early 20th-century debates, Copts in the aftermath of 9/11 have emphasized their religious and ethnic difference from their Muslim counterparts in order to assert their Christian affinity to white American society.

In contemporary Egypt, to be sure, there is a history of solidarity, friendship, and comradery with their Muslim neighbors that is effaced by discourses internal to Egypt and within the contemporary context of the War on Terror. Yet as Coptic Christians have been systemically discriminated against and have experienced violence at the hands of the Egyptian state, Islamist groups, and their Muslim neighbors, such targeted violence and persecution have influenced Coptic-Muslim practices of separation and distance (Galal 2012; Jeong Ha 2015). How Copts engage Islam in Egypt is important for Copts in the U.S. because it informs their collective identity and defines the politics of Christian-Muslim mediation there and beyond (Heo 2018). Such contemporary Egyptian contexts of sectarianism and histories of persecution also color how Copts in the U.S. relate to American Muslims. Yet, Copts are also directly interpellated into the landscapes of U.S. empire and global Islamophobia propagated by Western powers. These landscapes have shaped the self-understanding of Copts in the U.S. and the field of social and political action within which they operate.

Deborah Thomas and M. Kamari Clarke (2013, 319) have asked anthropologists to consider the vexed relationships between race and globalization today and how power and global subject-making can provide a lens into how inequality works in our contemporary world. The global expansion of the Persecuted Church discourse and geopolitical attention to the survival of Christianity in the Middle East has reconfigured Coptic subjectivity, while still diverting attention from how Coptic racial difference configures into the "persisting and unfolding violences of everyday life" (Beliso-De Jesús and Pierre 2019). Although 9/11 and the War on Terror have placed communities like the Copts in precarious positions, new racial-religious kinship ties have been forged between Copts and Western Christians that restructure colonial legacies of racial-religious superiority. Where once Coptic Orthodoxy was viewed as backward, superstitious and irrational (Sedra 2011), the Copts of late have been championed as "preservers" of the Christian faith in the face of Western Christianity's decline.

The Geopolitics of Christian Kinship

The Coptic Orthodox Church has long constituted itself as a church of martyrs, perpetuating its authority vis-à-vis their sacrifice in a lineage that extends from the time of the Roman Empire (Papaconstantinou 2006). The blood that constitutes the authoritative power of the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt and around the world is reimagined within new itineraries of global Christianity, whereby blood has engendered different forms of Christian kinship across denominational lines.

The Persecuted Church, a theo-political discourse fashioned by evangelicals, posits Christians in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East as exemplary martyrs of the faith, reconfiguring global Christian kinship according to a broader pattern of violence. While American evangelicals have had religio-political interests in the Middle East since at least the era of nineteenth-century missions (Sharkey 2008), new opportunities for connection and conversion presented themselves at the end of the Cold War, when evangelical leaders began to remap their vision of a Christian internationalism (McAlister 2019).

The rise of conservativism to the American political spotlight in the 1980s coincided with U.S. wars and emerging geopolitical interests in the Middle East (McAlister 2018). Thus, throughout the 1990s, former Cold War think tanks like the Hudson Institute, Freedom House, and the Institute for Religion and Democracy partnered with evangelicals in shifting from the fight against godless Communism towards the fight against fundamentalist Islam. As this constellation of forces developed over the past three decades, Copts have emerged as offering a striking portfolio of imagery, which at the same time reinforces the persecution discourse as a central theo-political analytic and differently configures racial formation for a global Christianity.

As Sylvia Chan-Malik has argued, Islam as merely a "racial" form is insufficient to capture the complexities of anti-Muslim sentiment that have become part and parcel of US political discourse. Describing Islam in the US as a "racial-religious form" better accounts for the intersections of racial configurations and religious beliefs and practices (Chan-Malik 2018). I understand the persecuted body as a new racial-religious form of global Christianity, which marks Christians as under global siege. Yet despite the traction of this theo-political formation in the U.S., Copts face discrimination because of their racial difference from white America. Thus, War on Terror logics of securitization result in a complex double movement of abjection and esteem, racializing Copts as "Muslim" (or Muslim-adjacent) while at the same time reifying their deaths according to the trajectories of Christian martyrdom.

"We had the wrong complexion"

After 9/11, anti-Muslim assaults and intimidation rose significantly in the US, with the number of hate crimes jumping from 28 incidents in 2000 to 481 by the end of 2001.[183] Islamophobia and anti-Muslim rhetoric affected not only Muslim Americans but also Sikhs, non-Muslim Arabs, or people of South Asian descent (Puar 2007). One of the early victims of this violence was the Egyptian-born Coptic Christian Adel Karas, who was shot dead by two white

[183] Katayoun Kishi, "Assaults Against Muslims in U.S. Surpass 2001 Level," *Pew Research*, November 15, 2017, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/11/15/assaults-against-muslims-in-u-s-surpass-2001-level/.

males inside his grocery store in San Gabriel, California on September 15, 2001.[184] Scholars have argued that the racialization of Muslims in post-9/11 America has meant that certain bodies have been made "suspicious" (Selod 2018). Copts have been included among these suspicious bodies, and many have tried to combat such suspicion through emphasizing their Christian faith, one particular strategy that Middle Eastern Christians have deployed to assert a claim of racial-religious misrecognition.

On a cold winter evening in Staten Island, I sat across from Abouna Girgis in the kitchen of the administrative center of the local Coptic diocese. In his late thirties and recently elevated to the priesthood, Abouna grew up in Bayonne, New Jersey, and has strong ties to his clergy-filled family back in Luxor, Upper Egypt, visiting them regularly. We talked about protests that had stalled zoning board approval of Bayonne's first mosque. (The same zoning board approved the expansion of a Coptic church in 2011.) After purchasing the property in 2015, the local Muslim community's proposal was denied by the zoning board in early 2017, citing traffic and parking issues. The property was protested and even vandalized, with crude phrases such as "F--- Muslims" and "F--- Arabs," in the name of Donald Trump, then-Republican nominee for president.

Bayonne is a working-class neighborhood, where historically many Italian, Polish, and Irish immigrant communities took up residence. More recently, Bayonne has become home to many Middle Eastern communities, including and especially Egyptians, both Muslim and Coptic Christian. When he was growing up, though, Abouna's family was one of a few Middle Eastern families. "You could tell, even at that age, that people weren't used to your complexion. They weren't comfortable with having people of your complexion around," he said. Now, the community has two Coptic Orthodox churches, and is expanding with a new influx of Coptic immigrants from Egypt. Though the community also faces its own share of discrimination, Copts joined in the protests against the Bayonne mosque. Protestors held signs that said, "Stop the mosque!" "If the mosque comes, the mayor goes!" "No mosque, remember 9/11!" I asked Abouna Girgis what he thought about the protests in his hometown. "Look," he answered, "if you're Coptic you're going to protest Islam. When you've seen and gone through the harassment, the persecution in Egypt and everything, can you blame them?" Such Coptic protest against mosques and their engagement in Islamophobic rhetoric are practices that aim to secure their recognition as Christians and also reflect communal trauma manifesting itself in diaspora.

For example, Copts continue to deal with issues of Church construction and repair in Egypt (Rowe 2007). Despite recent government efforts to streamline the process, Christians still face both official and social restrictions on building their houses of worship: officials are slow to issue permits, security agencies fail to protect churches from attack, and violence from Muslim neighbors has succeeded in preventing church construction in communities throughout Egypt.[185] These difficulties continue to affect this transnational diaspora in their everyday interactions with Egyptian Muslims in New Jersey. In early 2017, I sat in a packed room of parents and general congregation in Jersey City. Abouna Lazarus was explaining a multimillion dollar new church project. The current church building, unchanged since the 1970s, was far too small for the influx of immigrants from Egypt and the growth of the second generation. With a map of the area on the television next to an icon of Christ, Abouna outlined how much of the land has already been

[184] Joe Mozingo, "Slain Egyptian Was a Fixture in San Gabriel," *LA Times*, September 19, 2001, http://articles.latimes.com/2001/sep/19/local/me-47275.

[185] Ishak Ibrahim, "The Reality of Church Construction in Egypt." *TIMEP,* June 27, 2019, https://timep.org/commentary/analysis/the-reality-of-church-construction-in-egypt/.

purchased. However, there was a stumbling-block: a key piece of land was yet to be purchased for the property because it was owned by a "non-Christian, but Egyptian man" [*howa gheyr mesiḥee bas masry*]. "I won't say more than this" [*mish ha'ool aktar men keda*]. Abouna smiled; I also saw recognition on the faces of congregants as to what this actually meant. I asked the priest later to clarify this exchange. "He simply will not sell this to us. What would that look like? A Muslim Egyptian selling a piece of land in the United States for the purpose of building a church? How would this news be received in Egypt by Muslims there?" Egyptian sectarian politics are thus transposed onto a diaspora context where they remain integral to understanding Coptic positionality in the U.S. Equally important are the new challenges Copts have faced as a Middle Eastern community and how their Christian difference matters within this diaspora context.

Abouna Girgis and I continued our conversation. Abouna recounted how he and a group of friends had stopped at a local 7-11 on the evening of September 11, 2001. While there, he began to be heckled by a group of men (whom he took to be "Hispanic") who hurled insults at him. "We had the wrong complexion," he recounted. "They said to us 'You f'in terrorists. Look what you did. We're going to get you!'...[After 9/11], you felt like you were a target and it wasn't your fault." A local priest in the days following 9/11 even went under house arrest because of his supposed resemblance to Osama bin Laden, another Coptic interlocutor recounted. After 9/11, Copts changed their attire to sartorially distance themselves from Arabs/Muslims. Coptic clergy in New Jersey noted that Pope Shenouda III, the late Patriarch of the Coptic Orthodox Church, allowed priests to wear a wooden cross similar to Catholic clergy and to trim their beards, in the hopes that they would not be the targets of backlash or hate crimes after 9/11. In Los Angeles, Metropolitan Serapion has since 9/11 allowed clergy to forego their traditional head covering [*'amma*]—an informal requirement throughout the Coptic Church—because "they look like Islamic turbans." Coptic religious practices (such as priestly garb) are reformed in diaspora to reconcile with post-9/11 racial infrastructures that code such aesthetics as threatening.

The power of whiteness is structured in and through such disciplinary measures and everyday relations, and the transformation of Coptic religious and social life in the US points to the power of (Western) Christianity (Du Bois 1920, 36). Copts are Christians yet they must contend with and be transformed by a dominant and globalized form of Christianity, one that is intertwined within the power and privilege of whiteness. Such racial distinctions have never been tethered to a defined set of categories, whereby avoiding detection in those categories (name, dress, language) would somehow help to avoid the white gaze. Thinking with Barbara and Karen Fields' notion of "racecraft," the racialization of Coptic Christians in American society is pieced together in the ordinary and extraordinary course of everyday doing. Racecraft governs racial imagination—"what goes with what and whom"—and guides imagination and human action (Fields and Fields 2012, 25). Thus, the "deference and dominance" of racial distinctions lies in the dense set of prior representations and practices on which they build—the Muslim, the undocumented, the immigrant, the Jew, Black—their histories interweaving with one another. The shifting gaze of racecraft in the US can be traced in the ways racialization of different groups circuits and overlaps.

Especially after 9/11, many Copts were identified by law enforcement as potential threats. Magdy Beshara was the Coptic owner of the St. George's Shell Gas Station in Bayville, New Jersey. Shortly after 9/11, the FBI came to the family's home in the middle of the night, questioning Magdy as to whether Marwan al-Shehhi, one of the 9/11 hijackers, had worked at

the gas station. His step-son Michael[186] described the aftermath of the initial FBI raid: "People would drive by and say 'we're going to kill you terrorists' and throw a big liquor bottle at me and my sister." Under the PATRIOT Act, the government confiscated anything they desired from the gas station and their home. Their mail was opened, phones tapped, and Michael was followed to school by federal agents. The family faced death threats. Despite pleas to the police to intervene, they refused. Michael described how the incident forced him to differentiate. "It made me feel weird to say out loud, but I always thought to myself, 'I'm not a Muslim, I'm a Christian.' I felt like I was putting them down to say, 'Hey, look, I'm the good guy.' I felt like we had to do anything to defend ourselves." At school, Michael was bullied and physically assaulted on dozens of occasions. At one point in the months following the raid, an unknown assailant set the family's house on fire while Michael and his little sister were sleeping. All of this took place even after the FBI notified Magdy Beshara that he was no longer a subject of investigation.[187]

Junaid Rana has argued that racial infrastructure by means of cultural and institutional forms of discrimination interact with one another in a complex social system of racialization (2016, 119). Yet, the process of racialization is never complete; identifying who is the "Muslim" is part of the apparatus of racialization. As Magdy Beshara noted during an interview after the FBI raid of his gas station, "Middle Eastern people, we all look alike, you know what I mean."

An important element in the contemporary racialization of Muslims is the historical context by which Islam was understood as a theological and civilizational enemy of the Christian West. Tomaz Mastnak (2002) has argued that the Crusades represented an entirely new strategy of power in Christendom, a means of building new relations among Christians by directing outward a holy war against a contaminating enemy, an unclean race. Mastnak and others have pointed to the theological conceptions of race that circulated centuries prior to the emergence of bio-political racism (Feldman and Medovoi 2016). In close proximity to Egyptian Muslims and deemed theologically heretical by both the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox churches, Copts occupy a liminal space of difference within difference. Their theological and racial difference from the West has placed them into similar matrices of subjugation as with other non-Christian peoples; yet, their new enmeshments with Western geopolitical imaginations of Christian persecution have positioned them as kin in the fight against Islamic terrorism. Within the colonial context of Egypt, Copts also had a complicated relationship to the British regime. Racial science in colonial Egypt set out to distinguish Copts from their Muslim neighbors, based on a shared Christian kinship, while at the same time denigrating the Copts for not being of an "enlightened" form of Christianity. The imagined, civilizational divide between a homogeneous Christian West and a Muslim East upended itself in the paradoxical logics of Coptic comprehension.

Colonial Remnants

Sitting in a Manhattan café, Nessim, a Coptic interlocutor, and I chatted about the study of Copts over tea. "The enemies of Edward Said are the heroes of the Copts," he said. Nessim lauded the Orientalists of colonial Egypt for their accomplishments for the Coptic community.

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[186] This is a pseudonym.

[187] Michael Winerip, "Our Towns; A Terrorist at the Shell Station? No, but That Goatee Looks Suspicious," *The New York Times,* September 30 2001, https://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/30/nyregion/our-towns-a-terrorist-at-the-shell-station-no-but-that-goatee-looks-suspicious.html

Coptologist Gaston Maspero is noted as being partly (if not wholly) responsible for persuading Copts that they are "descendants of the Pharaohs" and, most importantly, that they are "racially pure" (Carter 1968, 96). In Maspero's assertion that the blood line of the Copts has remained pure from the time of the Pharaohs (Carter 1968, 119n38), the Copts secured their place in the Egyptian nation. Many Coptic intellectuals, politicians, and prominent laymen embraced this narrative of their timeless uniqueness and integral role in shaping Egyptian national identity. Maspero also suggested that Egyptian Muslim populations were racially intermixed with Arabs but largely descended from Coptic Christians who had converted to Islam. "Egyptian Muslims, then, were a substandard Copt" (Carter 1968, 119n38).

Nessim continued: "If you're trying to be a part of something, and you're a Copt, you sort of stepped over back to ancient Egypt because that was something to be proud of and the Europeans recognized it. There was always a European standard that you lived up to. So, a lot of these Copts made the connection, not with Coptic culture—which they knew was inferior—but to the ancient Egyptian culture. But to do that, they needed to claim pure descent, and it fit neatly into the European attitude that Muslims were part of degenerate races, and only the pure Egyptians, these were the ones that were really a good race. All of these colonial thinkers understood the ancient Egyptians as comparable to the West. So, if you [as a Copt] can claim yourself to be ethnically pure [Egyptian], you place yourself on the Western scope and you bypass all that sort of mess."[188] European recognition of the Copts, so long as they were the pure descendants of the ancient Egyptians, meant that they had to distinguish themselves from Muslims and Islam, using the criteria and rhetoric provided by the colonial thinkers and rulers.

Colonial regimes of racial-religious distinction were not limited to Muslim-Christian divisions. Copts were also distinguished by their lack of progress toward enlightenment because they were not the "correct" kind of Christian. The way to achieve true modernity—as defined by notions of organization, education, social consciousness, hygiene—was to adopt certain aesthetics, practices, and manners that indexed them as indistinguishable from Europeans (Deeb

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[188] In similar ways, French missionaries used Ibn Khaldun to remind the Berbers of their purported Christianity before the Arabs; emphasizing that St. Augustine was Berber. See Ramzi Rouighi, *Inventing the Berbers: History and Ideology in the Maghrib* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019). The colonial gaze also had a strong impact upon ideas of Ancient Greece, civilizational superiority, and racial purity. For example, the discipline of Classics (and specifically the Aryan Model for "Ancient Greece") has provided support for the notion of Europe possessing a categorical superiority over all other continents, which in turn justified imperialism and colonialism. See Sevasti Trubeta, *Physical Anthropology, Race and Eugenics in Greece (1880s-1970s)* (Leiden: Brill, 2013); Martin Bernal, "The image of Ancient Greece as a tool for colonialism and European hegemony," in *Social Constructions of the Past: Representation as Power*, eds. George C. Bond and Angela Gilliam (London: Routledge, 1994). For the contemporary impacts of this colonial knowledge on Greek nationalism, see Rodanthi Tzanelli, "'Not My Flag!' Citizenship and nationhood in the margins of Europe (Greece, October 2000/2003)," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 29, no.1 (2007): 27-49. Michael Herzfeld (2002) provides the most striking impact of the colonial takeover of *ancient* Greece for European world hegemony: "Greece tout court is almost always automatically assumed to be ancient Greece; the modern country, even in its own travel brochures, yields to the commanding presence of a high antiquity created in the crucible of late-eighteenth-century Aryanism—that same tradition of cultural eugenics that bred the Nazis' 'race science' and, at least in one controversial but persuasive historiographic reading, occluded both Semitic and Egyptian ('African') contributions to European culture" (900).

2006, 19). Islam and non-Western forms of Christianity have, in different iterations through passing epochs, taken on various vocabularies of the backward and irrational. In the U.S., Copts integrate these colonial logics of inferiority and collective memory of sectarian violence within new contexts of Islamophobia and Protestant supremacy.

Second and third-generation Coptic-Americans, for example, voice their concerns about "Egyptian culture" interfering with the progression of Coptic identity. In a Staten Island Italian bakery, Phoebe and I were discussing the generational differences plaguing the community, especially after the influx of Coptic migrants from Upper Egypt since 2011. Many Copts born and raised in the area have felt sidelined by the needs of new immigrants and complain that the latter's cultural mores negatively affect church life. These new immigrants bring with them the values which first and second-generation Copts attempted to peel away long ago, as they assimilated into whiteness. This Muslim/Arab influence, they argue, continues to affect the community. Phoebe affirmed: "I don't adhere to the Egyptian mindset. The Coptic heritage bears far more on my identity than the Egyptian part. The Egyptian part is something you shouldn't be proud of, not in that it's bad, but…there's a lot of influence that's not Christian…but I would never say I wasn't Egyptian, I would never say I'm American." "So, you don't consider yourself to be an American?" I asked. "No," Phoebe responded. "Because I think growing up solely in the Egyptian community, it's hard to identify as American. But do I identify with the mindset and the culture? Probably not. So, it's like a limbo state. And I think there's a lot more people that say 'the Egyptian part is whatever, but I love the faith.' Because when you look at the richness and the depth of our faith, it's hard not to appreciate the Church, and how incredible it is. And a lot of the time, our faith contradicts our culture." Phoebe did not mention Islam or Arabs once in this conversation. Yet here the phrase "Egyptian mentality," as juxtaposed with the Christian faith, signals a complex opposition that does not need to name what is being referenced. The need to distance oneself from the "Egyptian mentality" relates to the idea that within that shared geography, Copts must work hard to culturally separate themselves in diaspora—whether it be by emphasizing their Christian faith, eliminating Arabic from worship, or forging new kinship relations that extend beyond geographical ties.

Emerging out of Orientalist literature and colonial governance, "Muslim" countries were constructed as a geography that shared a common culture. In both *Mummies and Moslems* (1875) and *In the Levant* (1877), American writer Charles Dudley Warner differentiates "civilization" from "barbarism" or "savagery," always keyed to whiteness and its Others. In his writings on Egypt and the Levant, he describes a meeting with a certain European traveler in Cairo. "We were civilized beings, met by chance in a barbarous place" (Jacobson 1999, 145). Copts are from this "barbarous" geography, but they are Christians. Could they be considered proper Christians? As Barbara Fields (1990) has pointed out, the division of peoples into Christian and heathen prior to the rise of modern racial science did not mean that all Christians were equal. In British-occupied Ireland and in the American colonies, for instance, religious and racial systems of domination overlapped and interpenetrated. This logic operated in its own particular way in colonial Egypt among the Copts.

In *Modern Egypt* (1908), Evelyn Baring, Earl of Cromer, describes Copts and Muslims in Egypt as the same, but different. Both Muslims and Copts have remained "stagnant." Yet Muslims are stagnant *because* they are Muslims, "because the customs which are interwoven with his religion, forbid him to change" (202). Copts are stagnant due both to their improper Christianity and because they are "Orientals," residing in a geography that prevents their progress because of its association with Islam. If they can refine their Christianity—make it

modern and rational—they may be able to secure their path toward progress; yet they are still "arrested by barriers very similar to those which have applied in the case of the Moslem" (203). Baring continues: "The Copt…has, without knowing it, assimilated himself to the Moslem. 'The modern Copt has become from head to foot, in manners, language, and spirit, a Moslem, however unwilling he may be to recognize the fact.'…For all purposes of broad generalization, the only difference between the Copt and the Moslem is that the former is an Egyptian who worships in a Christian church, whilst the latter is an Egyptian who worships in a Mohammedan mosque" (203, 204-205). This complex structure of proximity and difference, articulated by Baring in an earlier colonial context, continues to affect Copts today in the U.S. as they navigate new networks of binding racial-religious power.

Enmeshments of Religion and Race

Scholars of Islamophobia have pointed out that the post-9/11 era of the targeted profiling, racialization, and securitization of American Muslims only intensified and renewed what was already part of a long history of anti-black racism, anti-Semitism, and xenophobia in the US (Abdul Khabeer 2016). Measures of securitization such as the PATRIOT Act, the Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) program, and the NYPD Muslim Surveillance program signal a scalar shift in the targeting of racialized communities. The global reach of the post-9/11 racial system is embedded within histories of Western conquest and imperialism that gesture to a politics of race and racism in tandem with and also beyond the black-white binary. Arab Americans are caught within a paradox: they are both religiously and ethnically heterogeneous, yet in the US they have historically been made to fit within the black-white color line. Middle Eastern Christian communities like the Copts contend with their racial difference, yet are aligned in their religious affiliation with the majority of Americans. Studies of whiteness have documented how different European immigrant groups gained (and intermittently lost) white racial status (Brodkin 1998; Haney-Lopez 1996). Yet such studies have themselves most often operated on a black-white dualism, and rarely address the limits of such a binary (Maghbouleh 2017) and how Christianity configures into racial difference.

In the contemporary racialization of Arabs and Muslims in the U.S., religion, national origin, and color articulate into complex subject formations that determine and differentiate the citizen and the terrorist (Howell and Shyrock 2003). The "Muslim" is not simply a marker of faith, but rather a racialized designation (Maira 2009; Razack 2008). As a racial-religious form (Chan-Malik 2018), the Muslim is known through specifically racialized bodies, religious behaviors, and the amalgamation of many other attributes that go beyond phenotypical or sartorial markers. The "Muslim" is not a definitive racial-religious form, but rather must be understood through the racializing conditions that catch different groups into this racial net. Racial conceptions and structural conditions order such lives and delimit their human possibilities, placing such persons between the exclusionary conditions of a racial-religious form like the "Muslim" and the psychological and cultural strategies employed by racialized subjects to accommodate themselves to everyday indignities (Du Bois 1903). Caught in the web of this racial-religious form, Copts attempt to reconcile communal histories of persecution by Islamic regimes and everyday Egyptian Muslims, and colonial legacies with diasporic racial infrastructures that present new challenges to Coptic identity.

One evening before a spiritual meeting, I met with a Coptic priest in a rural area of middle New Jersey. A new property had been purchased by the congregation, but the church had yet to be built. We sat in what appeared to be the old office of a two-story home, used

temporarily as the liturgical space. Abouna is quite active on Facebook, and had recently shared articles on President Trump's comments that Haiti and African nations (including Egypt) were "shithole" countries. Looking through the comments on the shared article, I noticed that many Copts voiced their support for Trump. I asked Abouna why many Copts expressed such views despite their Egyptian origins and kinship. "They support those comments," he explained, "because when they support them, they are essentially saying 'shithole' refers to Islam, not to them."

The work of differentiation done by Copts gestures towards the power of whiteness to mold sensibilities, relationships, and practices. Under U.S. legal precedent, Middle Eastern peoples are considered "white." Sarah Gualtieri has examined how the first wave of (primarily Christian) Syrian immigrants to the U.S. chose to stake their claim to citizenship on the basis of membership in the "white race" because "there was something compelling, even alluring, about whiteness that went beyond the strategic and the practical" (2009, 31). Gualtieri carefully attends to the logics of the new Syrian identity in American society, constructed around striving toward white acceptance. Their arguments were focused on Syrian connections to Christianity, in order to reconsider racial difference along religious lines.

Following *Dow v. United States* (1915), which defined Syrians as white, in 1925, in *United States v. Cartozian*, anthropologist Franz Boas testified that Armenians like defendant Tatos O. Cartozian were white because of their "European origin." The judge combined Boas' testimony with his own argumentation to rule on the division between Armenians and Turks. Ultimately emphasizing Armenian proximity to Europe and their Christian background, he ruled that they could be considered white (Gualtieri 2009, 49). In 1942, a judge in Detroit determined that a Muslim, Yemeni immigrant could not be. The judge noted: "Apart from the dark skin of the Arabs, it is well known that they are a part of the Mohammedan world and that a wide gulf separates their culture from that of the predominantly Christian peoples of Europe" (48). In fall 1943, Arab Muslims were deemed "white" by the Immigration and Naturalization Service, effectively casting them as partners with their Christian counterparts in the project of Western civilization; in their deeming as white, however, their religious identity was necessarily effaced. As Gualtieri writes, "Whereas the Christian identity of Syrian applicants in the racial prerequisite cases had been central to their argument for whiteness, and had indeed helped them secure it, Muslim Arabs were at their whitest when stripped of their religious affiliation" (51). Race and religion were closely tied together in the legal accession to whiteness for such Middle Eastern communities.

The histories of other Middle Eastern Christians are relevant to contemporary discussions of Coptic identity in the U.S. Within many naturalization cases that legally defined whiteness, the Christianity of such peoples was crucial to the logics of their belonging within American society. The Christianity of Middle Eastern Christians matters in different ways today, as their persecution is made visible by imagery, discourse, and policymaking efforts on their behalf. In everyday interactions, Copts emphasize their distinctiveness from "Arabs"—understood as an ethno-racial, but also religious identity in an America where Arab and Muslim continue to be intrinsically linked.

Strategies of separation evidence Coptic desire to disentangle from post 9/11 racial infrastructures—to not be identified as the enemy. But, they also show how pervasive logics of whiteness work within marginalized communities, as they interweave with transnational histories of persecution and intercommunal violence. One interlocutor recounted how members of his New Jersey church told him he "looked Muslim" because of his beard. While members of this

church are enmeshed in War on Terror logics of "Muslimness" in the U.S., the same comment was made to him by a monk visiting from Egypt. The symbolism of a beard in the U.S. is different from a beard in Egypt. In Egypt, the beard has variously symbolized Islamist politics that have been perceived by Copts to have negatively impacted upon their communities.[189] Particular fear among Copts has been directed toward the Muslim Brotherhood. Since the early twentieth century, the Muslim Brotherhood has been a major figure of Islamist opposition to the Egyptian state. During the 1970s, Islamists became the ire of more secular Muslims, and were feared by Copts due to an increasing number of violent attacks. Over the past thirty years, the securitization and militarization of the Egyptian state has been constructed under the banner of fighting Islamic terrorism. The Mubarak regime and now the Sisi regime have deployed anti-Islamist rhetoric and charges of "terrorism" as a means to suppress all forms of political dissent. With the events of 9/11 and the War on Terror, Egyptian security state tactics have been rendered as a service to its prime geopolitical patron, the United States (Mahmood 2015, 85). The Coptic Church has supported such regimes in the fight against Islamists, backing the 2013 coup and Sisi for the presidency in 2014 and 2018, as Coptic communities bore the violent brunt of post-revolutionary politics (Tadros 2013). Coptic fear of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt manifests itself in transnational contexts and among different generations.

In March 2017, I drove back to Jersey City from Manhattan with Marie, Carol, and Justina, three Coptic women in their 20s. Carol asked me about my research, particularly on Coptic sheesha bars and street vendors. Speaking about the recent influx of immigrants, I mentioned that many of them work for Muslim street vendors in Manhattan. Justina became agitated: "That just doesn't make sense to me. I thought all of the vendors were MB [Muslim Brotherhood]." Carol replied, "Okay, so that means the MB wouldn't hire them? How does that make any sense?" Justina: "Why would they hire Christians? Why would they want them to succeed? Giving these Copts jobs means you're helping their future. Why would they want that?" Carol refused Justina's argumentation as she continued: "Have you heard of the 100-year plan? That's the MB's plan to become the demographic majority. They're already on course to be the world's largest religion because they have more babies." While the fear of the Muslim Brotherhood's takeover of America has roots in Egypt, the particular rhetoric used by Justina on secretive plans and demographics, and the conflation of Islamists with all Muslims, are widely used among the far-right in the United States.

While Copts across generations are primed for such arguments from the Egyptian context, their manifestation in the United States is configured by domestic politics of Islamophobia and their export at a global scale. Fady, a Coptic rights activist in his mid-70s, came to the US in 1969. Today, he is part of a broad network of Christian (mainly white) conservative activists aiming to demonstrate that "the fundamental teachings of Islam are incompatible with the Christian faith and the American way of life." At his home, Fady gave me copies of his books he writes under a more "Muslim-sounding" pseudonym. Inside one of the books, it reads: "Dedication: To my precious grandchildren: It is my prayer that you will never have to go through what I once did in my Islamic mother country; may you never have to flee America because it turned to Islam." The texts express his fear of America's conversion to Islam, a need to uphold traditional Judeo-Christian values, and arguments for Islam's inherent irrationality. Fady told me he does this work because he feels guilty for leaving Egypt: "Forty

[189] For more on beards and the Egyptian context, see Walter Armburst, "Media Review: *al-Da'iyya* (The Preacher)," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 82, no.3 (2014): 841-856.

years ago, in Egypt, you couldn't tell the difference between a Christian and a Muslim; now all women are wearing hijab. The Islamization of Egypt is the culprit. I mean they were Muslims back then, but they have become Islamicized now."

In contrast to Fady's polemical writings on Islam, his own migration memoir describes a number of incidents of Muslim friendship which defined his upbringing. In one memory, he speaks about his Arabic teacher, Mr. Mohammed. "Mr. Mohammed was more than just a teacher, as he also supervised the class, paying attention to ethics and religion without any biases." One day, a fellow Muslim student made a joke mocking Christianity to the dismay of Fady and his Coptic classmates. The teacher proceeded to corporally punish the Muslim student, which Fady tried to fend off. The teacher insisted on giving the Muslim student a punishment. "That was the first time I ever heard of justice's rights in Egypt," Fady writes. "Never again did I hear about 'Madam Justice,' and I don't know if she has left the country or passed away." While much discussion on Copts in the West centers around their persecution, Christian-Muslim life in contemporary Egypt is also centered on pedagogies of negotiation and ambiguity. Broader geopolitical discourses that bind the Copts into particular frameworks fail to encompass the fullness of transnational Coptic life.

This chapter thus far has traced multiple discourses—the trope of the Persecuted Church; the effects of racialization; the hierarchies of colonial Egypt; the histories of race and religion in America—which together locate Coptic communities in the U.S. In this final section, I focus on the contemporary politics of Copts in America. American evangelicals, members of the Republican party, and, most recently, Eastern Orthodox leaders have forged new solidarities with the Coptic and other Middle Eastern Christian communities. The geopolitics of this new ecumenism has far-reaching consequences for Copts, as well as for the further entrenchment of global Islamophobia.

Icons of Suffering

Pope Tawadros, patriarch of the Coptic Orthodox Church, has repeatedly stated publicly that Copts are not persecuted in Egypt. Within the framework of national unity, the Coptic Church has promoted Muslim-Christian coexistence as the essence of Egyptian national identity. Admitting otherwise is thought by members of the clerical hierarchy and the Egyptian Coptic elite to threaten public order and disrupt the national fabric (Van Der Vliet 2010). The Pope has recently emphasized national unity and discarded narratives of persecution in Arabic interviews[190] and at public appearances even in the United States. During his first visit as Pope to the New York-New Jersey area in September 2018, he spoke at Rutgers University's Athletic Center to hundreds of Copts.

Joined by New Jersey politicians and clergy, Pope Tawadros finished the evening with a speech in English: "Since Islam entered [Egypt], we have always lived peacefully together—Muslims and Christians…Now, the population of Copts in Egypt is 15 million. We live among 85 million Egyptian Muslims. But all Egyptians are one. We consider our Church to be a keeper of national unity of Egypt. This is very important in the Middle East. At the same time, the evacuation of Christians from the Middle East is very serious for the whole world. Evacuation of Christians from Iraq and Syria is very dangerous to the peace process in the Middle East. Therefore, we [the Coptic Church] are a strong keeper of the national unity in Egypt. There is a

[190] See "*ḥowar ma'a Al-Baba Tawadros al-Thani* [In conversation with Pope Tawadros II]" *France 24,* October 13, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VxSeNhXkgXE.

strong relationship between the Church in Egypt, the president, the government, the parliament, with [] al-Azhar, with all churches."[191]

Only minutes before the Pope's speech, however, U.S. Representative Chris Smith of New Jersey's 4th District spoke directly to the Pope and discussed in explicit detail Coptic persecution in Egypt. Reading from his prepared speech, he proclaimed:

> *Thank you, Your Holiness, for radiating the love, compassion, and mercy of Jesus Christ…Like so many people around the world, I am especially inspired by your courage and the bravery of your clergy and laity in the midst of persecution and terrorism…Your Holiness, over the years I've chaired many congressional hearings on the plight of the Coptic Church and the indomitable spirit that you and others in this great church have shown…As the prime sponsor of the Frank Wolf International Religious Freedom Act*[192]*, a law that empowers the President of the United States, the Department of State and Defense and other agencies with new tools including sanctions against individual abuses and a fresh mandate, a strategy to confront and combat religious persecution, I am confident that we together are going to more than ever stop religious persecution…You yourself, Your Holiness have written regarding President Al-Sisi and I quote in part, 'He is working hard to ensure that Christians get all of their rights as Egyptian citizens. Coptic Christians have always been excluded from the Egyptian equation, but President Sisi is working towards changing this.'…I say to all of you. Working towards changing 'this' means that we have to do all that is humanly possible to realize that dream.*

Sharing in a new kind of Christian kinship, U.S. politicians interface with U.S. Coptic leaders and the Patriarch himself and connect histories of Muslim-Christian violence in Egypt with the global War on Terror and a geopolitical theology of persecution. This kinship of blood gathers around the blood of the persecuted. The geopolitics of persecution has brought together Christian leaders—from Pope Francis to Russian Patriarch Kirill to Franklin Graham—in a collective defense of global Christians. Traversing theological and political divides, American evangelicals and Orthodox churches have come together with conservative politicians around the globe to fight the new ideological Cold War, of which the images of bloodied Coptic bodies are a part.

I was a participant in the third international conference, held at the Trump hotel in 2017 in Washington, D.C., of the Archon Conference on Religious Freedom. The Archons of the Ecumenical Patriarchate are a society of laity, chosen by the Patriarch of Constantinople for their

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[191] See "*Laqa'a qadasat al-Baba Tawadros al-thani b-shabab New Jersey* [The Meeting of Pope Tawadros II with New Jersey Youth]." *CYC,* October 1, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dBUP2CVIvwE&t=146s.

[192] This Act amends the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA) to protect theistic and non-theistic beliefs and provides greater detail and specificity to IRFA's provisions. For more on this, see Tom Strode, "Congrats, Frank Wolf: Obama Approves Expansion of International Religious Freedom Act," *Christianity Today,* December 16, 2016, https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2016/december/congrats-frank-wolf-obama-expansion-irfa-religious-freedom.html.

service to the Greek Orthodox Church and for their respect within the community. Titled "The Persecution of Christians in the Holy Lands & The Middle East: Consequences and Solutions," the conference's schedule was theologically eclectic, its speakers comprised of politicians of evangelical backgrounds, Greek Orthodox influencers, and Syriac and Coptic clergy.

At registration, I received a tote filled with the typical conference materials, including a folder, schedule, notepad, and engraved pen. The tote also contained the book *Muslim: What You Need to Know About the World's Fastest Growing Religion* by conference presenter Hank Hanegraaff, formerly known as the Bible Answer Man and evangelical who gained fame through his radio show and his numerous publications on Christianity and American culture. While the book is concerned with the rising global demographic divide between Muslims and Christians, it is equally concerned with connecting global processes and contexts, forming them into an all-encompassing narrative of Islam and terror: "Equally grave is the specter of global Islamic jihadism now exacting mass genocide on Christians in the East and ever-multiplying terrorist attacks throughout the West."

Hanegraaff's book and its message for such a conference stand at the crossroads of the defense of Western civilization and the offensive on brown and black bodies in the War on Terror. In this imaginary, Islam as a system of governance stands as an affront to Western political, social, and spiritual values. By deploying Copts and other Middle Eastern Christians as exemplary victims of such a system, the audience of evangelical and Greek Orthodox elites (an otherwise unlikely alliance) instrumentalized their victimhood.

Session Two, entitled "Persecution of Christians and Possible Solutions," took place at the auditorium on Capitol Hill. The auditorium was dark, except for bright lights focused on a large stage projection of the 21 Libya Martyrs of the Coptic Church, darkened to black and white, lined up on their knees in front of images of masked members of ISIS standing ominously behind them. Following opening remarks, clerical leaders from various Middle Eastern churches gave speeches regarding their positions on persecution and the duty of the West to intervene.

Metropolitan Angelos of the United Kingdom spoke on behalf of the Coptic Orthodox Church. In comparison to Pope Tawadros, Bishop Angelos has explicitly described the persecution of Copts, appearing on the BBC and numerous other outlets following attacks in Egypt. During the panel, he commented: "We come at a time when there are 200-500 million Christians persecuted around the world. In scores of countries…they are suffering at a time when we as humanity are in an era of our development that prides itself in international treaties, international conventions and a right to life…The Christians of whom we speak are those that deny and reject minority status, for they are indigenous people. If what is happening in the Middle East were to happen to the indigenous people of America or Canada or the aborigines of Australia, the world would be up in arms. They live the faith that was born in the region." Against the backdrop of the Libya martyrs on their knees, the bishop described how he was compelled by the image to mark his own body: "The 21 martyrs of Libya have changed the world. Typically, the Copts have a cross tattoo on their inner right wrist. Just as a sign of who they are. I grew up in Australia. I didn't have one, I didn't see the need. But when I watch this video and the…man in the middle having to mask his face so we would not know who pointed that knife and said, 'we are after the nation of the cross.' I felt a need to get a cross for them. We hear the stories of the saints and the martyrs in our church every day. Another bombing, another martyr, another saint, it's still happening. It happened on our screens. We saw it before us…"

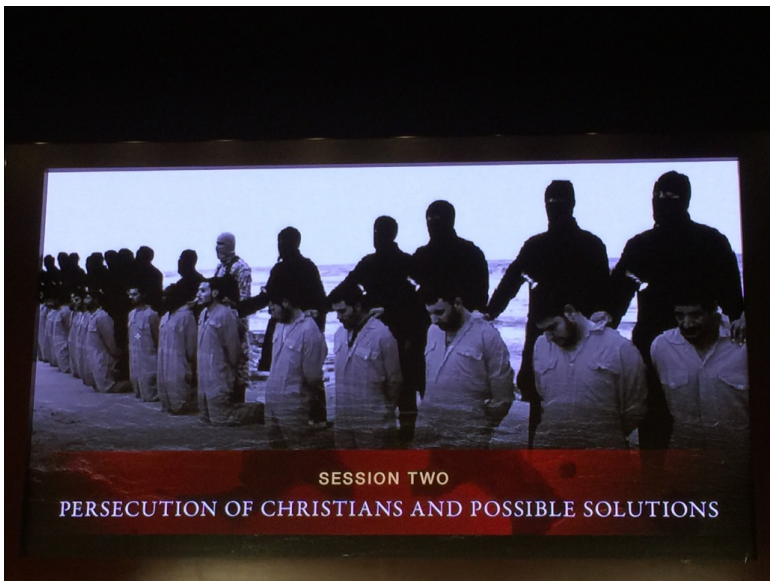


Figure 31: Photo by author.

During the conference, American politicians (both evangelical and Greek Orthodox) and religious leaders, Copts included, constructed a global vision of Christianity united through persecution. Images of bloodied Christian martyrs and their hagiographic accounts of witness to Christ are circulated in what I term an "economy of blood", their circulation serving to consolidate the coherence of this discourse. To become politically relevant to policymakers and agenda setters, Christian suffering is made visible by mainstream news media, religious leaders, Christian NGOs, and social media networks. While Coptic networks may also share such images, the economy of blood I am defining is particular to a Western imaginary that depicts the East as violent and Islam as monstrous (Arjana 2015). Bombings, blood, massacres, and beheadings—images of the dead and destruction are curated by these networks for the purposes of incitement to political action, and in some cases to war.[193] In this circulation, the spectacle of the persecuted body is mobilized as both an affective and effective pledge of solidarity, of commitment to the agenda to fight against the Muslim masses. Copts and other Middle Eastern Christians contribute to this economy through the testimonials of their dead and injured. But they also form its primary commodity.

In a ballroom at the Trump Hotel just down the street from the White House itself, President Trump's closest associates were the keynote speakers and key figures of the conference dinner. The first remarks came from Jordan Sekulow, executive director for the American Center for Law and Justice (ACLJ). His father, Jay Sekulow, is a frequent commentator on the Christian Broadcasting Network and on Fox News, and is also one of Trump's personal lawyers. Jordan, Jay's son, remarked on the persecution of Christians around the world, but especially in the Middle East, as an *American* problem. By looking to the faith and tragic circumstances of Middle Eastern Christians, America should be inspired to carry the imperial light of religious freedom to all corners of the globe. Sekulow proclaimed:

[193] Samuel Smith, "Iranian Christian who met with Trump details how regime shut down her family's church," *The Christian Post,* February 6, 2020, https://www.christianpost.com/news/iranian-christian-who-met-with-trump-details-how-regime-shut-down-her-familys-church.html.

> *We cannot forget that our brothers and sisters in Christ, whether they be of the Orthodox faith or just the Christian faith generally, are facing immense persecution around the world. For all of us, do not forget those Coptic Christians who are in the heart of Egypt, worshipping on Christmas Day, worshipping on Easter and hundreds are killed. And yet, next Easter, hundreds more show up. And that is a symbolism of their Christian faith, but it is also unacceptable in the world that we live in… Here we are in the United States of America…You have a government that accepts freedom. And we're unique. In the United States, we have to learn in a unique way how to take that understanding that we have been born into and ingrained into us, and take that to parts of the world where that is not ingrained. Where the free exercise of religion is not the first right. We have so much to do for the Persecuted Church.*

In this discourse, America is the leader, the savior, the example for the world. America can bear freedom to other parts of the world, where persecution and devastation has prevailed. Coptic blood, and the blood of other Middle Eastern Christians, is shed and displayed as spectacle upon the world stage. Bombings, attacks, and shootings were not only brought to bear on the Coptic community, but to all of Christendom. This economy of blood includes Copts in the role of martyr and maimed body, an imagery that the Coptic Church has also championed as a communal identity marker and as a relational node with the Egyptian security state. Such authoritative discourses bind Copts into particular characteristics of legibility that mediate interfaith relations in the United States.

Pathways of Reparation and Reconciliation

The economy of blood circulates Coptic suffering to advance religio-political policies that exceed the direct needs of the Coptic community in the U.S. or in Egypt. Caught between whiteness and its Others, Copts connect Egyptian contexts to these new imperial formations. On the Upper East Side one August afternoon, I sat on a black crate next to the food cart owned by Wael, a Copt from Assiut, Upper Egypt who came to the United States six years ago through the Green Card Lottery. "Everyone dreams of working abroad to make better money," he said with a tired smile. Wael explains how he felt marginalized back home, and what made him ultimately decide to apply for the Green Card Lottery: "Since I can remember, things are just not safe back home for us…they kidnap Coptic girls and kill us. Recently, there's been even more violence against Christians…like the bombing [at *al-Qudiseen* church] in Alexandria and the bus attack on the way to the monastery in al-Minya…because of things like this I supported Trump's ban on Muslims to the United States." As Halal food carts drove by us, Wael waved to his Egyptian Muslim colleagues, but was quick to tell me about his dislike for them, and their discrimination against him as a Copt, even in New York.

As more Copts immigrate to and build family in the U.S., histories of persecution and sectarian violence in Egypt are reimagined within new regimes of securitization and racialization. The Christianity of the Copts, currently revered by American religio-political forces, stands in paradoxical parallel to how Copts are racially constructed in everyday interactions with white America. For while Coptic interlocutors, both throughout the U.S. and in Egypt, have asserted to me that Copts are persecuted, the political significance of this persecution is unclear. Meanwhile, an official discourse of national unity between Muslims and

Christians in Egypt has been variously received since the early twentieth century (Ibrahim 2015). These different tracks of discursive interpellation require a multi-vectored approach to analyzing how Christianity and whiteness, as structures of global power, play out within a geopolitically important community like the Copts. For while the diaspora offers opportunities to form new solidarities and pathways of reparation and reconciliation, a geopolitical constellation of forces continues to suture Coptic Christian identity to itineraries of global Christian persecution and an economy of blood. Ultimately, liberation from these structures of recognition must include the transformation and revaluation of identity beyond the geopolitics of persecution. It is here where creative forms of solidarity can be forged.

Chapter 5
Transnational Conversions

The Coptic Church, which had chosen the solitude of its own primitiveness, its peculiar spiritualism, and the rough road of its so-called Monophysitism since the black days of Chalcedon in 451, is now steadily recapturing its faith in old friends and foes overseas and in distant climes. The aloofness and traditional suspicion of the patriarchs towards other Christians of different sects is gradually being replaced by a sense of mutual regard and a measure of cooperation.

-Aziz Suryal Atiya, *The History of Eastern Christianity,* 1968

On July 29, 2018, a Coptic bishop was found murdered outside of his cell at the St. Macarius monastery in Wadi Natroun, Egypt. Bishop Epiphanius, abbot of the monastery, was on his way to Midnight Prayer when he was assaulted and struck in the back of the head with a blunt object. In the days following the attack, Coptic Christians around the world voiced their shock and disbelief. One of the central scenarios of the murder was that a Muslim had perpetrated the act. Speculation around the Muslim identity of the perpetrator fell into a recognizable scenario, framed by American politicians, religious figures, and Copts in the U.S. as a continuation of persecution at the hands of Muslims. While U.S. asylum courts[194], conferences on religious freedom and the future of Middle Eastern Christians[195], and Coptic political activists[196] have framed such incidents in terms of persecution and "radical Islamic terrorism,"[197] the murder of the bishop sparked wider debate among everyday Copts.

The day after the murder, one Copt in the United States wrote the following on Facebook: "Why is there a battle for education? Why is knowledge and understanding dangerous to some? What is the threat that this man, or any other man, poses by being educated?" They continued their questioning, "The quote that has been circling around, 'Our Church is full of goodness that the West is continually learning from, yet we are leaving our roots and heritage,' speaks volumes. What are our roots? Why are we leaving our heritage? Why is it so difficult to return to them?" Epiphanius was a scholar who participated in ecumenical dialogue between the Coptic Church and the Catholic Church, as well as Eastern Orthodox churches, and was described as a "martyr" for theological education and academia in the Church, and a "fighter for enlightenment and understanding."[198] A Coptic iconographer from Washington D.C. drew an icon in the days following his murder depicting Epiphanius with textbooks, which indexed his encouragement of educational reform in the Coptic Church of late.

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[194] See Chapter 3.
[195] See Chapter 4.
[196] See Chapter 2.
[197] See the following examples from the Trump administration: Hugh Ferguson, "Pence references 'radical Islamic terrorism' twice in 9/11 address," *Politico*, September 11, 2018, https://www.politico.com/story/2018/09/11/pence-radical-islamic-terrorism-9-11-814303; and Peter Holley, "'Radical Islamic terrorism': Three words that separate Trump from most of Washington," *The Washington Post,* March 1, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/02/28/radical-islamic-terrorism-three-words-that-separate-trump-from-most-of-washington/.
[198] Private Facebook post, August 2018.

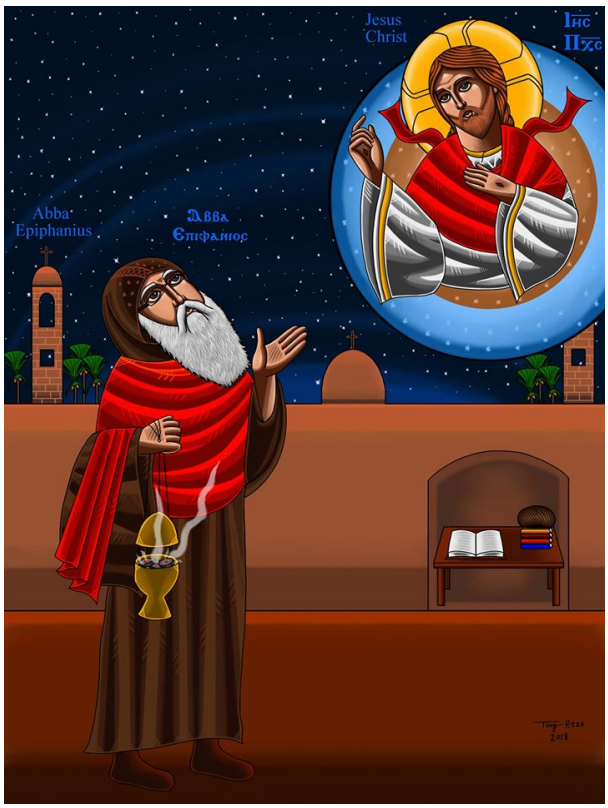


Figure 32: The Icon of Bishop Epiphanius by Tony Rezk. Republished here with permission from author.

Yet, despite speculation that the beloved abbot was murdered for his efforts toward educational reform, it was concluded shortly after that the murder pertained to an internal matter between the abbot and two other monks at the monastery.[199] The real reasons for the murder are not necessarily important to the argument of this chapter. Rather, it is the interpretation of the murder that is of greater relevance. How did Coptic understanding of the murder devolve from Muslim attack into a set of concerns over contemporary educational reform? Discussions of reform have their roots in the nineteenth century, yet contemporary debate on reform and tradition are enmeshed within new techniques of order and differential power structures that define the criterion of transnational Coptic religious life. Drawing on debates around the murder and the historical context of renaissance, or revival [*nahḍa*] among the Copts, I examine how educational reform efforts in Egypt and migration to the United States have reframed Coptic relationships with religious knowledge and political action. Debates around the murder gesture to broader anxieties around Coptic tradition in the diaspora. The migration of Copts to Western countries throughout the twentieth century presented challenges to the Coptic Orthodox religious tradition. In the United States, Copts were introduced to conversations on the role of Christianity in American civic life and in American foreign policy. Chief among these conversations, especially since September 11, 2001, has been the threat of Islamic terrorism, which has textured broader discussions on the role of Christianity in the public sphere.

[199] On August 10, 2018, investigators obtained a confession from 34-year-old monk, Isaiah al-Maqary, after another monk, Faltaous al-Maqary, 33, attempted suicide by slitting his wrists and throwing himself from the highest building of the St. Macarius monastery. Soon thereafter, the monks were defrocked, and in April 2019, the former monks were sentenced to death for the murder by the Egyptian state.

While Egyptian Copts have their own conceptions of Islam and Muslims, tinged with memory of sectarian violence and attacks, those conceptions have become enmeshed within War on Terror logics of Islam and violence among those in the Coptic diaspora. The transnational circulation and publication of violent attacks against Copts in Egypt furthers American narratives of the barbarity of Islam and Muslims—that Islam is a religion of violence. While Coptic reformers have emphasized that Protestantism must be expunged from contemporary Coptic religious life, U.S. Copts have continued to collaborate with Protestants on matters pertaining to the threat of Islam *and* of secularism. The threat of Protestantism (and itineraries of conversion) is the existential problem among the Copts between Egypt and the U.S., yet American Protestants (and particularly evangelicals) have been allies in the struggles against secularization and the global threat of Islam. The murder of Bishop Epiphanius contains a cipher of emotions that emerged from these arguments and historical tensions.

The tensions that emerged during the colonial period between indigenous pedagogies and modern education resurfaces today in theological schools, Coptic Sunday schools, and in online debates on social media. The ongoing process of reform, as a form of purification, is triggered by Coptic Christians' determination to harness the promises of modernity while remaining true to a spiritual ideal of maintaining the religious tradition. This theological mandate is complicated by American persecution politics—that are both appealing to Coptic sensibilities, but also foreign to the Coptic contexts and histories. Among American Christians, persecution has been used to describe the supposed sidelining of Christianity from American public life. Religious and political leaders have connected these domestic matters to a global phenomenon, whereby the persecution of Christians in the United States is a low-level form of the violence and bloodshed against Christians, particularly in Muslim-majority countries (McAlister 2019). In the United States, intra-Christian encounters—between Copts and evangelicals—through the medium of persecution politics have once again complicated such historical issues of empire and conversion, theology and tradition.

Anthropologist Fenella Cannell (2006) has previously noted, "Fundamental to any understanding of Christianity today is the opposition between broadly Protestant and Catholic Christianities" (22). The anthropology of Christianity has mainly focused on Protestantism and Catholicism, on rupture and conversion (Bialecki, Haynes, and Robbins 2008). Recently, the sub-field has sought to include Orthodoxy within its purview (Hann and Goltz 2010; Luehrmann 2018). Yet, these distinctive Christian traditions have not and are not historically sealed off from one another. Through new global migrations, Christianity must be thought anew, especially in light of the global influence of American politics (Mancini and Stoeckl 2018; McGranahan and Collins, ed. 2018). Christianity cannot simply be argued as *merely* a religion (Marshall 2014, S351). It must be studied with an awareness of what its "tradition" entails politically. American geopolitical interests in the Middle East have long made it a primary site for the exercise of Western power (Mahmood 2005, 191). To think about reform in the transnational Coptic context, then, is to also remain attentive to the vast number of institutional sites and practices aimed at transforming economic, political, and moral life in the Middle East, and now within its many diasporas. The contemporary influence of the United States in the region has once again revived colonial remnants of discipline and control. The vast modernizing projects of British and French colonialism in Egypt has been reimagined and reconfigured by U.S. imperial projects aimed at impacting everything from pedagogical techniques to conceptions of moral health; defining a form of life deemed to be *modern* and *enlightened*.

To study Christianity, anthropologically, one must also be attentive to the ways Western power (and Western Christianity) have remolded non-Western traditions and communities in wake of its influence. Even the central analytic of this chapter—reform—must be contextualized within relations of power. When reform is proposed, there is an assumption that the tradition's "essence"—what is perceived to be essential to it—is not to be changed, but defended through purification, the process of separating what is contingent from what is essential (Asad 2015, 168). The purification of tradition uses violence (or the threat of violence) to restore an obscured origin that can then accommodate itself more smoothly to the real, progressive world. This process of critical purification (modernization) is a process of what must be transgressed if tradition is to become "civilized." While anthropologists of Christianity have argued that Christianity has been discursively constructed as an "outside force"—"threatening, corrupting, or merely dusting the surface of the authentic focus of anthropological concerns" (Robbins 2004, 6), such arguments attend to the civilizing missions of conversion in the Global South. Eastern migrations to the West have dislodged tradition from its geographical footing, its rootedness in the soil. In this process of de/reterritorialization, Eastern Christian communities like the Copts have faced new challenges of purification and conversion bound by geopolitical power structures guiding debate, shaping criteria, and determining the contours of tradition.

While debate around education and reform is a broader problem of modernity, this chapter gives contextually specific snapshots into the struggles and questions of religious tradition between the diaspora and Egypt and the contemporary geopolitical factors that structure Coptic tradition. The reason education has been a loaded space of debate is because it is the site where continuity is championed and defended, and by which the authority of the Church depends. To show this, in the first sections of this chapter, I lay out the stakes of the institutional shift that took place during nineteenth century colonial rule and the onslaught of missions in Egypt. Based on this, I then look at central terms of debate on the correct interpretation of tradition among the Coptic diaspora in the United States. I show how Copts in Egypt and in diaspora interpret one another and the Coptic Orthodox tradition differently, leading to ambiguity of what defines Copticity[200] and its relation to Orthodoxy. From there, I give deeper historical context to these debates, highlighting the effects of Protestant missions and Coptic communal reform on them. Ultimately, I argue that the contemporary interpretation of Coptic tradition has been mediated by colonial remnants of intervention and current global cultural concern over secular and Islamic threats.

Processes of Purification

In June 1968, the Catholic Church returned a fragment of St. Mark's relics to the Coptic Church.[201] In the Coptic tradition, St. Mark the Apostle first preached the Gospel in Egypt and is considered the first Patriarch of the Coptic Orthodox Church. The Catholic Church considered this to be a "gift." Yet, Copts described it as a "return" [*al-'awda*]. The "return" of St. Mark's relics occurred during Pope Kyrillos VI's reign and President Gamal Abdel Nasser's presidency.

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[200] Scholars of the Copts have defined Copticity to mean the cultivation of a kind of Coptic cultural or ethnoreligious consciousness, or the "quality, state, or consciousness of being a Copt" (Sharkey 2008, 54).

[201] In 828, relics believed to be the body of Saint Mark were stolen from Alexandria (at the time controlled by the 'Abbasid Caliphate) by two Venetian merchants with the help of two Greek monks and taken to Venice. See Donald Nicol, *Byzantium and Venice: A Study in Diplomatic and Cultural Relations,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). Most of the stolen relics remain in Venice until today.

In a united show of anti-colonial nationalism, the Pope and President received St. Mark's body together at the inauguration of its then-newly built Patriarchate Cathedral in 'Abbasiyya. The notion of "return" draws its power from colonial trauma, whereby foreign intervention in Egypt reorganized all forms of life, including and especially religious tradition. Thus, postcoloniality marked not only the rise of political movements like Pan-Africanism and Arab nationalism, but also forged the institutional and pedagogical power structures that bound Copts to the Egyptian nation and to the representational capacity of the Coptic Orthodox Church. "The theology of the land supersedes the theology of creed [*lahoot al-'arḍ qabl lahoot al-'aqida*]."[202]

Copticity became bound to Egypt, and upon decolonization in the 1950s, purification of the tradition became a process of "civilization" and "modernization"—a determination of what is *really* part of the tradition and what was imposed by "outside forces"? Sorting outside from inside became the focus of debate through the twentieth and into the twenty-first century. As a consequence of this process of purification/modernization (Latour 1993), traditions, descriptively so identified, can disintegrate or implode. Driven by a sense that there is something threatening about the mixing of culture and nature (or in the Coptic case, culture and tradition), purification is never entirely successful (Keane 2006, 23). These are the stakes of Coptic debate over the tradition—how do we purify without disintegrating, falling prey to the outside, diluting the essence of the tradition?[203] The anxiety of purification, of maintaining tradition, is a central tension among the transnational Coptic community.

Since the late nineteenth century, Protestant and Catholic missions not only aimed to convert Muslims, and eventually Christians, to Western forms of Christianity, they also reformed education under colonial contexts of power (Sharkey 2008). Much has been written on the role Western missionaries and modern education has played in the moral-material transformation of colonial subjects in Egypt (Sedra 2011). Established by Protestant and Catholic missionaries in the nineteenth century, the modern school aimed to rationalize faith and replace local pedagogies with Western education (Baron 2014; Carter 1984).

This institutional shift fundamentally changed the Coptic Orthodox Church by establishing a different set of criteria of what defined a modern Christian Church. European and later American colonial rulers and missionaries sought to enframe educational life in Egypt, whereby how one learned was dictated by methods of ordering (Mitchell 1988, 63). Partially this was understood through the connection between spatial order and personal discipline. One of the main issues many colonial (and Egyptian) writers described is the lack of discipline in Egypt's streets. In comparison to Egyptian streets, "the calm, the diligence, and the order of life on the

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[202] "Hijrat al-Jathūr [Emigration of Roots]," *Youtube,* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0lY641ISHps.

[203] Writings on the Copts during the mid-twentieth century pointed to this phenomenon. "The Copts are so jealous of their identity that many resent being labelled as Christians on their Egyptian identity cards. It isn't the religious labelling that annoys them, but the lumping together with the other Christians who carry a foreign connotation and, often, a foreign passport. These other Christians in Egypt included about 100,000 Catholic Copts affiliated with Rome, as are a mosaic of other Catholics in the Latin rite and in various Oriental rites: Melkites, Maronites, Armenians, Syrians, and Chaldeans. Non-Catholic Christians include the Greek Orthodox, Armenians, Jacobites, and Protestants, the latter estimated at 100,000. The Christians have been reduced in number by the continuous exodus of foreigners from Egypt since the 1956 attack on Suez by Israel, France, and England. The Copts, who remain in Egypt as they always have, want to stress their identity as Egyptians and to them this means bearing the label Copt" (Wakin 1963, 25).

street and in public places were the very characteristics that indicated and made possible the material prosperity of the French and the progress of their society" (Mitchell 1988, 64). The lack of discipline in public life also manifested itself within the Egyptian education system according to such writers.

In the process of achieving structure and order, a parallel threat emerged of "disorder." It is during this period that the threat of backwardness, disorder, and ignorance becomes an ever-present threat. For example, Europeans writers would describe the "chaos" and absence of "order," or *nizam* in the courtyard, or teaching space of al-Azhar mosque. Despite the particular success of such a pedagogical approach—that of individual instruction and discipleship—it was deemed inefficient and disorderly. "Life within the teaching mosque of al-Azhar required no walls to divide classrooms, no desks, no ordered ranks, no uniforms, no timetable, and no posted curriculum" (Mitchell, 82). Education, as an isolated process in which children acquire a set of instructions and self-discipline, was born in Egypt in the nineteenth century (85). This is significant to understanding how the pedagogy of missionary schools, which championed authority and productivity, reframed religious life in contemporary Egypt during the latter half of the nineteenth century. In response to the spread of such schools in Egypt, the Coptic Orthodox Church and Coptic Orthodox elites in Cairo established their own schools and a theological college for systematic religious training (Seikaly 1970).[204] These efforts to compete with missionary schools and prevent conversion of Copts to Protestantism (as well as Catholicism[205]), contributed to a crisis of identity in the Coptic Orthodox Church that was mediated through debates around religious instruction and theological education.

Observations on the limited nature of Coptic curriculum and the absence of order and discipline in Coptic education—lack of classrooms and desks—sought to compare prior conditions with new techniques of order. Learning was set up as a process separate from life itself—where Copts learned their faith according to their profession or occupation (Mitchell, 86). Education was to be an autonomous field, defined not by its subject or method, but as an activity that took place in a specialized location. Among the foreign missionary schools, those founded by John Lieder, of the English Church Missionary Society, and by the American Presbyterian Mission were the most successful in transforming Coptic education in Egypt (Sedra 2004). Such missionary organizations viewed oral tradition with disdain and focused their attention on textual literacy. As Bishop Suriel describes in his seminal work on Coptic reformer, Habib Girgis, Lieder provided textbooks with the sole goal of transforming education and tradition and eliminating a culture in which "the speakers of words, rather than the writers of texts, were the bearers of authority" (Suriel 2017, 43). The destruction of oral culture and its authority among Copts and the rise of textual supremacy was an important step in efforts to control native Egyptians' morality and behavior—an essential element of the modern state's exertion of control over its subjects (Hirschkind 1991, 292).

Missionaries believed that in order for the Copts to convert to a pure form of Christianity—not one bogged down by idolatry—they had to conform to an evangelical mindset not just in proper behavior and discipline, but also rooted in a particular interpretation of Scripture. For missionaries like John Lieder, Christianity was industry, discipline, and order. The

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[204] Later defunct due to lack of institutional support.

[205] Catholic mission history in Egypt extends back further than Protestant missions. See Alastair Hamilton, *The Copts and the West, 1439-1822: the European discovery of the Egyptian church*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

spiritual and cultural aspects of conversion were inseparable. Mission schools were meant to serve as catalysts for wider cultural conversion and colonization of the Coptic Church and the Coptic people (Suriel 2017, 45). Thus, the stakes in the modernization of the Coptic Church were that of setting the barrier between the modern and the backward, innovation and tradition. The struggle to reconcile the changes in techniques and criteria that came along with the colonial establishment of modern education in Egypt with the purification of a Coptic Orthodox tradition continues to manifest in transnational contexts like the United States. Amid new dynamics of migration and renewed Western interest in the future of Middle Eastern Christianity, imperial interventions among the Copts continue to linger and impact upon Coptic ideas of belonging in diaspora.

"We were raped for 1400 years!"

At a swanky Manhattan restaurant owned by a member of the New York Coptic community, I sat in a booth with two priests. I had just returned from a seminar in Washington D.C. on Orthodox theology and the Coptic tradition. During the seminar, a participant asked, "Why do we use Protestant materials in our Sunday school curriculum?" and I recounted the exchange in the restaurant. One of the priests retorted, "And we were using Catholic theology up through Pope Shenouda. We essentially used Catholic books and materials and made them Orthodox." After realizing what he had said, Abouna became frustrated and exclaimed, "God, we were raped for 1400 years! Jesus Christ, it's a miracle we're still existing! Every new sultan that came to power in Egypt would steal all of the treasures of the church and we would have to rebuild. We dealt with that for centuries! Our history is different from theirs!"

Abouna's emotional response to Coptic engagements with Catholic and Protestant traditions is directed toward the nature of the comparison. According to him, Copts have dealt with other circumstances and should not be blamed for their pedagogical mix-matching. Instead of addressing the Protestant and Catholic missionary contexts that produced such a criterion of credibility, he points to the role of Muslim rule as the site of corruption. Yet, the idea that the Coptic Church was raped for 1400 years is not a new assertion. It is one Protestant missionaries made during their time in Egypt. One such British missionary who lived in Cairo wrote, "Torn with dissensions and political intrigue in the fifth and sixth centuries, [the Copts] offered themselves as an easy prey to the lusty Moslem invaders, swelled with the pride of unbroken victories further East … [Coptic] beliefs are in many respects corrupt, and among the poorer Copts great ignorance prevails and strange superstitions" (Gollock 1906, 34–5; cited in Brooks Hedstrom 2012, 135). The image of the Church being raped by Muslims resonated with foreign audiences, who interpreted the Coptic Church as an a helpless, ignorant, and feminized institution in need of strong, Western (masculine) leadership and education. The traces of this idea are integral to understanding the debates on theological education in the Coptic Orthodox Church.

As Copts have immigrated to the West, they have contended with their new position as another minority, within the majority. In Egypt, Coptic Orthodox Christians are the majority of Christians, yet they are a small minority in a Muslim-majority country. In the United States, for example, Copts are a small minority of Christians, yet they are a part of the Christian majority, which has provided its own set of challenges. While Protestant missionaries influenced education and general cultural norms in Egypt during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Coptic Orthodox Church maintained its authority over national Christian culture and identity. It does not have this authority in the United States. U.S. Copts, faced with the positivist demand of religious

knowledge, have experienced a new crisis in education, and are seeking out new forms of apologetics to answer to secular and atheist interlocutors in school, at work, and in the public sphere.

Conversely, Copts in Egypt question whether the spirituality of Coptic-Americans runs as deep, given the perceived liberal, irreverent culture of the West. In Bahjura late January 2017, a group of Copts from Canada and the United States, an evangelical from Florida, and I sat down for lunch with the Egyptian coordinators of the Coptic Orphans Serve-to-Learn program. Prior to eating, we prayed together in Arabic and English. While we started eating our lunch of fried chicken and French fries, Botros, one of the Egyptian coordinators, asked if it would be possible to video tape us praying, at some point. Seeing our confused reactions, he said, "In Egypt, we have this idea that Westerners [*an-nas fil-gharb*], because they have so much freedom [*'andhum ḥurriyat ketir*], they don't pray. People ask themselves, 'because they have everything, why would they need to pray?'" The video of our prayer would evidence to other Egyptians on Botros' social media that "Westerners" still pray. Amanda, the evangelical woman from Florida, motioned her hands into a prayer position with a smile, indicating to Botros that she still prays even though she lives in the U.S.

Egyptian Copts have viewed with suspicion the accuracy and authenticity of the tradition among Copts outside of Egypt. "Do you fast in America?" One Coptic-American interlocutor recounted such a question by one of his family members in Egypt. "Of course, we fast. I think they have the idea that because we live in a liberal culture, we just sweep things under the rug, we don't take our faith seriously," he continued. Yet, for Copts in the West engaged in debate around theological education, they convey the opposite. It is the Copts in Egypt that do not accurately *know* the tradition. "Copts go, they get educated, they get their theology decrees [here]…There's a mixture of Western teachings in Egypt, and then they come here…and they hear the opposite, and they ask what is the truth?" Copts in the United States have access to an array of Christian seminaries, especially Eastern Orthodox institutions, that are non-existent in Egypt. In the opening up of theological education beyond the Coptic Orthodox Church's seminaries in Egypt, comparisons of Orthodox tradition are made more readily available. The possibility of intra-Christian, and especially intra-Orthodox, comparison has led to a more critical debate around the Coptic Orthodox religious tradition, with charges of "incorrect teachings" being leveled against the pedagogy of the seminary.

Whether at university events, after liturgy, or during youth meetings, many Copts have described the Church and its community as once being in "darkness," until they received the "light."[206] Over breakfast at a Staten Island diner, Abouna Mattias, a young Coptic priest in his mid-30s, educated at an Eastern Orthodox seminary, expressed his frustration over the lack of attention to theological correctness in the Coptic Church:

> *There needs to be accountability to the hierarchy. [Some] decisions issued at the Holy Synod are embarrassing. A network of educated clergy need to make sure that when they are issuing decisions, they are grounded in the Tradition. Any Egyptian degrees need to be eliminated. You need to have received a degree from an accredited institution....Obviously, this will get a lot of blow back, but it's necessary if we're going to survive and thrive. The Mother Church needs to be held to international theological standards…Because of the misinformation and*

[206] Interaction (November 7, 2017).

lack of Biblical centrality over the centuries, until missionaries came, we were lagging behind and we incorporated many inaccurate things into our theology."

Copts are from Egypt, and the Church is rooted in its landscape. Yet, over the past 50 years as Copts have emigrated to Western countries, there has been anxiety over the separation of churches in the U.S. from the mother church in Egypt. One such example came in May of 2015 when the Southern U.S. diocese of the Coptic Church announced the formation of the American Orthodox Church of Alexandria—a subset of the diocese—would establish parishes to serve American-raised Copts and American converts. Egyptian commentators saw the removal of "Coptic" from the name as an assault on the Egyptian character of Coptic identity, and believed that the Church in America was trying to obtain autocephaly from the Coptic Church of Egypt.[207] Bishops of the Coptic Church in Egypt responded to a barrage of questions from concerned Copts, anxious over the idea that Copts abroad were no longer part of the social fabric of the Church, and that they were removing the essence of the Coptic Church. "What does the word Alexandria mean if not Coptic?" Bishop Musa responded during a youth meeting in Cairo.[208] As described by proponents of the plan in the US, the overall goal of the endeavor was "to diminish Coptic/Egyptian/Arabic cultural distractions and to supplant that with cultural supplements that are amenable to the American population."[209] Because of the transnational controversy, "Coptic" was later inserted back into the title of the churches.

The tension between maintaining an Egyptian national identity and contending with the increasingly global character of Coptic identity has dually impacted the liturgical life of the transnational Coptic Orthodox Church. The Church has had to balance pastoral needs of its many diasporas and maintain its institutional power and social cohesion in contemporary Egypt. Below the surface, these anxieties over labels and names are connected to histories of colonial subjugation. Such levels of comparison were laid during the nineteenth century, when Western missionaries came to Egypt and established new modes of religious knowledge. Measuring the Coptic tradition up against these new modes led to a reformation of Coptic identity and theology.

"Missionaries came to save the Church"

From the mid-nineteenth century, the Anglo-American Protestant movement in Egypt evangelized to both Muslim and Christian Egyptians. Rather quickly, missionaries realized that Muslims would not be fertile targets of conversion, and set their sights on Coptic Orthodox Christians. Anglo-American missionaries opened dozens of schools, medical facilities and public libraries, initiated rural development programs, and promoted literacy campaigns for the sake of

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[207] "*infiṣal ūsqofiyat janub al-Wilayat al-Mutaḥida 'an al-Kineesa al-Qibtiyya al-Misriyya* [The separation of the Southern diocese of the United States from the Egyptian Coptic Church]," *Al-Bawaba News,* May 7, 2015, https://www.albawabhnews.com/1276791.

[208] "*ḥaqiqat al-kinesa al-mustaqila fi Amrika: rad al-Anba Musa w al-Anba Rafael* [The truth regarding the independent church in the United States: the response of Bishop Musa and Bishop Rafael]," *YouTube,* May 24, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_o6nXodhvmA&fbclid=IwAR3sF2QLHsZ69QNlXl7zq5jX2lTBR0mZ6Ofl7VSvNMbdHk5LcjysmELyNNw

[209] John Habib, "American Orthodox Church of Alexandria: What's in a Name?" *Orthodox Christian Meets World blog,* March 10, 2015, https://johnbelovedhabib.wordpress.com/2015/03/10/american-orthodox-church-of-alexandria-whats-in-a-name/.

Bible *reading*, retuning the Coptic tradition to new practices. Yet, between the mid-nineteenth century and mid-twentieth century, Protestant missions, such as American Presbyterians, for example, claimed only 26,663 official communicants by 1957, which is minute in comparison to the estimated two million Coptic Orthodox Christians in 1960. The size of such congregations remains small, but the impact of the missionary encounter was much larger. The numbers of Muslims and Copts who attended mission schools far surpasses actual conversions to the faith, and this is where the effects of such an encounter lie. As historian Heather Sharkey has aptly described, the history of missions in Egypt was "not *merely* a history of religion and religious practice: it was a history of ideas, and ideas have power" (2008, 189; my emphasis). This history was not just one of ideas, but missionaries shifted power structures and set a criterion of religion and religious practice.

Yet, missions had to deal with the real problem of Christians in the Middle East. If the Middle East already had indigenous Christian communities whose histories stretch back to Christ, what are the goals of evangelism? American missionaries tried to bring Copts into the evangelical community as a way of prompting a reformation within the Coptic Orthodox Church. Such missionaries repeatedly stated that the Coptic Orthodox Church was a dead church—referring to it as "mummified" or "embalmed" (Sharkey 2008, 19). As evidence of its lifelessness they pointed to what they claimed had been its failure to withstand the rise of Islam beginning in the seventh century, its hemorrhaging of Christian believers to the Muslim fold, and its subjection to Muslim tyranny in centuries that followed. To entice missionaries to Egypt, pamphlets and books depicted Egypt as "a land of darkness in need of the light of truth from missionary activity" (Brooks Hedstrom 2012, 136). Published in 1898, one such book by Irish architect and Protestant missionary William J.W. Roome, described the Copts as such: "Bearing the name of Christians, and being the lineal descendants of the primitive Church of Christ in Egypt, the Copts are specially dear to the hearts of all true Christians. They have a zeal, but it is not according to knowledge. They are seeking for righteousness by fasting, by repeating psalms, by keeping feasts, by building churches, but they do not seek it where it is to be found. They, like the Mohammedans, are sinners needing a Saviour" (Roome 1898, 17; cited in Brooks Hedstrom, 137). According to Roome, Copts acted through ritual, but they had failed to *know* its ethos; to consciously rationalize and systematize the faith. Their failure to do so then supposedly led to Coptic susceptibility to Islamic conversion. The Church institutionally failed to protect the flock by not educating them, according to such logic.

Missionary reform projects and its Coptic reformers emphasized textualized ritual and knowledge as the foundations of faith. Egyptian Enlightenment led to the destruction of other forms of knowledge and authority that were not textual. Oral traditions, ritual practice, and liturgical life, while still important became secondary sources of authority to the text (Sedra 2011, 2). The idea of textualized authority constructed Copts and the Coptic Orthodox Church as deficient, and missionary standards of religious practice as the standards the Coptic Church needed to live up to. Until today, many Egyptian Protestants describe missions and missionaries as saviors of the Coptic tradition.

In September 2017, at the Bible Society of Egypt, the largest Arabic Bible publisher in the world, an Egyptian Protestant representative of the organization described to me the impact of nineteenth century missionary work in this way: "They brought Enlightenment to Christians in Egypt. Before the hard work of the missionaries, the Copts only cared about the tradition, not the Bible. It was not the basis of the Church…We credit to the Coptic Church the tradition—the icons. People at that time didn't read. None of them were educated, but they knew the stories.

When they see a photo, they know the story. That's the story of the Bible—one told the story to the other. That's how the Bible went from one century to another. One priest telling the stories and the people carry on the stories with the icons. But when we arrived in the nineteenth century, it's almost dead. The Church died. That's why the missionaries came to save the Church and make a revolution in the Church. They said, 'we have to do two things. The first thing we have to educate them. They opened schools. The second thing, we have to give them the scripture.'"

In 1865, the Bible was popularly translated into Arabic by American Protestant missionaries Eli Smith (1801-57) and, subsequently, Cornelius Van Dyck (1818-95). The Van Dyck translation is the most widespread version of the Arabic Bible around the world.[210] The illiteracy and superstitions of the wider Coptic communities throughout Egypt were the target of missionary ire. As historian Paul Sedra notes, the textual culture promoted by missions led to a reformation in the Coptic Orthodox Church (as well as among Muslim *'ulama*). By means of "modern" education, personal understanding of the Bible, was promoted to ritually complement practice, but also to supersede it.[211] By "modernizing" the faith, the Church could control its boundaries. Yet, "as long as faith was a matter of 'superstition,' there was no way to bring faith under control" (Sedra 2011, 10). The Church began to incorporate missionary pedagogies and to develop "modern" institutional sensibility. Such sensibility created the grounds for the debates over education, faith, knowledge, and "proper" theology and practice that have reshaped religious tradition between Egypt and diaspora.

The totalizing nature of such an endeavor is not one exclusively confined to the Church. Rather, the transformation of the Coptic Church into a disciplined, modern institution runs parallel to the transformation of Egypt and the development of the modern state. The modern state seeks a singular personality for itself in the exercise of sovereignty, and claims that this is necessary for the progress and modernization of its subjects. The desire to preserve unity of the people rests on the assumption that homogeneity is key to religio-political governance (Asad 2015, 206). Just as the modern state must reflect the nation's *singular* personality, the Coptic Church's efforts at reform from the late nineteenth century through the emergence of the postcolonial Egyptian state were aimed at uniformity and authority. Yet, what makes the Coptic case different is the enormous influence of Western Christianity on the reorganization of the tradition. The struggles of the Coptic Church over the past century have unfolded against the backdrop of modern political rule in which colonial, postcolonial, and now, Euro-American imperial governments and institutions have been engaged in wrestling power from traditional centers of religious authority (Mahmood 2006, 340). Modern Coptic history of reform and renewal evidence this struggle and offer a lens onto the techniques of power that have constructed the capabilities of Coptic life and tradition (Abeysekara 2019, 26).

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[210] David Grafton, *The Contested Origins of the 1865 Arabic Bible: Contributions to the nineteenth century Nahda* (London: Brill, 2015) explains the negotiation of the popular translation among Middle Eastern Christians and missionaries. Prior to 1865, the Bible was copied in manuscripts located in Coptic monasteries, yet communities knew the Bible through oral transmission and liturgical practice.

[211] The emphasis on text and textuality as the site of "true" religion is part of the discourse of world religions and what is understood to be proper religion. See Chapter 8 in Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

Spiritual Reform and Renewal

Pope Kyrillos IV (1854-1861) of the Coptic Orthodox Church is known as Abu Islah or the "father of reform" and has been portrayed as the leader of the Coptic *nahda*, or renaissance (Ibrahim 2010). His reforms included administrative changes, ecclesiastical reforms, shifts in iconography[212], and lay educational changes. In 1854, when Abu Islah became patriarch, he required all clergy based in Cairo to attend weekly classes at the Patriarchate, where theological education, along with basic literacy skills, were taught. In order to facilitate many of the educational reforms for the clergy, there was a need for greater dissemination of the tenets and beliefs of the Coptic Church. In 1859, the Pope purchased the first private printing press in Egypt, brought from Austria. The introduction of the printing press helped to popularize religious discourse, authorized by the Church, and began a public debate around education, tradition, and religious practice. It opened access of materials to a larger community that had previously been limited to manuscripts in the monasteries.

The reformist message of Abu Islah was clear: the new approach focused on the enlightenment of the clergy through education, in an attempt to move away from what he believed were signs of superstition and backwardness. In 1853, Abu Islah set up the first of several Great Coptic Schools, or *Madrasat al-Aqbat al-Kubra*. Prior to the creation of the schools, Copts had followed a very similar pattern to preliminary education of Muslim children at the local *kuttab*, where often blind teachers, *'urfan*, taught religious studies and basic literacy skills in Arabic to young boys. These Great Coptic Schools graduated some of the most influential Copts. One such Copt was Habib Girgis.

In 1893, Habib Girgis (1876-1951) enrolled in the newly founded Coptic Orthodox Seminary in Cairo, established by Pope Kyrillos V (1874-1927). He was among the first students enrolled, but became displeased with the educational standards of the institution, educating himself and aiming to reform the seminary. While still a student at the seminary, he gave various lectures. One, documented by the editor-in-chief of the newspaper *Misr* in 1897, began with the following question: "Is there among us anyone who is capable of responding to those who ask him about his religion and why he is a Christian? I am sure that most of us do not have an answer, except to say that we were born from Christian parents and hence we are Christians." In the 1890s, Girgis began teaching religion to children in *al-Faggala* and published a simple catechism that marked the beginning of his mission to establish Coptic Sunday Schools throughout Egypt. In order to compete with the mission Sabbath Schools, Girgis decided to emulate them. He wrote a Coptic catechism, which was published in a series of four books in 1898, and the popularity of his classes grew. He feared that the attempts of Western missionaries to convert the Copts to Catholicism and Protestantism would ultimately lead to the disappearance of the Coptic tradition. So, he sought to emulate missionary religious education structures and infuse them with what Girgis determined to be Orthodox teachings.

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[212] Abu Islah was vehemently opposed to the culture of iconography. He believed it was a form of idolatry and superstition, which led to the degradation of the spiritual values of the Coptic Church. The culmination of his crusade was a bonfire in both Cairo and Asyut, where relics were burnt. Comparing the actions of Abu Islah, in line with the missionary disdain for icons, and the words of my Egyptian Protestant interlocutor at the Bible Society of Egypt, iconography, as image, not text, preserved the idea of the Church as backward, "pre-modern." Clerical leaders, like Abu Islah, and laymen pursued all-together different structures and styles to measure up to mission activities and programs (Ibrahim 2010, 24).

Girgis' efforts to educate Copts on their faith, through print material and instruction, eventually developed into a movement. The Sunday School Movement of the Coptic Orthodox Church officially began in 1918, with the stated goal of combatting the cultural and pedagogical role of Protestant and Catholic missions in Coptic religious life.[213] Habib Girgis collected Protestant and Catholic religious educational methodologies and adapted them for a Coptic audience—making Bible study more central, focusing on the history of the Coptic Church, and the lives of Egyptian saints and martyrs, enlivening these lessons through images and illustrations. Girgis expanded the movement to ensure that religious education spread beyond Cairo to every branch and society in Egypt, and even into Sudan and Ethiopia.

On Sept 14, 1918, Pope Kyrillos V appointed Girgis as dean of the Coptic Orthodox Seminary and was also chosen that year to serve on the newly established General Sunday School Committee, and in 1927 became the general secretary. The seminary became the site of theological education in the Coptic Church and the Sunday schools standardized religious pedagogy and practice for generations of Copts. Both institutions of Coptic religious education became the pillars of reform. Yet, they also opened the doors to social and political conflict within the Coptic community. Girgis appropriated many of the tools of the Protestant missionaries, including Arabic Bibles, to develop a template for Coptic theological education—both at the seminary and in Sunday schools. Because Arabic translations of the Early Church Fathers' texts, central to Orthodox tradition and practice, were not well known, Girgis used Protestant and Catholic apologetics to round out his educational program. This has had a profound and divisive effect on the Coptic Church.

Beginning in the 1950s and 1960s, as the postcolonial Egyptian state emerged, the reform movement produced two schools of thought—one focused on spiritual revival and the other on ecumenism, mission, and social reform. It is in this context that Father Matthew the Poor, an advocate of patristic and monastic revival, emerged as a pivotal figure. In 1969, he became a monk at St. Macarius Monastery, attracting several critics, who believed that his educational program was "innovation" [*bida'a*] and not consistent with Coptic tradition. From the 1970s onwards, the Church underwent an internal debate about the nature of theological education and the place of patristic studies. The followers of Father Matthew the Poor emphasized internal piety, patristic education in the Coptic Church, and also engagement with Orthodox fathers outside of the purview of the modern Coptic context, both other non-Chalcedonian and Chalcedonian[214] authors.[215] Father Matthew's critics, which included Pope Shenouda III (1971-

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[213] In 1870, there were 236 [Protestant] Sabbath School pupils, a number that increased to 658 in 1875, 1,494 in 1880, and then in a huge leap to 4,438 in 1887. The majority of these pupils were Copts a fact that troubled the Coptic Church hierarchy. They felt threatened by the development of a religious educational activity imposed by foreigners and taking place right in front of them, but they had little ability or means to react. These Sabbath Schools used methods specially designed to appeal to children, such as distributing attractive religious pictures, reading from illustrated books, and teaching tenets of the faith through the dynamic question and answer method of catechism. See Suriel 2017 for more details.

[214] Oriental or non-Chalcedonian Orthodoxy did not recognize the 4th ecumenical Council of Chalcedon disagreeing on the dual nature of Christ incarnated as human and divine; they proclaimed instead the unity of the two natures (the miaphysite dogma). Oriental Orthodoxy includes the Coptic, Syriac, Armenian, Ethiopian, Eritrean, and Syrian Orthodox churches of India.

[215] Father Matthew the Poor worked with English translations of Russian Orthodox theologians, such as Vladimir Lossky (1903-58), Sergei Bulgakov (1871-1944), Paul Evdokimov (1901-70), and others (Watson 2000).

2012), preferred to emphasize the authenticity and uniqueness of the Coptic Church. Whereas Father Matthew preferred to maintain a church/state division, Pope Shenouda III sought to restructure the Church in such a way as to bring all aspects of Coptic society under its umbrella—hospitals, education, culture, among other segments.[216]

Over the past several decades, Coptic theological education and reform has generally centered around the clericalization of the laity—that is, educating and including all Copts under the institutional authority of the Coptic Orthodox Church (El-Khawaga 1997). Yet, also during the period of the 1960s and 70s, Copts began to emigrate out of Egypt, and began to pursue theological studies at Western institutions. Such clergy and laity began shaping debate on the Coptic religious tradition, questioning not only the institutional strategies of education, but also scholarly engagement of the Coptic tradition with other Orthodox traditions. In Egypt, debate spurred by the religious revival has centered on the identity of Coptic Orthodoxy—oscillating between the indigenous Egyptian character of the tradition and its position within global Christianity. The Coptic Church's increasing engagement in ecumenical dialogue during the latter half of the twentieth century has brought conversations on its utility and danger to the fore, harkening back to debates of exchange with and isolation from colonial missions of the late nineteenth century.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Protestant missionaries came to Egypt to restructure and reform Coptic religious practice in line with modernity. In the late twentieth and twenty-first century, Copts have come to the United States, transmitting and translating this debate into new contexts—where they are the minority of the Protestant Christian majority. If questions of purity within traditions are about boundaries—what is contained within and deemed outside of the tradition—then what happens when boundaries are rewritten by migration? Through theological debate, Copts engage and counteract questions of belonging, migration, and geopolitics (Moll 2019). In the twenty-first century, the Coptic community is loaded by geopolitical weight—as a Christian minority community in a Muslim-majority country in the Middle East. Redrawing these boundaries of purity is dependent upon the political conditions of religious transmission.

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[216] While the split between Fr. Matthew and Pope Shenouda is significant to the discussion on theological education, I would be remiss not to flag the divide between Pope Shenouda and Bishop Samuel. Clerical consolidation became the decisive trait of the religious awakening of the 1960s and 70s. This period of reform is intimately linked to the arrival of a new profile of clergy and laity within the Coptic Church that were educated through the Church's reform programming, mainly Sunday schools. The new era of reformers had unique interests, with their focus on internal piety and social services, as well as ecumenism. A student of the revival, Pope Shenouda III was elected 117th pope in 1971. Prior to his appointment, he became Bishop of Education under his predecessor, Pope Kyrillos VI, and controlled all Coptic education—from Sunday schools to graduate-level seminary education. While Bishop Shenouda expanded and strengthened Coptic religious education, his colleague, Bishop Samuel was appointed bishop for public ecumenical and social services. In that capacity, Samuel widened his sphere of influence from rural ministries to include urban social development projects. These initiatives triggered new demands and expectations concerning the training of church workers, the services they rendered, and the role of the Church within the Coptic community at large. When Shenouda became pope, he faced a community whose educational level had risen and whose expectations had changed. Copts no longer expected solely religious guidance and liturgical celebrations from their church, but also educational and social services, job training, and assistance finding work (Meinardus 1999). The Church itself also took on a larger political role, with Pope Shenouda as its foremost representative.

"Their context is not our context"

In an 1897 paper entitled "The Awakening of the Coptic Church," prominent Coptic layman Marcus Simaika wrote the following: "No religious instruction is given in any of the schools, beyond using the Old and New Testaments as reading books, without any commentaries. Very few Copts, therefore, know anything about the doctrines or the history of their Church, and what little anyone knows, he has acquired in a casual way, or at the Protestant or Roman Catholic Missions" (Simaika 1897, 738). Almost a century later, Anglican priest and scholar John Watson (2000) wrote: "The Coptic Orthodox position is better described as a traditional Biblical Christianity in the shadow of Islam. Their closest theological allies are certain Conservative Evangelicals in the USA" (Watson 2000, 139-140). In both quotations, the Coptic Orthodox tradition is critiqued for its diffusion through other traditions—most prominently Protestant Christianity (especially evangelicalism) and Islam. While the Islamic conquest of Egypt certainly impacted upon the Coptic religious tradition in different ways, the colonial, missionary encounter altered the Coptic tradition by textualizing ritual and constructing religion as a set of truth claims (or doctrine). Coptic Orthodoxy became dependent upon its ability to *argue* its truthfulness vis-à-vis Protestantism and Catholicism. This required an apparatus of education comparable with Western modes of scholasticism.

The Coptic predicament, that extends to such communities to present-day Egypt and in diaspora, is part of a broader history of colonial transformation. With the reorganization of social/institutional and discursive space under colonialism, there emerged both new kinds of available subject-positions and a new set of problems related to conflicting religious truth claims. As David Scott discusses in the case of Sri Lanka, this is part of a broader nineteenth century colonial transformation of what constitutes religion (Scott 1999, 56). Textuality became central to the persuasion of truth claims. Truth claims needed to be backed up by text, and not by ritual. In the colonial Coptic case, this reorganization was centralized by the Church, as chief authority in the standardization of the faith. The "laity" [*al-'almaniyeen*][217] became a secular node of opposition to the clerical hierarchy. By these structural changes, Coptic forms of life were dramatically altered.[218] These colonial remnants have traveled and reemerge in diaspora debates on proper religion and pure tradition.

On a summer evening in Western New York in 2018, I entered a Coptic community center. A priest, Abouna Salib, was speaking to a young Coptic man about a book on the Coptic language, requesting a scanned copy of its contents. A deacon, known as Brother Makarius, who resides at the center greeted me, and together with Abouna we entered a side room where we regularly chatted when I would visit. Although it was summer, the room held a manger scene with a Merry Christmas sign above. Over tea, we started to speak about the murder of Bishop Epiphanius, to which both were tight lipped about their feelings, especially after it had been revealed that a fellow monk had perpetrated the crime. As I noted earlier, the bishop's murder brought into sharp relief two schools of thought—one focused on the uniqueness of the Coptic

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[217] *al-'Almaniya* means secularism in Arabic, and the Arabic terminology of laity derives from the idea of the separation of religion from society—whereby religion becomes a matter of private belief. The clergy/laity distinction at the end of the nineteenth century falls in line with this development.

[218] While historian Magdi Guirguis (2011) and others have documented the rise of the *arakhina* (or Coptic lay elite) from the seventeenth century and their socioeconomic and religio-political influence, I argue that such a "laity" were quite different from the laity that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century that sought *fundamental* changes to the pedagogical, ecclesiastical, and pastoral forms of the Coptic Church and the subject-positions of a Coptic religious body.

Church and its placement in Egyptian society, and the other more greatly focused on ecumenism and an opening to the world and other traditions. Brother Makarius chimed into the discussion, "What does an opening to the world mean? How do we benefit from ecumenism? If anything, we see a disintegration of our own tradition through it. We give so much, but what do we see in return? And this is a product of liberalism, where there is a chipping away at what defines our Church in efforts to make things equal."

His spiritual guide and mentor, Abouna Salib, was appointed by Pope Shenouda III as a delegate in ecumenical dialogue between the Coptic Church, and both Eastern Orthodox churches and the Roman Catholic Church. Abouna came to the United States in 1998 to serve the Western New York's Coptic community, which included Brother Makarius and his family, one of the first to settle in the United States in the 1960s. Coptic inroads in the ecumenical movements of the late twentieth century have been fraught with conflict and carefully strategized so as not to disturb the nationalist character of the *Egyptian* Church. The influence of Protestant missions on the Church dramatically effected the way Coptic Orthodoxy was understood. While this is not to discount scholastic endeavors prior to Euro-American missions[219], the focus on knowledge, scholarship, and reading was specifically emphasized as a major element of Christian thought *and* practice. The reorganization of the community around Western standards of religious knowledge compelled the Coptic clerical hierarchy to address such deficiencies *through* scholarship.

Fr. Matthew the Poor promoted the return of the canon of the Early Church Fathers, such as Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Irenaeus of Lyons, and Justin Martyr, to Coptic theological education. On the contrary, supporters of Fr. Matthew the Poor have labeled his theological counterpoint, Pope Shenouda, as "Protestant." In Pope Shenouda's ministry, through weekly Friday sermons, recordings of his lectures, and public appearances, he more greatly emphasized focus on the Bible rather than the canon of the Early Church Fathers. Accusations of solo-scriptura should not hold, Brother Makarius emphatically affirmed. "We were dealing with a severe crisis," he said. "People don't seem to understand how threatening Protestantism was for the Church. So, Pope Shenouda used a framework—the Bible—to combat their advances. It's not as if the Church Fathers didn't read the Bible! That is our basis and they continually tell us through their writings that we should always go back to the Bible." Pope Shenouda's emphasis on the Bible in comparative theology was a product of his audience.[220] While the 1950s ushered in a global ecumenical impulse, the Coptic Church was moving toward greater communal introspection, reflecting a sense that Egyptian Christians needed to look out for themselves (Sharkey 2008, 207). In the aftermath of missions, the threat of Protestant belief, culture, and practice continued to be *the* threat of Coptic Orthodoxy. In the 1950s, the Coptic Orthodox Church revived pilgrimage to monasteries, the study of early church martyrs, and the production

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[219] On Medieval Arabic Scholasticism, see for example, Maged Mikhail, *From Byzantine to Islamic Egypt: Religion, Identity, and Politics after the Arab Conquest* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014); Mark Swanson, *The Coptic Papacy in Islamic Egypt* (Cairo, Egypt: The American University in Cairo Press, 2010); Kurt Werthmuller, *Coptic Identity and Ayyubid Politics in Egypt: 1218-1250* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2010).

[220] Scholars have asserted that Pope Shenouda III was influenced by the works of Protestant theologian, Matthew Henry (662-1714). His Bible commentaries have been translated into Arabic and are widely read in Egypt. See John Watson, "Signposts to Biography—Pope Shenouda III," in *Between Desert and City: The Coptic Orthodox Church Today*, eds. Nelly van Doorn-Harder and Kari Vogt (Oslo: The Institute for Comparative Culture, 1997), 244.

of hagiographic literature to focus attention inward on the renewal of Coptic identity in the aftermath of colonialism.[221]

Under the reign of Pope Shenouda, the Church clericalized and institutionalized the life of laity as a means to bring all Copts under its religious authority. Coptic renewal also took place in Egypt's monasteries, which were more greatly connected to patristic literature, especially the writings of the monastic fathers, preserved in the manuscripts. Other sites included the Coptic Orthodox Theological Seminary in Cairo and the Higher Institute for Coptic Studies, both attached to the patriarchate. These institutions relied on textbooks shaped by the contact with Western academic theology, as well as a theological tradition rooted in Medieval Arabic theological literature. Although there is a long history of co-existence between these two traditions of theological literature, there has been a growing tension between them caused by contact and connection with Western patristic and ecumenical theology (Rubenson 1997, 35-36). This tension is nothing new to other Orthodox churches.

In the United States, Copts have encountered other Orthodox churches that have challenged Coptic authority in Egypt on defining Orthodoxy. Campaigns for theological education are part of this transnational shift in context, and have created debate around the Orthodox Tradition and its many traditions among the Greeks, Russians, and others. Brother Makarius affirmed, "If you look at what the Russians went through with the Neo-Patristics Movement, this movement was anti-West and came from a particular history that the Russian Orthodox Church was undergoing. Why do we have to imitate their history when it is not ours? Their context is not our context."

After the Russian Revolution of 1917, many Orthodox theologians fled Russia and founded centers of Orthodox theology in the West, which included the St. Sergius Orthodox Theological Institute in Paris and Saint Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary in New York, popular among many Copts. The movement aimed to rid Orthodoxy of Roman Catholic and Protestant influences. Theologians Georges Florovsky and Vladimir Lossky advocated for a return to the Greek fathers of the Early Church, instead of a specifically Russian approach to Orthodox theology. The Neo-Patristic movement emphasized Orthodoxy's need to liberate itself from Latin scholasticism, which has led towards ecclesial triumphalism and isolationism, as well

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[221] In parallel, monastic and spiritual revival began in Syria/Mount Lebanon during the 1940s. The founding of the Orthodox Youth Movement in 1942 was a catalyst for this resurgence. Riad Mofarrij, "Renewal in the Antiochian Orthodox Church in Lebanon," *Studies in World Christianity* 15, no. 3 (2009): 217-235. The 1920s-1950s also marks a global transformation in Catholicism. See James Chappel, *Catholic Modern: The Challenge of Totalitarianism and the Remaking of the Church* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018). In Greece, this revival took place between the 1960s-1970s. See Tore Tvarnø Lind, *The Past is Always Present: The Revival of the Byzantine Musical Tradition at Mount Athos* (Lanham, Md., Scarecrow Press, 2012). The Greek revival was also evident in the diaspora. See Fevronia Soumakis, "A Sacred Paideia: The Greek Orthodox Archdiocese, Immigration, and Education in New York City, 1959-1979" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2015). "Return to Tradition" became the dominant theological paradigm in Greece during the 1960s, influenced by the theology of the Russian diaspora. This movement re-immersed itself in patristic and ascetic literature, and dedicated itself to casting off the yoke of all Western influences; this move which has come to be known (after theologian Georges Florovsky's call to "return to the Fathers") as liberation from "Orthodoxy's Babylonian captivity." See Pantelis Kalatizidis, "New trends in Greek Orthodox theology: challenges in the movement towards a genuine renewal and Christian unity," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 67, no.2 (2014): 127-164.

as suspicion towards the West and everything that could affect the purity of Orthodox theology and spirituality.[222] This tendency towards anti-ecumenism was not the intention of the movement's founders. Georges Florovsky wrote: "Independence from the non-Orthodox West [i.e., Latin Scholasticism] need not become estrangement from it. A break with the West would provide no real liberation…[Orthodox theology] is not to abandon [the Western tradition], but to participate in it freely, responsibly, consciously, and openly. The Orthodox theologian must not, and dares not, depart from this universal circulation of theological searching" (Florovsky 1987, 301-303). Yet, Orthodox Christian "rigorism," as characterized by the period of Archbishop Christodoulos of Greece (1998-2008) and the present Russian Orthodox Church hierarchy in its defense of "traditional values," have been intensified by the ongoing transnational processes of globalization, which has produced the feared erosion of local religious and national identities (Makrides 2016). Anti-ecumenical positions are exemplary of this perspective. Yet, while Greek and Russian communities in the West have established their own theological centers of learning, Copts are just beginning to do so.

Thus, the anti-ecumenism of Brother Makarius and the crisis in theological education among the Copts, is nothing new. Rather, such a debate on the influence of Western pedagogy on Eastern Christian communities is far-reaching beyond national borders. However, the Coptic case is unique in that it is dually intertwined with Islamic empires of rule, colonial histories of missions and contemporary conditions of migration to which Brother Makarius emphatically attests: "their context is not our context." Leaving the theological center, I came across some young Coptic men looking over some texts suggested by Abouna Salib. Brother Makarius and I continued our conversation, and James, a medical resident at the local hospital, chimed in: "Environment is everything…how can we speak of theology without speaking about practice and where that practice is developed and how?" Since the deposition of the Alexandrian patriarch Dioscorus at the Council of Chalcedon in 451A.D., the narrative of the Coptic Church has been that it has cyclically found itself in a position of defense. Thus, much of its theological history is characterized by polemics against Chalcedonian Christology, against Islamic criticism of the Trinity and the Incarnation, against Roman Catholic views on papal primacy, and most importantly, against Protestant missionary regimes that first sought converts and then to fundamentally transform the Coptic Church. Attempts at renewal have often been looked upon as undermining lines of defense, and thus, apologetics have been the site of theological engagement (Rubenson, 46). Thus, for Copts in the United States, championing a return to the Church Fathers (as the Neo-Patristic movement before them), *knowledge* of the tradition has been fashioned into an aesthetics of correctness and proper distinctions between faith and culture.

Ethos and Faith

During a hot summer day in 2016, I sat with Adam, a 23-year-old consecrated servant, American-born, and educated at a preeminent Eastern Orthodox seminary in New York. Adam was frustrated with the Coptic diocese he began working for. While stroking his beard, he conveyed his unease about the intermingling of Orthodox Tradition with Coptic cultural heritage, saying:

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[222] See Viorel Coman, "Revisiting the Agenda of the Orthodox Neo-Patristic Movement," *The Downside Review* 136, no.2 (2018): 99-117; Coman, "The Orthodox Neo-patristic Movements as Renewal of Contemporary Orthodox Theology: An Overview." *Review of Ecumenical Studies Sibiu* 7, no.1 (2015): 94-115.

I think in Egypt you are born Coptic Orthodox so you live Coptic Orthodox, you bleed Coptic Orthodox until you die Coptic Orthodox. That's your identity, it's very much a part of who you are because the culture is very religious based, and your name even defines who you are. You're either a Mina or an Ahmed. But here [in the U.S.] that's definitely not the case. If you're a Coptic Orthodox Christian born and raised here you have to make the decision to be an Orthodox Christian. You have to have faith. You have to actively believe in God, actively believe in the sacraments and believe they are transformative. You have to be kingdom driven…here [you have] the people who actually want to live an Orthodox, sacramental, Christian life and you have this giant group of people who are just like 'this is who we are'…the goals of both sides are different. The goal of one side is heaven bound and the goal of the other side is…not to say they aren't heaven bound, but it's less of a faith experience, and more of an ethos.

Adam argues that Egyptian culture is religious and American culture is not. In Egypt, faith is identity. It is not something chosen. Yet, in the United States because there is choice, you must choose to be Orthodox, not just a Copt. It must be a conscious, sincere testimony to your faith. The choice is faith. In Egypt, faith is not faith, it is an ethos. Adam's argument lends insight into what processes of purification/modernization entail. Similarly, anthropologist Lara Deeb elaborates on modernization through the distinction between the "modern/civilized" and the "not modern/civilized" among pious Shi'i Muslims in south Beirut. Among her interlocutors, being modern was explained by notions of authenticity, organization, and education, whereas not being modern was linked to tradition, ignorance, and incomplete morality. Being modern meant being "better than," and being "better than" depended on particular knowledge and awareness, a kind of enlightenment (Deeb 2006, 19). Deeb's interlocutors described a process of establishing correct meaning, understanding, and method of various religious and social practices and beliefs; what she describes as "authentication." Deriving from Talal Asad's idea of discursive tradition, Deeb reminds us that the preservation of "tradition" as opposed to those rituals, beliefs, and practices that are "authenticated" also has its own historical context (21). Thus, those who read religious texts, discuss the tenets of religious practice, or seek out theological education—as well as those who do not—are engaged in practices and discourses that have a history, and have been variously interpreted, debated, and authorized throughout that history. Contemporary notions of "authentication" in the form of religious education—to meet the needs of a world that asks questions of one's faith—are continuing these discourses and practices in a particular form. Similar to Deeb's pious Shi'i interlocutors, diaspora Copts rely not only on rationality and the accuracy of interpretation (of the Bible and the Church Fathers), but also on "personal knowledge-seeking" (23); you have to "actively believe," according to Adam.

In these processes of authentication in the transnational Coptic community, Western standards of measure for modern-ness and rationality cannot be ignored, not only because of imbalances of power, but also because those standards often permeate the differences between arguments around the separation of "faith" and "ethos." For Macarius and other Coptic-Americans, clergy or laity, the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt has disseminated incorrect knowledge, undergirded by inaccurate interpretations of the Orthodox Tradition. Many Copts point to the Coptic Orthodox Theological Seminary (also known as the Clerical College) in Cairo as spreading incorrect teaching. The College has been depicted as lacking in the credentials necessary to compare with other theological schools across Christian denominations.

One hot Fall morning at the Cathedral complex in ‘Abbassiya, Cairo, I met Abouna Mina, who had just finished a liturgical vestment fitting in the small chapel. Born in the United States, Abouna Mina had recently graduated from an Eastern Orthodox seminary in the Northeast and did not look positively upon the Clerical College in Cairo. We decided to visit the College, located in a nearby building. Entering the newly renovated structure, we sat in the administrative office waiting for the newly appointed head of the College. Abouna Daoud, along with Bishop Maqar, both products of the Baramous monastery, were the newest heads. The Baramous monastery was a place Abouna Mina knew well, since he had recently returned from there for his forty days, a period of training and reflection after being ordained to the priesthood in the Coptic Church.



Figure 33: Coptic Clerical College. Cairo, Egypt. Fall 2017. Photo by author.

Abouna Daoud and Abouna Mina sat opposite one another. Abouna Daoud described the issues of the Clerical College in Cairo as connected to ‘*azmat ad-dollar* [the dollar crisis], which referred to the downgrading of the dollar to Egyptian pound ratio in November 2016. “We need money to develop the curriculum, but there is none,” Abouna noted. “Many Copts cannot understand why they would donate money to the Clerical College. They donate to *ikhwat ar-rab* [charity], but they don’t understand why donating to theological education is important.” Limited funds and financial constraint across Egyptian society has reconfigured priorities away from theological education, centralized in the Coptic Church. Given this reputation, Copts have sought their educations outside of the theological confines of the Coptic Church, and the Oriental Orthodox family of churches. “You know, the most popular places for theological education in our Church is in Greece, Germany, and Italy. Okay, the Church in Greece is Chalcedonian, in Germany, Italy, and America, your teachers most likely will either be Protestants, or even

atheists, who are teaching theology…but, do you know that if the [Clerical] College or the [Higher] Institute [of Coptic Studies] established a doctoral program, do you know the word that would be used to describe this diploma? They'll tell you, 'this is a *local* PhD,' with no international accreditation or legitimacy." At international theological conferences, the Coptic Church is depicted as "weak" [*da'aifa*] in terms of theology, according to the headmaster.

He explained that his co-headmaster received a theology degree from the United States at an Anglican university. When he returned to Egypt and became co-head of the Clerical College, Copts complained that he had been educated by Anglicans and not Copts. Abouna refuted their argument, "…anyone who teaches theology in Egypt has received degrees from the other churches, many of which are not Orthodox! We receive degrees from a place. This does not mean our theology changes…We have to influence the place we find ourselves in [*ta'aseer al-makan*]." After our meeting, Abouna Mina and I left the Cathedral complex for dinner. In the car ride, I asked him about the conversation. "So, what is his background?" Abouna asked in reply. "He's legit, I get it, but at the end of the day, you're administratively the head of *the* theological school. I don't mind talking to you and getting to know you. You represent the place well, and you're obviously able to communicate, but it's a little more than that. You have to have the credentials."

"Credentials" become the authoritative means by which one can represent and speak for the needs of the Coptic community. Emphasis on obtaining an education from a "credited," usually Western institution is enmeshed within the demand to make Coptic Orthodoxy a "proper" religion—on par with other world religions, which meet certain criteria of textuality, education, or scholasticism (Masuzawa 2005). Since the colonial period in Egypt and now in new transnational contexts, Copts contend with their interpellation into "proper" religion, reorganizing the ways they understand their tradition and own religious practices. For Abouna and many others engaged in campaigns for renewal in the Church, credentials mean degrees from *Western*, accredited universities, regardless of the denomination.

Yet, in Egypt, many Copts have fought to keep and preserve their ethos and way of life from destruction and desecration by the Egyptian state, inter-communal conflict, and Western intervention. Abouna Bakhoum has discipled a group of Coptic youth since the 1990s in Coptic traditions, heritage, and political activism. In late Fall 2017, I exited the sweltering Cairo metro at the 'Ezbet Al-Nakhl station with a disciple of Abouna. We walked through the bumpy and narrow streets, passed a church and advertisements to apply for the Green Card Lottery. Abouna, a priest from 'Ezbet Al-Nakhl, had just returned from St. Paul's Monastery near the Red Sea, where, after losing his wife and daughter, he now lives as a monk. Here in 'Ezbet Al-Nakhl, Abouna rents a room, along with other visiting monks and priests, in a neighborhood building. Adorning the walls of his dorm room are hundreds of books on theology and Coptic history. Stacks of books even cover the floor. I asked Abouna what he understands as theological education and how it relates to the preservation of the Coptic tradition.

He noted: "The Greek fathers, for example. Why do we call them 'Greek' fathers? They were Copts, but they wrote in Greek. Those are our [Coptic] fathers. But the West took the tradition, or heritage, [*turath*] of our fathers, translated them, and studied their works. So, when you talk about [academic] methodology [in the West], they benefited more from our fathers than we did. But we excelled in something else. What they have is an academic tradition [*al-turath al-*

'almee], we have a practical tradition [*al-turath al-noskee/salookee*[223]]. What does that mean?...The first is a doctor of medicine, you give him a book on wounds and injuries, he reads it, but he is [still] unable to perform a surgery to fix these injuries. The second has never been to medical school, but he's able to perform surgeries [without these books]."

Abouna distinguishes the acquisition of cognitive knowledge from the cultivation of embodied knowledge. In *The Senses Still: Perception and Memory as Material Culture in Modernity* (1994), C. Nadia Seremetakis notes that *nostalghia,* or nostalgia from its Greek etymology, evokes the transformative impact of the past as unreconciled historical experience (4). Thus, the sensory must be understood both as an internal capacity and "dispersed out there on the surface of things" (6). Sensory interiors and exteriors pass into each other forging extra-personal experience. Embodied knowledge, therefore, lies in the understanding that the senses are meaning-generating apparatuses that operate beyond consciousness and intention. Truth becomes a collective, material experience. The Orthodox Tradition as experienced among the Copts cannot be separated from the historical contexts and collectively sensed experiences of the community—whether of persecution, of flourishing, or of crisis. Embodied knowledge is constructed out of the cross-communication of senses and the Coptic material world—in the soil, the air, the fleshy body, the sound of hymns, the smell of incense. It is a social aesthetics that is embedded in networks and histories of object relations and sensory exchanges. Memory and the senses co-mingle with one another across a collective social and somatic landscape (9).

The Coptic tradition is built through a topography of relations that are mapped onto Coptic bodies and collective memory. The Orthodox Tradition, as debated and lived by the Copts in Egypt, is one imbued with centuries of institutional changes and shifting landscapes. It is not one that can merely be read, memorized, and recited. It entails an embodiment of the past that lives out through the present. Each conversation and interaction, conflict and cooperation, is tied to the soil. Abouna's dialectical reasoning between the intellect and the body gestures to processes of modernization. The modern reorganization of the senses has impacted upon religious knowledge, practice, and theology—how one understands tradition has been mediated by a proper attuning to a modernization of the sensorium (Hirschkind 2011; Schmidt 2000). To understand the contemporary crisis of Coptic religious tradition, one must also acknowledge not only the sidelining of material relations and sensory exchanges from religious experience, but also the displacement of historically-specific contexts from the scholastic development of tradition.

In *Church, World, Mission*, Fr. Alexander Schmemann, a prominent Orthodox priest in America during the mid-end of the twentieth century, suggests that from an Orthodox perspective, the past is never merely a matter of history, but rather it by necessity implies theology. For Orthodox Christianity, the past is the essential channel of the Christian Tradition. However, Schmemann is careful to distinguish Tradition from the past, writing: "Tradition and past are by no means identical, yet the former comes to us from the latter, so that the true knowledge, i.e. understanding, of Tradition is impossible without the knowledge i.e. understanding of the past; just as the true knowledge i.e. understanding of the past is impossible without obedience to Tradition" (Schmemann 1979, 14). Tradition is connected to, but independent of the past. The past, or the historiographical understanding of history, is a channel by which Orthodox Christians can receive the Tradition.

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[223] This refers to a behavioral tradition connected to asceticism, or a monastic culture associated with a code of conduct and practical instruction.

For many Copts, understanding the past—the ways in which such debates have emerged—is precisely that which muddles what is the **T**radition and what is tradition—or the necessity to differentiate between faith and culture. The idea of a Coptic past that channels the Orthodox Tradition varies among interlocutors between Egypt and the United States. *Knowing* this past is quite different from *living* it. Again, in *Church, World, Mission,* Schmemann suggests that the Orthodox fixation on going back to the Early Church Fathers, their teachings and their vision is one thing, but "it is quite another thing, and much more difficult indeed, to relate that vision to the real, concrete life, shaped and conditioned as it is now by a totally different vision...It is as if, having found something essential and precious, we do not know what to do with it except analyze it in scholarly books and periodicals, from inside an academic ivory tower standing in the midst of general, although respectful, indifference" (Schmemann 1979, 17-18). Schmemann speaks to a kind of practical theology[224], in which practices have been shaped by theology, not simply taught at a university, but lived.

On this point, one Coptic interlocutor in New Jersey suggested the following: "The argument goes that we were just poor individuals going through the liturgy, and the priest purchased their position or it was [about] family…kind of a miserable [framing]. But that just didn't make sense to me. What did make sense to me was that there is something liturgical in our educational system…It isn't about the content, but what you are *doing* as a people." Theological education should not only lead to cognitive knowledge, but should also be shaped by embodied knowledge, through liturgical practice. Renewal of theological education, a "return to the [Early Church] Fathers," as Schmemann and other Eastern Orthodox thinkers of the late twentieth century have expounded upon, has been looked to by Copts both in Egypt and the United States as a way out of the bind of Protestant missions and their itineraries of enlightenment.

The transformations that took place under colonial missionary regimes produced new criteria of Christianity. Yet, Coptic contexts have also included successions of Muslim governance, where there were eras of oppression and persecution. These are also histories that impacted upon Coptic tradition. Yet, in contemporary campaigns of theological renewal that come in the context of transnational migration, Islamic contexts of Coptic life have taken on new meaning in the U.S. diaspora.

"Islamic mentality"

Sitting in the conference room of a Coptic center in the United States, a diaspora bishop and I spoke on the relationship of the Coptic Church between Egypt and the diaspora. He started to describe the monuments of Coptic history—the monasteries, the fathers of early Christianity, among them St. Cyril, St. Athanasius, and the influence of Pharaonic history of Coptic identity, the temples and artifacts. The bishop paused for a moment, placed his hand to his mouth and whispered aloud, "Except Islam...it screwed everything up." In Egypt, Islam is understood as the religion of the majority, and discriminatory practices against Copts are understood as a function of structural discrimination as well as social bias and targeting. The national project has from its commencement tended to disfavor and marginalize Copts in various ways, and Copts have been made the targets of attack. These contemporary contexts jointly have their historical realities where Copts have variously been massacred and places of worship and historical sites destroyed. In the diaspora, these memories are relived in the Synaxarium (or compilation of hagiographies),

[224] Not to be confused with the academic understanding, where "practical theology" refers to the study of theology in a way that is intended to make it useful to contemporary circumstances.

hymns, and liturgy. Yet, such memories of dispossession, violence, and discrimination have been reconfigured within American contexts of Islam, and the difference between Islam and other Middle Eastern religious traditions, like Coptic Orthodoxy, are firmly emphasized among Copts in the U.S.

Debate over theological education among Copts often centers on the following premise: the Coptic Orthodox Church stands far behind other Orthodox churches in terms of theology and education because after the Arab Conquest of 641 AD, religious education and tradition forms of practice were stifled. Islam was the main culprit of Coptic decline. Similar to my conversation with Phoebe from Chapter 4, Hany, a second-generation Copt from Staten Island noted that the current issues in the Church regarding education stem from the influence of "Islamic mentality." I asked him what he meant by this, and replied, "In Islam, they have this idea with their clerics, the sheikhs, that produce these fatwas. People just follow them. For example, they have this fatwa that their guy, Mohammed, or his followers or something drank camel urine for health reasons, so everyone else sees this as legit and they follow blindly. Muslims base their faith on following without questioning. We, as Orthodox, shouldn't be doing so. Our Church does the same stuff—if a bishop or whatever clergy says this, it must be true. We don't have that in our Tradition."

Hany constructs "Islamic mentality" as the "irrational"—tradition that is followed blindly through the adherence and trust of authority. Although Hany is differentiating and essentializing an Islamic tradition, "modernist" Muslims have levied similar critique against "traditionalist" Muslims (Fernando 2014; Deeb 2006; Bowen 2003). Being modern, rational, and progressive entails the adherence to notions of authenticity, organization, education, social consciousness, and piety. Whereas not being modern is linked to tradition, ignorance, and incomplete morality (Deeb 2006, 19). Achieving modernity as rationality, then, is about the acquisition of a particular knowledge and awareness of that which is deemed "proper." To understand what is "rational" to Hany, it must be understood that something can appear rational to someone only in terms of his understanding of what is and is not rational. If Hany's concept of rationality is a different one from a Copt in Egypt, for example, then it makes no sense to say that anything either does or does not appear rational to Hany in that other Copt's sense. According to Weber (1963), the non-rational animates human life, but rationalization focuses and directs the power of the non-rational. Religion affects action most forcefully when the tension between non-rational motives and a powerful rationalizing impulse is at its height. For Hany, this deferment to authority rather than personal discernment is not rational and therefore not within the purview of a modern, religious tradition.

This is of particular frustration to Copts in the U.S. By phone one evening in 2018, a New York priest recounted a meeting in Rhode Island. A bishop was in attendance and a member of the audience asked about a priest in Alexandria who had come under fire for one of his sermons that was believed to have non-Orthodox material. Copts accused the priest of heresy and a Facebook page attacked him on social media, not knowing that the sermon was almost word for word from St. Severus of Antioch, an early church father. The bishop was asked to respond. Instead, of stating this fact, he explained that the sermon was sound and in line with *Coptic* Church fathers. The man in the audience applauded the bishop for "defending the faith from heretics." The priest recounted that he was baffled. "Many Copts have no idea what they believe in. Much of these differences stem from other factors," he said. The priest argued that the manifestation of these accusations of heresy stem from the contemporary sectarian struggles in contemporary Egypt. "Shari'a was implemented under Sadat, in the constitution, which are

against the rights of the minority, and Pope Shenouda was trying to defend us. He was patriotic, as opposed to Father Matthew who was spiritual in the matter. 'Leave it to God.'" As discussed in Chapter 2, Pope Shenouda opposed the policies of President Sadat in the 1970s, especially when it pertained to Coptic rights and the rising tides of violence against the Copts. He was vocal in his opposition. In contrast, Father Matthew described such politics as worldly matters that the state should alone govern (Matthew 1964). Importantly, the public image of figures such as Father Matthew and Pope Shenouda is much of what is at play in these open controversies over theological issues, and with significant effects. Copts may not have necessarily read Father Matthew's writings, for example, but they are likely to know why they shouldn't even bother. Despite these internal debates and differences, the overarching issue for the New York priest is Islamic persecution and its effect on the Church. This is the central focus of conflict in the contemporary tensions of theological education. "With churches ransacked, manuscripts burned, it's a miracle the Church has survived until today," he noted before concluding the phone call.

What is striking is how theology and discussions around education are so readily interpreted through the ideological grid of sectarian identity. This identitarian association is another aspect, I would argue, of secularity's design, also propped up by particular sensibilities, dispositions, attitudes and assumptions. While Islam has certainly impacted upon the Coptic Orthodox tradition, Copts in the U.S. have increasingly had to contend with new contexts, new identitarian associations. John Watson notes the following in *Among the Copts*: "In fact, anyone entering the Coptic world must be prepared to find the real context of Coptic thought, which is not secular pluralism, which besets the western theologian, and is not a sphere, time-locked in fourth century Alexandria. The context of Coptic theology has been an anti-intellectual autocracy and has become renewed Islam" (2000, 126). Yet, as Copts have increasingly immigrated to the United States, they have increasingly participated in cultural war debates and internally deliberated on the role of Christianity in public life, viewing secularism as a primary threat to Coptic life in diaspora. Transnational anxieties of authority within the Coptic Church lie between the continued threat of Islam, reimagined within the Global War on Terror, as well as the threat of creeping secularism.

Secular Threat

Every Labor Day weekend for over a decade, Abouna Thomas, a popular priest from Cairo with a major following in the diaspora, holds seminars on family, social issues, and evangelism. With the largest program of missionary activities in Egypt and throughout the African continent, Abouna Thomas has made a reputation speaking on cross-cultural communication, ethics, and relationships. The parking lot of the Upstate New York hotel, where the seminars were to take place, was packed to the brim with cars from the tristate area.

The hall of the seminars held five screens that surrounded Abouna—two for projecting presentations to each of his sides, two others for translation to each side of the hall, and yet another behind him projecting a picture of Christ with a lamb, as the Shepherd. It was positioned just so, so that Christ was directly behind the priest in the camera shot. There were several other cameras broadcasting, one from the CYC network, a Coptic diaspora station that operates in English. Before beginning the first lecture, Abouna answered questions from the audience, brought to him on white pieces of paper. One such question which caught my attention asked how youth in America should approach issues such as same sex marriage. Abouna began, "In my opinion, you have persecution here more [as Christians] than we do in Egypt. Here, you have a secular society that imposes demands on you as Christians that are against your faith. In Egypt,

we may have a terrorist come and blow up a Church, but it doesn't affect our faith. You all are more of a minority [here, than we are there]." He continued to clarify, "We cannot say that homosexuality is natural. It is a sin, but we must not judge others. I am also a sinful person. Just because we are in a secular society and this is accepted, we don't let go of our faith and deny our Christ."

The bombs and attacks on Christians in Egypt, for Abouna Thomas, does not affect the faith. It only strengthens it. Yet, in the United States, Copts have been subjected to the liberal politics of pluralism, where ethical choices must be made in the everyday. In Egypt, minority politics of separation, repression, and resistance are reconfigured within the current American culture wars, where Copts share in common with evangelical and conservative others feelings of threat to religious values. The protection of "traditional values," as espoused by the likes of Russian President Vladimir Putin and the Russian Orthodox Church, has traversed theological divides, and has appealed to many Copts in the United States (Stepanova 2015). While Copts are a minority in both Egypt and the United States, in the United States Copts have to reckon their values in a public sphere that is dominated both by pluralism, but also by pervasive evangelical politics. The flattening of political contexts comes at the price of theological distinctions.

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One afternoon, at a Coptic convent in the New York-New Jersey area, I sat at the kitchen table with Tasoni Makrina, a *mukarisa* or female consecrated servant, and Michelle, her colleague at university, a strawberry blonde woman in her late 30s. Michelle had come to visit the convent and the retreat center, formerly owned by Dominican monks, recently purchased by the Coptic Orthodox church, as a possible retreat location for members of her Episcopal Church. Before touring the center, we sat around the kitchen and talked about their class together, on theology and evangelism. Michelle described how important the class was for her because of the different perspectives that classmates brought to the space. There was a rabbi, Eritrean priest, among others. I asked the two women why knowing theology is so important in contemporary American society. Michelle cited Pew Research's 2014 Study on Religion in America.[225] From the study, she recounted that the vast majority of millennials cannot tell you the details of their faith's theological stances on, for instance, hell or atonement. They have lost this vocabulary in their everyday nomenclature. Michelle thought aloud whether it would be better for youth to know their theology better, to be able to answer such questions, or, instead, to cultivate religious sensibilities, no matter what those sensibilities theologically look like, even if it is a "theistic morality" of sorts.

Tasoni glared at Michelle. "What sensibilities, though, are you talking about?" she asked. She seemed uneasy with the assumption that, for instance, even if Coptic youth become Muslim, at least they retain some religious sensibilities. Instead of addressing Tasoni's underlying concern of Truth, Michelle continued by detailing how different youth are today from what they were a few decades prior. "Unlike older generations, many youth don't engage in the words of atonement, for example. In the future, they will probably instead identify as 'mystics' rather than as Christians." To Michelle, this seemed like a fine proposal. Tasoni's reaction was between confusion and complete disapproval. Michelle grew up in a small town in the South. She explained that growing up you knew who the bad and good people were. The people who went to

[225] "Religious Landscape Study," *Pew* Research, 2014, http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/

Church were the ones who were good—they were respectful and of good character. The people who didn't go to Church were the ones who were not so good. The difference between these two groups of people growing up, for Michelle, was their attendance at Church. However, when she moved to New York City and met different people, of Muslim, atheist, and Jewish background, who were good and "holy," her perspective began to change. "I met the most holy Muslims and atheists, and the worst Christians. My perspectives flipped." Tasoni interjected "What do you mean by 'holy'?" Michelle didn't directly answer the question, only to say that her marker of "holiness," as church-going, shifted when she migrated.

Many Copts in the United States, across generations, are contending with the shifting modes of knowing and relating to their faith in new contexts outside of Egypt. The meaning of beliefs and practices is reconsidered in light of modern concerns. The revivalist movement among the Copts toward theological education seeks to actualize tradition in response to challenges of heterodoxy, secularity, and religious diversity.

Entanglements

Among Copts in both Egypt and the United States, campaigns for renewal in theological education have been centered on the ways religious knowledge has been transmitted and authority or expertise established. In the rationalization of the faith, colonial experience shaped both practice and understanding the faith. Just as under influence of Protestant missions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, modern education became and continues to be a means to construct a new vision of faith and community. The tension that emerged during colonial times between indigenous pedagogies and modern education resurfaces today, where the need for reform is articulated along the same lines of debate over what leads to "correct" knowledge of the tradition and its apt performance.

Theological education aims at proper interpretation of theology. This ethical commitment is not only tied to the past, but also the present. The practice of interpretation is not only committed to proper transmission of the religious tradition (from the past), but it is equally committed to making it understandable and meaningful in the present. The present is, of course, ever changing, which makes the work of theological education that much more pressing and never ending—bridging the finished past and ever-changing present.[226] The Protestant missions of the nineteenth and early twentieth century forced Coptic leaders to reform religious transmission through education, as a means to maintain community in a new landscape of diverse Christian ideas (Sharkey, 51). Discussions, commemorations, and venerations that occurred around and following the murder of Bishop Epiphanius evidenced what the stakes are for Coptic renewal in theological education. For many, the murder symbolized the stakes of knowing and transmitting the Tradition. In diaspora, these stakes are dually interpreted through new contexts of secularity and religious diversity that place emphasis on knowing and evidencing the faith. Knowing the ethos of the *transnational* Coptic Church, its shared values and spirit, by studying such shifts in religious pedagogy, one can grasp the entangled processes of authentication.

[226] Manfred H Vogel, "What can the term 'Jewish theology' possibly mean?" in *Problems in Contemporary Jewish Theology*, ed. Dan Cohn-Sherbok (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1991), 279-280.

Epilogue
Geopolitical Reverberations

A fundamental premise of this dissertation is that processes of localization entail historical and global flows, the conceptual and political conditions of possibility, and are enmeshed within structures of power. For the Copts, I have traced the power structures that have bound communities from the periods of imperial and colonial rule in nineteenth and twentieth century Egypt and in the periods of migration to the United States in the latter half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century. In the context of migration in the era of the War on Terror, Coptic lives have been altered and transformed through their objectification by American regimes set on politicizing their lives for imperial ends. Yet, as Part II of the dissertation sought to illuminate, migration has most drastically impacted how Copts legally translate their lives within U.S. asylum courts, within everyday interactions between themselves and Others, and how Copts understand their own religious tradition in light of transnational translation. In this epilogue, rather than summarize the keys arguments of the dissertation, I would like to reflect more deeply on my theoretical method.

The dissertation engages a multi-sited approach, as an ethnography of migration, but the pursuit of this research method is dually connected to a broader interest in imperial formation[227] and the entanglement of communities within the geopolitical interests of empire. While the dissertation examines sites of Coptic Christian migration, it more broadly pursues traces and transformations under the gaze of empire, and specifically U.S. Empire. Similar to Talal Asad's method of investigating the secular (2003), I look to the shadows of empire, as it were, because Western, and particular American, forms of life have come to be the criteria of global measure. Much of the work of Michel-Rolph Trouillot has traced the asymmetries and silences produced through the operationalization of power (2003; 1995). Anthropological investment in the empirical—this people, that place, in this moment—can often blind us to the processes of localization. The collapse of object of observation (Coptic Christian migrants) and object of study (U.S. Empire) results in a lack of attention to the broader configurations of power—how American imperial formation is altering the terrain of life for transnational Coptic communities.

The ordinary affects of imperial reconfigurations of life, thought, and practice are caught both in broad transnational circulations, but in the reformations of intimate life. Ordinary affects are not clear-cut causations, but rather fractious and multiplicitous. Kathleen Stewart has elaborated that ordinary affects are "not the kind of analytic object that can be laid out on a

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[227] Ann Stoler has elaborated on this concept at length. In *Duress*, Stoler writes, "Imperial formations prodigiously produce specialized lexicons of legal, social, and political terms, concepts, and enduring vocabularies that both innocuously and tenaciously cling to people, places, and things" (2016, 20). This concept is first formulated in Ann Laura Stoler, "On Degrees of Imperial Sovereignty," *Public Culture* 18, no.1 (Winter 2006): 125–46. A revised version of the article is included as chapter 5 in this volume. It is also elaborated in Ann Laura Stoler and Carole McGranahan, "Refiguring Imperial Terrains," in *Imperial Formations*, eds. Ann Laura Stoler, Carole McGranahan, and Peter C. Perdue (Santa Fe, NM: School for Advanced Research Press, 2007), 3–44. While Stoler differentiates between imperial formations and empire, I engage both of these concepts to gesture toward the temporal fluidity of power structures that bind communities like the Copts to certain discourses and forms of life, and the importance of American institutions and their geopolitical and economic influences over such communities in the present.

single, static plane of analysis and they don't lend themselves to a perfect, three-tiered parallelism between analytic subject, concept, and world" (2007, 3). To trace such ordinary affects, this dissertation has opened windows onto different epochs, analytics, and lifeworlds—from Egypt to the United States, from Naj Hammadi to New Jersey. Such ordinary affects are "a problem or question emergent in disparate scenes and incommensurate form and registers: a tangle of potential connections" (2007, 4). In mapping these affects, coexisting forms of composition, event, and scale are brought together to show the interlaying of minority migrant life. The layered textures of the scenes spattered throughout the dissertation—between different geographies, scales of power, and temporalities—speak to the elusive nature of power, where glimpses of it can be captured in its reflections and in its shadows.

Thus, I return back to Trouillot's notion of location and the process of localization. While anthropology has tended to conceive of places as localities or locales, where discrete functions occur, functioning as a closed unit, outside of power, history, and a global web of political and economic connections, location is always situated and intersectional. "One needs a map to get there, and that map necessarily points to other places without which localization is impossible" (Trouillot 2003, 122). In unpacking the transformations of Coptic life over the past century, in migrations to the United States, the dissertation has attended to the shadows of empire—where Coptic migration, persecution, and death has been politicized for civilizational struggles. Without attending to the dynamics of power that have elevated Middle Eastern Christians like the Copts to a community in need of saving, the institutional and material effects of such a discourse would be foreclosed. Of importance in Talal Asad and Saba Mahmood's work, for example (2012; 2015), the concept of religion as belief is part of a normative secular framework in which religion is disinvested of its materiality. Copts are Christians in the U.S., and while the preceding writings on their religious entanglements are vital for understanding the structure of this community, tracing the transnational circulation of discourses, political subjectivities, and religious practices re-directed me to the force of U.S. empire—in its reshaping of Christian-Muslim relations globally, reconfiguration of racial intelligibility, and reorganization of traditional religious life—that transnational Coptic life reflects and refracts.

As Mayanthi Fernando (2014) has aptly examined through her own research on Muslim French life and the contradictions of the French Republic's discourses, institutions, and political and legal practices that power operates asymmetrically whereby subjects are molded by discursive binds and geopolitical interests. The local, per Trouillot, is pregnant with processes of localization—where objects of observation illuminate broader functionings of power. Thus, just as Fernando's object of observation was framed in terms of a series of overlapping questions on possibilities of assimilation and civilizational incommensurability, where Muslim French cannot escape the sense that they are "consistently under the microscope," and but "one aspect of a larger web of interpellations to which they are subjected" (2014, 240), Copts are also caught as bound objects of imperial desire. Put differently, American Christian leaders, politicians, and policymakers frame Copts through overlapping questions of intervention as well as civilizational incommensurability—whereby Middle Eastern Muslims are in constant pursuit of Middle Eastern Christian decimation. Copts are caught in the middle of these civilizational battles between Islam and Christianity, as well as continued American imperial interests (political, social, and economic) in the region. These binds impact upon intercommunal relations, transnational communication, and religio-political subjectivity—how Copts develop an understanding of themselves in the homeland, in migration, and in diaspora. In post 9/11 America, these binds have mapped homeland contexts of sectarian violence onto diasporic

contexts of the War on Terror and Islamic difference that have foreclosed migratory solidarities and have aided imperial formations of civilizational destruction.

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On a warm August afternoon, I stood next to Samuel as he served customers at his food cart in downtown Manhattan. Samuel came to the U.S. after 2011 on the Lottery, working non-stop since then at this food cart—7 days a week, 8 hours or more a day. After selling a couple of hot dogs to tourists, he spoke to me of his dissatisfaction with the other Egyptian Muslims here, even mentioning how one of his close friends from Jersey City was allegedly murdered in Atlantic City by an Egyptian Muslim. "It's dangerous for us, even in America. There was even a whole [Coptic] family killed in Jersey City back in 2005," he said.

Samuel was referring to the brutal murders of Hossam (46), Amal (36), Sylvia (15), and Monica (8) of the Armanious family in Jersey City, which sent shock waves throughout the Coptic community. On January 10, 2005, family members were found bound and gagged, with their throats slashed and heads stabbed repeatedly. The Armanious family murders lit a spark between Copts and their Muslim neighbors. Rumors swarmed that the murders were a hate crime, directly connected to Hossam Armanious' angry exchanges with Muslims in Paltalk messenger chatrooms on Islam. Armanious' Paltalk name was "I Love Jesus," and was said to have been threatened to death by someone in the chatroom during an argument about Christianity and Islam.[228] Rumors also swirled that a Coptic cross tattoo on 15-year-old Sylvia's wrist had been stabbed.[229]

The funeral for the family in Jersey City erupted in chaos, after local Muslims, clerics and laity, came to pay their respects. The local bishop embraced a sheikh, and Coptic men began shouting at the bishop, berating him for inviting Muslims to attend the service. The bishop and the sheikh were taken away by local police officers into a nearby garage, as the group of Copts continued screaming and waving wooden crosses at the two religious leaders.[230]

During the somber funeral, Coptic protestors also carried signs reading "American Family Beheaded on American Soul. Welcome Bin Laden," with a photograph of the smiling family. Other Coptic mourners clashed with the protestors. "Muslims as a group kill people. Nobody else slaughters people. If it was a robbery, why tie their hands and cut their heads?" one Coptic protestor said. Another shouted, "Islam is not a religion!"[231] "We don't need any talk about Sept. 11 or Muslims!" a Coptic mourner retorted. Inside of the church, many screams and wails filled the spaces walls, which were packed with nearly 2,000 people. One man inside of the church screamed, "Muslim is the killer! Muslim is the killer!" before he was dragged away by

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[228] Anthony Ramirez, "Arrests Fail to Mend Muslim-Christian Rift," *The New York Times*, March 5, 2005, https://www.nytimes.com/2005/03/05/nyregion/arrests-fail-to-mend-muslimchristian-rift.html.

[229] Andrea Elliott, "A Bloody Crime in New Jersey Divides Egyptians," *The New York Times*, January 21, 2005, https://www.nytimes.com/2005/01/21/nyregion/a-bloody-crime-in-new-jersey-divides-egyptians.html.

[230] "Rage Explodes at Egyptian Family's Funeral," *The New York Times*, January 18, 2005. https://www.nytimes.com/2005/01/18/nyregion/rage-explodes-at-egyptian-familys-funeral.html.

[231] "Family, Friends Mourn Slain N.J. Family," *Fox News,* January 17, 2005, https://www.foxnews.com/story/family-friends-mourn-slain-n-j-family.

police. Mounir Dawood, then president of the American Coptic Association (ACA) said to reporters that "Muslim terrorists" were to blame.[232]

Yet, in March of 2005, two suspects were charged with murder. They were not Egyptian, nor Muslim. Instead, one was the upstairs neighbor, Edward McDonald, and his friend, Hamilton Sanchez. The two men pleaded not guilty at the time. In 2011, McDonald was sentenced to 300 years in prison.[233] Yet, suspicions, even until today, in Jersey City linger that it was a Muslim who was involved. The murder split Muslim and Christian Egyptians in Jersey City. The al-Saraya sheesha café is owned by Copts and caters to the local Muslim and Christian Egyptians. It also happens to be right next to the local church's second building for liturgy. For a time following the murders, the sense of comradery experienced between the Copts and Muslims went stagnant. Both communities bonded off of a shared immigrant experience, including Samuel who works with many Egyptian Muslim immigrants as a food vendor.



Figure 34: al-Saraya sheesha café. Winter 2018. Photo by author.

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Reverberations of Egyptian sectarianism, persecution, and discrimination have followed many Coptic migrants to the United States, where they interpret new intercommunal contexts dually through Egyptian national lenses and geopolitical framings of Islamic terrorism. As a migrant population in the New York-New Jersey area following 9/11, Copts translated the murder of the Armanious family through both collective memory of persecution and War on Terror discourses of Muslim violence. A New York Times article published a week after the killing described such tensions this way: "The murder case, while tragic on its own, has opened a

[232] "Funeral of Slain Family Brings Religious Tensions to a Boil," *The Gainsville Sun,* January 18, 2005, https://www.gainesville.com/news/20050118/funeral-of-slain-family-brings-religious-tensions-to-a-boil

[233] "300-year Sentence for Jersey City Man Convicted in 2005 Quadruple Killing is Upheld," *The Jersey Journal,* June 10, 2011, https://www.nj.com/hudson/index.ssf/2011/06/300-year_sentence_for_jersey_c.html

wound and produced an outpouring of emotion that even Egyptian Christians and Muslims struggle to explain. The answer is layered: there are old-world grievances, a largely unspoken anger toward Egyptian Muslims after 9/11, and a newfound immigrant power that has left the Egyptian Christians—a repressed minority in Egypt—unafraid to assert their voice here."[234]

Jersey City has the largest concentration of Copts in the United States, which is estimated to outnumber the local Muslims as well. Following September 11, inter-communal relations among Egyptians in Jersey City became more fraught, and the murder of the Armanious family was interpreted through anti-Muslim rhetoric that proliferated. Compounded with this after 2001 was the fact that Copts, too, experienced anti-Muslim racism, pushing Copts to distance themselves from their Muslim counterparts. Yet, almost two decades after 9/11, Copts and Egyptian-Muslims continue working, shopping, walking, and studying together. They share tables at al-Saraya, and continued to shop at the local halal meat store together. Despite these aspects of shared life in Jersey City, violence against Copts in Egypt continues to be interpreted through the War on Terror, like in the case of the Armanious murders. "Why did so many people go into the streets, expressing their anger and belief that this murder is terrorism?" a protester asked. "Because the same thing happened in Egypt." Bloody events in Egypt and murder of Copts in Jersey City are understood through a transnational discursive convergence, where local events are mediated by and made parallel to incidents in Egypt. Their specific context—from where and when these events take place and how they differ—is effaced and mediated by migratory contexts in the United States, where Copts are championed as the model victims of Islamic violence. The implications of this sort of hermeneutic enterprise, which sees these images and events as windows onto a geopolitical, civilizational battle between Islam and Christianity, levels the distinctions between communal contexts in doing so, and leads to different strategies of separation.

While this dissertation has taken seriously Coptic collective memory and contemporary experiences of persecution and violence, it has also attempted to unpack how such experiences have been utilized by American political, social, and legal power structures for imperial expansion—to "save" persecuted Christians around the globe. The naming of "persecution" surely has geopolitical implications. Identifying perpetrators of Coptic victimhood as Muslims of this or that village or as this or that Islamist organization or as the Egyptian state, a self-proclaimed "Islamic state," lends itself to anti-Muslim narratives in the West. These narratives further perpetuate military campaigns in Muslim-majority regions and further the securitization of Muslim populations in the West. These narratives aid in the continued discursive othering of Islam as the arch-civilizational enemy of a Christian, democratic West. Yet, in not attending to the shadows of these processes *within* a migratory community like the Copts, the ordinary affects of empire are effaced. The production of civilizational narratives of a Christian West and a Muslim East (of Christian victims and Muslim monsters) involves the uneven contribution of competing groups and individuals who have unequal access to the means of such production. As Trouillot aptly argued, "The ultimate mark of power may be its invisibility; the ultimate challenge; the exposition of its roots" (1995, xxiii)

This dissertation, an initial writing on this dynamic of Copts and U.S. empire, has been about anxieties; the kinds of anxieties that transnational religious minorities frequently face—anxieties around national belonging and transnational community. Such anxieties have been structured by the current contexts of the War on Terror and the aftermath of the Arab Spring

[234] Elliott, "A Bloody Crime in New Jersey Divides Egyptians."

throughout the Middle East. These contexts have changed the conditions of religious identity and inter-communal relationships, pushing communities like the Copts into complex legal, political, and theological predicaments. It is in the further examination of these predicaments that an excavation of the roots, traces, and shadows of U.S. imperial power can take place.

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