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**Gender and Identity in Contemporary Coptic Society**

Hazel Haddon

The American University in Cairo

Masters of Arts Thesis

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## **Dedication**

For N.H. and E.T.

## Abstract

This thesis attempts to analyze the role that class plays in determining attitudes to gender among upper middle class Egyptian Copts.

Through fieldwork, it explores the relationship between class, religion and gender in the lives of upper middle class Christian women. It argues that members of the upper middle class share a common 'class culture' and have access to 'cosmopolitan capital' which is constituted largely in social, cultural, educational and linguistic terms, and which sets them apart from the broader middle class. A distinctive class culture is produced through gender ideologies (described using terms such as 'open minded' and 'educated') that distinguish the upper middle class from other socio-economic groups which enforce different gender norms. This class culture and the resources provided by cosmopolitan capital allow upper middle class Coptic women to selectively reinterpret some elements of mainstream Coptic Orthodox teaching on gender issues, particularly teachings that are not compatible with the kind of gender norms practiced within the upper middle class (for example, mixed gender friendships, and romantic relationships prior to engagement).

These selective reinterpretations of gender norms are not rigorously policed by clerical authorities; but other areas of contestation between lay elites and church authorities do provoke reactions, particularly the struggles over divorce rights.

Upper middle class Coptic women use gendered symbols (women's dress, gender segregation etc.) to define the boundaries of their class and locate others in a particular class framework, showing that ideas about gender remain central to contesting and defining group identities.

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## Introduction

This thesis aims to explore the relationship between gender, class and religious identity among Egyptian Christians. Using ethnographic tools, it will argue that class plays an important role in the way affluent Christian women interpret gender roles and formulate religious identities.

Based on fieldwork carried out between ۲۰۰۹ and ۲۰۱۱, this thesis will explore how young Christian women from a particular social demographic – an affluent urban upper middle class, with a transnational sensibility created through international travel and residence, consumption of Western popular culture and bilingual education – relate to normative gender roles, particularly those endorsed by the Coptic Orthodox Church.

It will argue that the impact of narratives about gender roles on the lives of these upper middle class women is very different from their impact on poorer Christian women. Christian women who are part of the upper middle class interpret these discourses selectively, in ways which allow them considerable freedom of choice and independence – for example the freedom to work outside the home, or to socialize with male friends. They typically describe their choices as correct interpretations, because they are the product of “education” and being “open-minded” – both terms rooted in a particular class culture.

Class identity therefore provides young Christian women with the freedom to negotiate official and popular discourses about gender.<sup>۱</sup> These young members of the affluent upper middle class also described religious identities that were not sharply articulated along denominational lines, in contrast to lower middle class and working class Christians.

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<sup>۱</sup> I use the term discourse/discourses to refer to “the act of talking or writing itself;” “a body of knowledge content;” “a set of conditions and procedures that regulate how people appropriately may communicate and use that knowledge.” Following Foucault, this usage aims at linking “communication, knowledge and power.” *Routledge Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology*, s.v. “discourse.”

Recent scholarship has described a process in the second half of the twentieth century through which the Coptic community became centralized around an invigorated Coptic Orthodox Church.<sup>†</sup> This “revival” process and the emphasis on a shared Coptic identity that reinforces it was a primarily middle class phenomenon. The group of university-educated clerics who led the process of revival were products of a new Christian professional middle class, and the solidification of communal identity around the Church itself represented a displacement of a landed, aristocratic lay elite by this middle-class clergy.

This revival reflected a wider change among the Egyptian middle classes, who became increasingly economically vulnerable in post-Nasserist Egypt as the social bargain fractured, and university graduates were no longer guaranteed stable employment for life by the state.<sup>‡</sup> A revived Coptic Church and Coptic community provides a vulnerable Christian middle class with social networks, opportunities, economic and social support, as well as religious ministry. The urban upper middle classes, however, have had the power to mould their relationship with the church as they choose; their existing social and economic capital provides an alternative source of security to dependence on a communal identity and a strong church.

Drawing on this context of a particular upper middle class culture, this thesis will argue that young Christian women from this class interpret gender roles and religious identities differently, drawing on an upper middle class culture that defines class differences partly through different attitudes to female behavior.

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<sup>†</sup> Dina El Khawaga, “The Political Dynamics of the Copts: Giving the Community and Active Role,” in *Christian Communities in the Arab Middle East* ed. Andrea Pacini (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998) 172-190.

<sup>‡</sup> Under Nasser, the authoritarian regime guaranteed Egyptian citizens a minimum standard of living, including the provision of employment opportunities and government services (such as healthcare and education), in exchange for political support. One of the main beneficiary groups were lower middle class university graduates, who found stable jobs for life as part of the rapidly expanding state bureaucracy.



It will also argue that gender is a neglected category in discussions about Christianity in Egypt and more specifically about Coptic identity. By showing how gender is policed, it will reach some conclusions about gender as an important site of identity production.

## **Chapter 1: Writing about Christians in Egypt**

This chapter explores some of the key issues surrounding research on Egyptian Copts, such as the paucity of scholarship on the Copts in general and on Coptic women and gender issues specifically. It also highlights some of the problems inherent in writing about Coptic communities as an outsider given the problematic history of outsiders' selective interest in and deployment of apparent Coptic grievances, and briefly summarizes the methodology of the fieldwork, and explains why research was not restricted to Coptic Orthodox members.

### **Coptic women: hiding in plain sight**

This thesis was initially prompted by twin observations; firstly, the feeling that women and gender were critical elements of the debate about Copts and Coptic identity, and secondly, that analysis and research on these gendered debates, and Coptic women themselves, were curiously absent from much of the academic literature. Recent studies like Saba Mahmood's ethnography of Muslim women in Cairo have presented new models for understanding the intersection between religion, politics and gender in the region and particularly in Egypt.<sup>4</sup> However, academic literature has focused primarily on Muslim women. Mahmood's research argues that an Islamic women's movement, embedded in new spaces and employing new practices, has been overlooked by many Western feminist scholars who are too preoccupied with

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<sup>4</sup> Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: the Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, (Princeton University Press, 2005).

searching for signs of resistance to patriarchal norms. Other researchers have followed the opposite approach, explicitly examining Muslim women's religious practices for strategies of resistance or proto-feminist leanings.<sup>°</sup>

Missing from this picture, however, are detailed studies on Coptic women's experiences, from either post-colonial or from liberal feminist approaches. Yet Coptic women in Egypt have also experienced this Islamic awakening as external observers of a changing Islamic identity and practice which has strongly impacted shared public space and wider Egyptian culture, which they are part of.<sup>¶</sup> At the same time, the Coptic Orthodox Church has undergone its own process of religious and institutional change, usually termed a "revival"; and the implications of this for gender dynamics have not been fully explored.

### **Ethnographies of the particular**

This absence of knowledge about gender dynamics in Eastern Christianity has a political dynamic. Over the last several decades, scholarship on the Middle East has become more reflexive and more sensitive to the problems of knowledge production. Colonialist legacies by which the region was categorized according to immutable binaries, rendering it an inferior to an equally essentialized Western counterpart, have been reappraised. Labels like "the West" and "the Middle East" have been usefully problematized, and many unhelpful paradigms have been rejected.

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<sup>°</sup> For example, Sofia Nehaoua, "Prédicatrices de salon à Héliopolis: vers la salafisation de la bourgeoisie du Caire?" *Le Mouvement Social* no. 231 (2010): 73-76.

<sup>¶</sup> Many of my informants discussed these changes with me, and each had a different narrative and emphasis; Dina described a period of time around ten years ago when she was at university, when she noticed a trend towards "stricter" religious interpretations among her Muslim friends, which particularly impacted their attitudes towards mixed-gender gatherings; others such as Christina talked about her parents' memories of a Cairo in which women did not veil, in comparison with her own experiences. Irene saw the changes in terms of an eschatological trend of growing "darkness" that would soon reach an inevitable climax.

Some essentialized notions retain their power, however. Lila Abu-Lughod has argued that culture “is the essential tool for making the other”,<sup>y</sup> having replaced the nineteenth century narrative of race as a mechanism for creating “a rigid sense of difference.” She notes that in many cases, anti-colonial movements have adopted a “reverse Orientalism” in which local culture is reclaimed and celebrated (“A Gandhian appeal to the greater spirituality of a Hindu India”),<sup>^</sup> and the markers of difference remain unbroken.

In scholarship on the Middle East, religion often functions as a mechanism for creating this sense of cultural difference.<sup>^</sup> Discussing anthropology, Ranya Abdel Sayed argues that: “In the case of the ‘Middle East’ Islam has often been used as the qualifying trait that distances the Other from the West and allows the exoticism necessary to make the area a legitimate subject of inquiry.”<sup>^</sup>

Abdel Sayed suggests that one way to avoid the othering process that comes from a focus on the apparent Islamic nature of the region is to take up Abu-Lughod’s suggestion that anthropologists look to produce ethnographies of the particular and write against essentializing notions of culture, in this case by producing work on Egyptian Christians.<sup>^^</sup> Following Abdel Sayed, to write about Christians in the Middle East provides a chance to disrupt simplistic binaries that essentialise the region as “Islamic” and to problematize categories such as “Arab” “Egyptian” and “Copt.”

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<sup>y</sup> Lila Abu-Lughod. “Writing Against Culture” in *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present*, edited by Richard Fox, (SAR Press, 1991), 137-162.

<sup>^</sup> See above.

<sup>^</sup> Focus on Islam evokes previous colonial era (and much older) tropes whereby the inherent disorder and dysfunction of Islam was accordingly an explanation for the self-evident inferiority of the region.

<sup>^</sup> Abdel Sayed, Ranya. “Church Politics: A modernist Approach to the Role of the Coptic Orthodox Church of the See of Alexandria in Constructing Group Identity Among Egyptian Copts”, (Masters diss., American University in Cairo, 2003), 6.

<sup>^^</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

Analyzing Christianity and gender is a particularly powerful way to disrupt these existing binaries and essentialised categories. The essentialisation of Islam and the Middle East is produced through gendered narratives and images such as the veiled, oppressed Muslim woman, the harem, or the inherently misogynistic Islamic/Arab mind. Studies of gender and Christian necessarily complicate this simplified picture.

### **Literature review**

Abdel Sayed's judgment that most works on Copts are either "historical or theologically apologetical"<sup>11</sup> is still largely accurate. Much of the available research treats categories like "the Copts" as a single entity, rather than politically and culturally constituted community.

Some studies that do deal with questions of identity and cultural production include El-Khawaga, who outlined a Coptic "renewal", describing the changes in the structure of the Coptic community and in the role of the Church.<sup>12</sup> This process began as both a product of and reaction to modernization, in a way that parallels the emergence of Islamist movements.<sup>13</sup> This renewal included a dramatic increase in the number of Copts becoming monks, the reorganization and centralization of church life, and the "massive institutionalization"<sup>14</sup> by which lay Copts were brought into the Church structures as deacons or servers, changing the relationship between Church and believer.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 2.

<sup>12</sup> El-Khawaga, Dina. "The Political Dynamics of the Copts: Giving the Community and Active Role," in *Christian Communities in the Arab Middle East*. Edited by Andrea Pacini (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1998): 172-190.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 182.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 180.

Paul Sedra's study looks at how the Coptic community itself has been constituted as an actor.<sup>11</sup> Sedra argues that academic studies often focus on the Copts as a symbol and as an undifferentiated mass. His article instead describes the community as complex and marked by class divisions. Within these "class cleavages", Sedra locates the roots of different and competing narratives about Coptic identity and the place of Copts in Egypt.

El-Khawaga and Sedra's research suggests that the Coptic community is a not the product of primordial ethnic differences, but rather is politically constituted product of an Egyptian encounter with modernity. If books about women in Egypt fail to capture the Coptic experience, books about Copts rarely discuss women's lives in detail. Women are marginalized in these pages; confined to a single chapter, or the subject of brief observations that remain under-analyzed.<sup>12</sup>

One exception to this is Febe Armanios's article on gender and Coptic Orthodox society. In her analysis, she describes various contemporary discourses about women's expected roles.<sup>13</sup> She also discusses the growing popularity of the image of the female "virgin saint", who was martyred defending her virginity.

There are a few other works that touch on different aspects of Christian women's lives, such as Pieterella Van Doorn-Harder's unique monograph on Coptic nuns.<sup>14</sup> Van Doorn-Harder analyses the effect of the Coptic revival on nuns, showing that, like monasteries, convents experienced dramatic changes in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (she dates the changes from the 1960s). She notes some interesting trends, such as the significant numbers of educated

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<sup>11</sup> Paul Sedra, "Class Cleavages and Ethnic Conflict: Coptic Christian Communities in Modern Egyptian Politics," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 10, 2 (July 1999).

<sup>12</sup> Samer Soliman, in his discussion of issues that provoke protests by Copts, talks about sensitivities within Egyptian religious communities to losing members and notes that "it seems that when the lost member is a woman the loss and the triumph are doubled" without exploring this further. Soliman 2009, 140.

<sup>13</sup> Febe Armanios, "The Virtuous Woman: Images of Gender in Modern Coptic Society." *Middle Eastern Studies* 38, no. 1 (2002): 110-130.

<sup>14</sup> Van Doorn-Harder, Pieterella. *Contemporary Coptic Nuns*, (University of South Carolina Press; 1990).

young women taking religious orders, and changes such as the creation of an order of consecrated deaconesses in 1992.

There is also some useful research on Coptic women by contributors to *Between Desert and City: the Coptic Orthodox Church Today*.<sup>71</sup> This study builds on Dina El-Khawaga's work on the Coptic revival (and includes a chapter by her), exploring various contemporary elements of Coptic Orthodox life and worship. There are some interesting insights in Berit Thorbjornsrud's chapter;<sup>72</sup> Thorbjornsrud carried out fieldwork in the El-Salhiyya region of Greater Cairo, and she has describes the lives of the lower-middle class and working class Coptic women she encountered. She presents some arguments about the links between the identity of these women and their public religiosity, and analyses the active involvement of female servers in Church. She argues that there is a link between a young woman's activity serving in church and the respectability of her presence in the public space in the eyes of her community.<sup>73</sup> Although inherently limited – as a case study of a particular demographic – her research points towards interesting links between official church discourses and the lived experiences of certain Coptic women.

A dissertation by Ereeny Zaki, looking at poor Coptic women in the El-Salaam city region of Cairo, provides an interesting contrast to the subject of this thesis – the lives of upper middle class Coptic women.<sup>74</sup>

Although these studies of Coptic women provide useful information, some of them adopt the same flawed approach outlined in Abdel Sayed in her study – a failure to problematize the

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<sup>71</sup> Nelly Van Doorn-Harder and Kari Vogt, *Between Desert and City: the Coptic Orthodox Church Today*, (Oslo: The Institute for Comparative Research in Human Culture, 1997).

<sup>72</sup> Berit Thorbjornsrud, "Born in the Wrong Age: Coptic Women in a Changing Society" in *Between Desert and City: the Coptic Orthodox Church Today*, ed. Nelly Van Doorn-Harder, Kari Vogt (Oslo: The Institute for Comparative Research in Human Culture, 1997), 167-89.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 188-9.

<sup>74</sup> Ereeny Zaki, *Poverty, Gender and Religion: A Reflection on the Status of Coptic Women in Poor Areas*, Masters thesis 2004.

boundedness of the Coptic community. Zaki's research is problematic for a different reason; the study looks at the lives of poor Coptic women in a way that is embedded in elite discourses about feminism, gender and Christianity. She writes that:

The women in my study display characteristics of subordination and lack of awareness of their interests and their needs. During the fieldwork, there were only few cases of women who were able to demonstrate high levels of awareness of some of the injustices against them as women.<sup>٧٤</sup>

Her study replicates the kind of errors that Mahmood had warned against, whereby a researcher projects a particular kind of feminist discourse and praxis onto the lives of her subjects. In this case, the cultural gap is not between a Western researcher and her third world subjects, but instead between Zaki, an Egyptian Coptic woman, and the Egyptian Coptic informants she works with. The only difference between the researcher and the subjects in this study is the socio-economic factor – she is upper middle class and they are members of the urban poor. It is this class element, and its impact on identity and conceptions of gender roles, that this thesis hopes to explore.

### **Defining a Christian upper middle class**

This research project was originally envisaged as a study of members of the Coptic Orthodox community only. This approach follows official Church narratives and much of the scholarly literature, which present the Coptic Church as “native” and authentically Egyptian.<sup>٧٥</sup>

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<sup>٧٤</sup> Ibid., ٩٣.

<sup>٧٥</sup> . The Coptic Orthodox Church describes itself as the authentic location of Egyptian Christianity through an unbroken chain of orthodox spiritual authority stretching back to the Apostle Mark's evangelism in Egypt. Until the Council of Chalcedon in ٤٥١ AD, there was a single church in Egypt; after this theological schism, the Egyptian church split into two – the Coptic Orthodox Church, and the Greek Orthodox Church. The Coptic church became the dominant expression of Egyptian Christianity, and today around ٩٠ per cent of Egyptian Christians are members, but both churches claimed this legacy as the inheritor of orthodoxy and the legacy of St Mark, and both



Other Christian denominations are not perceived as representing “Egyptianness” with the same authority.<sup>٢٦</sup>

Following these narratives, I began my fieldwork with the assumption that a study of Christianity in Egypt necessarily required a strict focus on Coptic Orthodox believers, as authentic Egyptian Christianity would surely be located there, and encounters with other Christian denominations would be as isolated groups of recent converts, engaging in “non-authentic” religious practices, largely unconnected with the lives of the orthodox faithful, and unsuitable for an anthropological approach that seeks “native” informants. A quote from Piernella Van Doorn-Harder’s study on Coptic nuns played over in my mind, from an encounter at the beginning of her fieldwork when she had encountered the mother superior of a nunnery:

She explained to me the Coptic veneration of the saints and expressed her regrets that the people of my church, the Protestants, did not venerate the saints...after she had disappeared several excited nuns rushed into the room; *ummina ra'isa*, the mother superior, had spoken to me and in spite of my Protestant background had approved of me.<sup>٢٧</sup>

This was the kind of attitude I expected to encounter – one which viewed members of other Christian denominations (particularly Protestant churches) as problematic and perhaps “less” Christian.<sup>٢٨</sup>

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churches to this day maintain a Patriarch of the See of St Mark, with the Byzantine patriarch based in Alexandria and the Coptic patriarch in Cairo.

<sup>٢٦</sup> For example: “The Coptic Orthodox Church can be considered the national Church because of its ancient roots in Egypt.” Christine Chaillot, *The Coptic Orthodox Church* (Paris: Inter-Orthodox Dialogue, ٢٠٠٥) ١٠.

<sup>٢٧</sup> Van Doorn-Harder, *Contemporary Coptic Nuns*, ٧.

<sup>٢٨</sup> The doctrinal differences between the Coptic Orthodox Church and Protestant denominations are significant and are considered to be much greater than the differences between Catholic and Orthodox theology (although the Coptic Orthodox Church is in communion with neither). Some of the major differences are on the nature of Christ, the origin of the Holy Spirit, the interpretation of the seven sacraments, the refusal of orthodox tradition, the Protestant belief in salvation through faith alone, failure to venerate the saints, and a lack of belief in intercession. (Shenouda :١٩٨٨)

As is so often the case in fieldwork, I found that my initial categorizations were inadequate. Following Trotter,<sup>79</sup> I planned to explore existing social networks rather than selecting unconnected individuals, to better situate my findings in an authentic social context. Situating my fieldwork amongst lay members of the upper-middle class removed me dramatically, almost totally, from the world of Van Doorn-Harder's abbess and her wary distance from Protestantism. I started to find that not only were social networks formed regardless of denomination, but even the family networks of my informants often cut across different denominations. Most strikingly, I found that the Coptic Orthodox women I was speaking to did not follow the rigid lines of denominational segregation in their religious lives, either.

Taking up an invitation to attend a bible study group from Sylvia, a Coptic Orthodox friend who knew I was interested in learning more about Christians in Egypt, I was struck by her participation in a religious community that was not only operated completely outside both formal and informal Coptic Church networks, but also followed an explicitly non-denominational approach and included members from a variety of different Christian backgrounds.

The study group was starting a new series of sessions when we joined, in the autumn of 2010, having taken a month's break for the summer holiday. It was a non-denominational group that had been formed by a group of attendees at an "Alpha" course at a large Protestant evangelical church in downtown Cairo, Qasr Dohara.<sup>80</sup> The group, of mixed denomination, had

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<sup>79</sup> Trotter II, Robert T. "Friends, Relatives and Relevant Others: Conducting Ethnographic Network Studies" in Mapping Social Networks, Spatial Data, and Hidden Populations. *Ethnographers Toolkit*, ed, Jean J. Schensul, Margaret D. LeCompte, Robert T. Trotter, II, Ellen K. Cromley, Merrill Singer. (AltaMira Press 1999), 1- 50.

<sup>80</sup> The Alpha course is an introductory course to the basics of Christian belief and practices; it originated in the Anglican Church but is expressly non-denominational and is held in churches of different denominations around the

chosen to continue their biblical discussions in a regular session, and word of mouth had expanded the group from an original five to a current maximum of ٣٤, as those who participated invited their friends. Around ١٥-٢٠ attended each week.

In the group, according to Dina, one of the informal organizers and a veteran Alpha course leader, the “majority” were Coptic Orthodox, with a couple of Protestants (including herself) and “very few” Catholics. Although the group had coalesced around an activity by a Protestant church (and formulated along Protestant lines), the bible study itself was not officially affiliated with Alpha or with Qasr Dohara Church, nor did the group address discuss topics with an explicitly Protestant agenda. Dina described to me the way the group avoided differences:

We have a friend, Mary; she’s very Orthodox, but we never get into things that can... make problems...like the saints or Mary. These topics are not discussed. We usually discuss things from the Bible. We just read a paragraph from the bible and start discussing it.

Other members of the bible study group showed the same kind of complex religious affiliations and experiences; Irene, whom I later interviewed, came from a Catholic family but was now evangelically-oriented (but did not like to describe herself as belonging to a particular denomination). Youssef, the group’s powerful leading presence, came from an observant Coptic Orthodox family and now, like Irene, was Protestant-oriented.

As I started to meet with other informants, away from the bible study group, I wondered if these kinds of patterns would be replicated, and I found that the other women I interviewed had similar attitudes and experiences. They had friends and often family members who attended different churches; and they too had participated in religious activities outside of their churches.

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world. For information on Qasr Dohara, see Dowell, Anne, “The church in the square: negotiations of religion and revolution at an evangelical church in Cairo,” Egypt, Masters thesis ٢٠١٢.

Even Christina, an informant who was strongly committed to her Coptic Orthodox identity, had experimented, attending an evangelical service at Qasr Dohara. Several of my other informants had gone from one denomination to another, and sometimes back again.

Instead of encountering the discrete Christian communities I had initially expected, I found myself mixing with groups of people who were interested and engaged with Christianity, but did not attach much importance to denomination.<sup>71</sup> Upper-middle class Christians could not easily be segregated into denominations, without dividing parents from children, friendship groups, social networks, and even bible study groups.<sup>72</sup>

The rigid boundedness of the Coptic Orthodox community – emphasized in the literature - did not seem true for my informants. I found myself rethinking my conceptions about the way upper middle class Christians in Egypt experience religious categories, and I was faced with several choices. I could have expanded my fieldwork in order to locate and select informants with stricter ties to the Coptic Orthodox Church and tradition, and undoubtedly it would have been possible to find individuals like this. The young Christians I built relationships with would often make distinctions between a “strict Copt” or “very Coptic” and someone who was “not so religious”, and I could have sought out contacts using these kind of descriptions.

But such an approach felt artificial and would have required that I seek out research subjects who conformed to my definitions of authenticity. A more honest approach seemed to be

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<sup>71</sup> Various different Protestant missionaries arrived in Egypt in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and many aimed their efforts at Copts rather than Muslims. Under influence of missionary-founded schools, many Copts did convert, including some power and wealthy families, such as the aristocratic Wissa from Assiut. These missionary schools had a major impact on the Coptic community, influencing the process of revival and reform by spreading new ideas about modernity and about church-lay relationships.

<sup>72</sup> Mixed-denominational marriages were also fairly common, although I did not have the chance to interview any of these couples.

to chart the way my expectations, as an outsider, were interrupted by the lived reality of my informants.

### **Methodology and fieldwork**

My fieldwork, conducted between 2010 and 2011, was based on qualitative research methods – participant observation and semi-structured interviews. Initially, I built relationships with an existing group of Coptic contacts and friends, and I was able to engage in informal participant observation of daily lives as well as of specific religious practices and activities. A second main stage of participant observation started towards the end of the summer of 2010; a contact invited me to accompany her to a bible study group, and I attended the sessions with her for several months.

I started my formal interviews towards the end of 2010, starting with several bible group members, and then branching out to other contacts. I focused, in my semi-structured interviews, on trying to map out existing social networks as much as possible; for example interviewing (separately) two cousins, or two close friends, to try to understand the social context in which my informants operated. These interviews were generally recorded, and took place in cafes, or in the informants' homes. I continued my participant observation over this period.

### **The insider/outsider binary**

Anthropological research on Christian communities in the Middle East can be difficult, as it draws on a particularly problematic history of foreign interference, which complicates the already difficult job of the researcher who must be conscious of her positionality and voice.

European colonial powers justified their actions in the region on the basis of protection of native Christian groups, claiming jurisdiction over religious minorities under Ottoman rule. In Egypt, colonial rule was marked by a divide and rule approach. The nationalist movement explicitly rejected this divisive approach, deploying symbols of religious unity, and many Copts were active in the struggle against colonialism. However, Coptic issues remain embedded in discourses about national identity and authenticity, rendering them highly sensitive, particularly to any perceived foreign agendas or foreign interest.

As a non-Egyptian, non-Coptic researcher, studying the Coptic community required that I situate myself within this complex network of competing and overlapping discourses. It also colored my encounters; I found simply explaining that I was researching Coptic issues would often lead Egyptians, both Muslim and Christian, to explain their take on the issues at some length. Their explanation was not a response to my purposely vague statement of interest, but rather to their assumptions about my opinions (as a foreigner). These responses were so remarkably uniform that I started to note down the pattern; upper middle class Muslims would usually respond to the topic with a defensive statement about the lack of conflict between Muslims and Christians in Egypt “normally” or “in the past” and the attribution of violence today to a few extremists. I never mentioned an interest in studying discrimination, or Islamic-Christian relations, but many of my Muslim interlocutors assumed that this was my purpose and

that they would need to challenge my (presumed) assumptions that Christians in Egypt were oppressed by Muslims.<sup>33</sup>

My findings are therefore the product not only my own subjective experience as an outsider to Coptic and Egyptian culture, but as an outsider, provoking a particular range of assumptions and reactions among the people I spoke to. If my encounters were shaped by my outsider status, it is worth noting research conducted by those with “insider” status is not unproblematic. Ganiel and Mitchell, discussing religious ethnography, argue that insider/outsider status is not fixed, and that “one’s religious identity is mediated through a host of other social identities.”<sup>34</sup> Some of the scholarship on Coptic issues does assume a privileged right to speak on behalf of research subjects because the author shares a religious identity with them. In fact, identities are multifaceted; each researcher is situated in a certain way in relation to the people they study.

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<sup>33</sup> My sense is that most Egyptians Muslims, even affluent middle class graduates, know relatively little about the realities of Christian worship. Anthony Shenoda provides an example when he notes that a Protestant prayer held in Tahrir Square in 2011 was widely described in the press and on social networks as a “Coptic mass” - Anthony Shenoda, “Reflections on the (In)Visibility of Copts in Egypt,” *Jadaliyya*, last modified May 18, 2011, [http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/1624/reflections-on-the-\(in\)visibility-of-copts-in-egyp](http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/1624/reflections-on-the-(in)visibility-of-copts-in-egyp).

<sup>34</sup> Gladys Ganiel and Claire Mitchell, “Turning the Categories Inside-Out: Complex Identifications and Multiple Interactions in Religious Ethnography”, *Sociology of Religion* Vol. 67, No. 1 (Spring, 2006), 3-21.

## Chapter ٧: The Production of Culture and Community in Egypt

This chapter will analyse some of the key debates that surround the definition of Copticness, the minority status of the Coptic community, and the relationship between Copts and state. It will look at the Coptic “revival”, related processes of change that reformulated the church, the Coptic community and the relationship between the two in the twentieth century, creating a revived Coptic identity that focused inward on the community. It will attempt to describe these processes of change in class terms.

### Defining Copts

As Paul Sedra has noted, the act of defining a distinct Coptic community is, by its nature, political and contentious.<sup>٧٥</sup> To speak about “the Copts” is to enter into a coded debate about the nature of Egyptian identity and the relationship of the Egyptian state to its citizens.

Various conflicting and overlapping definitions of Copticness exist in contemporary Egyptian society. For some, ‘Copt’ has been reclaimed as a signifier of a kind of Egyptian ethnic identity. The reimagining of the Egyptian past in light of the pharaonic discoveries of the ١٩<sup>th</sup> century has led some (particularly secular Christian elites) to use the word to describe a unique ethnicity that all Egyptian natives share, regardless of religious allegiance. According to this view, there are “Muslim Copts” and “Christian Copts”.

Another interpretation is to use “Copt” as both an ethnic and a religious marker, and the autochthonous, authentic Egyptian-ness that it represents is a quality possessed only by Christian

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<sup>٧٥</sup> Paul Sedra, “Class Cleavages and Ethnic Conflict: Coptic Christian Communities in Modern Egyptian Politics.” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* ١٠:٢ (١٩٩٩). : ٢١٩-٣٥.



Egyptians. Christian Egyptians (Copts) therefore are constructed as a racial and ethnic group that is separate from Muslim Egyptians, descended from a glorious Egyptian past (normally the pharaonic period). The religious division in society is therefore imbued with an ethnic quality in which Christians are Copts and Muslims are Arabs, rendering Muslims the descendants of foreign invaders and therefore less authentically Egyptian.

### **Defining a minority**

Within Egypt, Copts currently make up around 10 per cent of the population.<sup>31</sup>

Historically, the Coptic community has been constituted in different ways, with some currents emphasizing Copticness as a racial or religious category that separates Copts from other Egyptian citizens, and others denying that religious affiliation has any meaning in the public space, and preferring to describe it as a confessional identity that is (or should be) restricted to the private sphere.

In the 1990s, with a resurgent public Islamism visible in public spaces, and concern about Islamist violence, the question of Coptic identity and status within Egyptian society was again a contentious topic. In 1993, a proposed conference entitled “The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Minorities and People of the Arab World and the Middle East” included the Copts on the agenda and was to be held in Cairo. There was a strong public reaction, and a number of key figures, including Coptic Orthodox Patriarch Shenouda III,

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<sup>31</sup> Estimations of the size of the Coptic Orthodox in Egypt are fairly contentious; official figures from a 1996 census estimate the number to be 6.3% (O’Mahony ‘The Politics of Religious Renewal: Coptic Christianity in Egypt’ in *Eastern Christianity*, ed. O’Mahony, 2003, 11), while Church estimates are much higher, sometimes as much as 20 per cent. Reliable estimates should in theory be obtainable, as citizens are regularly required to give information of their religious affiliation (e.g. to be displayed on the national identity card). The Church must also be able to provide reasonable estimates through figures for baptisms, marriages and funerals.

prominent lay Coptic voices like Samir Morqos, and Muslim thinkers such as Mohamed Hasainan Haikal condemned the designation of Copts as a minority.

These critics of this conference's agenda argued that that the division of Egypt into Muslim (majority) and Christian (minority) was an inaccurate description of Egyptian society, as Christians and Muslims were both Egyptians and religious affiliation was not a relevant way to divide the nation.

The term minority in Arabic (*aqalliyya*) can be interpreted to imply lesser status rather than numerically smaller, and therefore imply a particular power relationship rather than demographic reality. The response, led by the regime and other key stakeholders in the official narrative of Egyptian unity such as the Coptic Orthodox Church hierarchy, represented a rejection of a threat to an official national unity narrative. To reject the label of minority when attached to Egyptian Christians is to reject the implication that religious affiliation affects the relationship between citizen and state.

Paul Sedra has identified two strands of thought within Coptic society, the “national unity strand” and the “persecution strand”. The national unity strand positions “Copts as so fully and harmoniously integrated into Egyptian society as to be indistinguishable from Muslims”.<sup>75</sup> In this discourse, Copts and Muslims have been historically united, particularly against foreign (i.e. Western) invaders such as the Crusaders, the French and the British. In contrast to this stands the persecution strand which views the Copts as an ethnically separate group from the Muslim counterparts, who have suffered at the hands of an Islam-dominated state.

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<sup>75</sup> Sedra, 221.

Official discourse of the Mubarak era sanctioned a version of the national unity narrative, publically rejecting, as in the case of the ١٩٩٤ conference, any implications from perceived outsiders, that Copts were disadvantaged by their religious status. The Coptic Orthodox Church, which had reached what Mariz Tadros describes as an “entente” with the Mubarak regime, also sanctioned a version of this narrative, particularly in its interventions on issues relevant to public life.<sup>٣٨</sup>

The vigorous public response by various establishment voices to the proposed conference on minorities is a potent example of how any attempt to challenge this state-endorsed representation is considered to be a threat – particularly when the discussion is started by “foreigners”. The national unity discourse consistently asserts that Copts and Muslims must unify against foreign threats and that attempts to frame Coptic identity in other ways are hostile to the Egyptian nation.

Samer Soliman argues in his ٢٠٠٩ article on Coptic protest that, since the incident in ١٩٩٣/٤, it has in fact become more acceptable to apply the term minority to the Copts in public debate, and to acknowledge that there is a Coptic question.<sup>٣٩</sup> He quotes a ٢٠٠٦ article by Mohamed Hasainan Haikal in which he uses the term minority to describe Egyptian Copts, in contrast to his stated position in ١٩٩٤.

It may be that towards the end of the Mubarak era, some of the rhetoric had shifted, and some sense of difference between Copts and Muslims could be acknowledged publically without provoking accusations of sectarianism and treachery; but the main elements of the national unity discourse were still deployed to shut down real debate about topics such as sectarian violence, religious persecution, legal inequalities and barriers to freedom of worship, etc. When the so-

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<sup>٣٨</sup> Mariz Tadros, ‘Vicissitudes In The Entente Between The Coptic Orthodox Church And The State In Egypt (١٩٥٢–٢٠٠٧)’ *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (٢٠٠٩), ٤١:٢٨٧.

<sup>٣٩</sup> Soliman, ١٤٠.

called “Coptic question” is raised, the underlying issues and debates are ignored and the problem is concealed by rhetoric. For example, violence against Copts is attributed to Islamist terrorists (who are also a threat to wider Egyptian society) or its sectarian dimensions are ignored, for example in the ٢٠١١ incident in which a Muslim policeman shot six Christians who were unknown to him.<sup>٤٧</sup> This avoids challenging official narratives that define all Egyptians as equal citizens regardless of religion.

### **The Coptic revival and Coptic identity politics**

Despite the deployment of the national unity narrative at key moments to shut down debate about contentious issues, framing Coptic identity in ethno-religious terms has become increasingly dominant with the Egyptian Coptic community. A particular minoritarian discourse has taken shape in the second half of the twentieth century, produced and sustained by a “revived” Coptic community, centered on the Coptic Orthodox Church.

Initial processes of reform and revival within the Coptic community were the result of an exposure to Western modernity. Anthony O’Mahony has characterized this first series of changes as the “lay” reform phase.<sup>٤٨</sup> In the ١٩<sup>th</sup> century, the Coptic community in Egypt was headed by aristocratic, land-owning Coptic families, who, like the Muslim elite of the time, were exposed to Western ideas and practices. Under Mohamed Ali, and later under the British protectorate, other, non-Coptic Christian denominations started to establish churches and communities in Egypt.<sup>٤٩</sup> These new churches and missionaries began to establish schools and educational establishments, which were popular among the Coptic elite, who were then exposed

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<sup>٤٧</sup> Egypt Independent, “Governor denies sectarian motivation behind Minya train shooting,” January ١٢, ٢٠١١. <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/governor-denies-sectarian-motivation-behind-minya-train-shooting>

<sup>٤٨</sup> O’Mahony ‘The Politics of Religious Renewal: Coptic Christianity in Egypt’ in *Eastern Christianity*, ed. O’Mahony, ٢٠٠٣, ٧٥.

<sup>٤٩</sup> In the case of Greek Orthodoxy, this was a re-establishment.

to new religious ideas and to new models of Christian practice, hierarchy and priesthood.<sup>٤٧</sup> This exposure led to complaints that the Coptic clergy was “backward”<sup>٤٤</sup> and pressure was put on the Coptic religious establishment to reform to remedy its stagnation in the face of modernity.

With the formation of the *majlis al-milli* (community council) in ١٨٧٤, the Coptic elite had a formal tool for overseeing communal affairs and for pressing for reform. As well as supervising the financial affairs of the community, there was an emphasis on educational reform, and improving the educational level and overall quality of the Coptic priesthood. Patriarch Kyrillos IV (١٨٥٤-١٨٦١), the “father of reform (*abu al-islam*)” began training programs for priests and deacons. Under the reign of his successor, Kyrillos V (١٨٧٤- ١٩٢٧), a council scheme to form a theological seminary, which would provide clergy for the first time with systematic training, was approved by the patriarch and eventually started functioning in ١٨٩٣. Various charitable and educational associations were also founded, and Coptic schools and hospitals were established.

In this period, the Western-educated lay elite set the agenda, using the community council as a tool to modernize the community. The second “monastic” phase of reform<sup>٤٥</sup> would result, ultimately in the displacement of the landed Coptic elite in favor of Coptic clerics.

This “monastic” revival that started to take place in the early ٢٠<sup>th</sup> century was a result of some of the earlier changes. As part of the movement towards educational reform and modernization of the community, Habib Guirgis, an archdeacon who had been among the first students at the newly inaugurated theological seminary, created a committee to provide religious instruction to Coptic youth.

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<sup>٤٤</sup> O’Mahony, ٧٦.

<sup>٤٥</sup> O’Mahony, ٧٦.

The committee, which was established in ١٩١٨, formed branches all over Egypt, with the aim of encouraging the religious instruction of Coptic children between the ages of four to the end of high school.<sup>٤٦</sup> This “Sunday School Movement” attempted to strengthen the community in the face of pressure from other denominations and missionaries.

The movement was massively influential, providing a centralized, unified model of religious education that reinvigorated religious identity, stressing the centrality of the Church in a Christian life that had a lasting impact on the Coptic community.

One of the results of these educational reforms was the influx of a new group of middle class, often university-educated Copts who taught in the Sunday schools before choosing to enter the monasteries. Many then went on to join the clerical hierarchy (among them Nazeer Roufail, the future Patriarch Shenouda III).<sup>٤٧</sup>

The “monastic” project of reform differed from the lay movements of the late ١٩<sup>th</sup> century in its aims. Whereas the lay reformers had focused on modernizing and rationalizing the community and the church as part of a project to build a modern Egypt, the new middle class monastic reformers were concerned with effecting a spiritual revival in a church that was threatened by resurgent and sometimes hostile Islamist politics and the presence of other Christian denominations. This revival would aim to define a Coptic identity which looked inward, focused on family, church and community.<sup>٤٨</sup>

The rise of this generation of middle class reformers also coincided with political changes that displaced the Coptic old landowning families. After the ١٩٥٢ revolution, land reforms and

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<sup>٤٦</sup> Chaillot, ٦٩.

<sup>٤٧</sup> In the Coptic Orthodox Church, the clerical hierarchy (bishops and the patriarch) are drawn from the monastic orders.

<sup>٤٨</sup> Dina El-Khawaga and many others see parallels with Islamist revival movements that date from the same era, noting the same emphasis on religious identity “as ‘the total meaning’” (El-Khawaga, ١٧٧).

subsequent emigration contributed to an increasing marginalization of the former leading Coptic families. Kyrillos VI had no allegiances to this lay elite and could therefore build a strong, cooperative relationship with President Gamal Abdal-Nasser.

### **Creating an imagined Coptic community**

The revival process involved significant institutional reform of both church and community, restoring the authority of the church hierarchy and re-centering communal life on the church. Control of monasteries was centralized and numbers of bishops and priests were increased.<sup>49</sup> Bishops, who had previously had largely independent control over their dioceses, were now subject to more patriarchal oversight. Through a process El-Khawaga describes as a “massive institutionalization”,<sup>50</sup> the lay community was also brought into the institution of the church through an expansion in the number of lay *khudaam* (servers), who were to assist in every aspect of church life. Some within the community contested this expansion, arguing that it politicized relationships between the church and the lay community.<sup>51</sup>

This generation of reformers enacted a kind of neo-traditionalist approach to create a common Coptic identity, based on the proud re-appropriation of a supposedly glorious Coptic past. A revival of interest in monastic vocations saw the numbers of monks and monastic foundations increase dramatically around the turn of the century. Theological doctrine was expressed through a fundamentalist, literal approach to biblical scripture.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> El-Khawaga, 183.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 180.

<sup>52</sup> Rubenson sees the emphasis on as fundamentalist, literalist interpretation of the bible common in official religious discourses today a link with Protestant and Islamic influence. S. Rubenson, 'Tradition and renewal in Coptic theology', in Van Doorn-Harder, *Between Desert and City*, 1997, 30-01.

These reforms created an “imagined Coptic community”<sup>٥٢</sup> based on a common identity, formulated in ethno-religious terms. This community was centered on the church and represented by the clerical hierarchy. El-Khawaga describes the process as a “retotalization of meaning”,<sup>٥٤</sup> through which religion became a complete source of identity.<sup>٥٥</sup>

This neo-traditional Coptic community, centered on the church, was the product of an emerging Coptic middle class, and in the post-Nasserite era, it was the Coptic middle classes who gained most from the protection of a communal identity and a strong church. This middle class – reliant on university education for their status – was hit by Sadat’s economic policies, which caused contraction of the state and its social services, as well as a reduction in social mobility.

The situation of this broader middle class has become increasingly precarious, as unemployment figures for graduates remain high. It is this vulnerable group that has embraced the new Coptic identity and the protection of a community and church that provides needed social services as well as religious ministry.

### **The state and minoritarian discourse**

Under Mubarak, the Egyptian state utilized the national unity rhetoric to forestall potentially threatening discussion about sectarianism and the relationship of Coptic Egyptians to the state. This rhetorical tool, when deployed at the level of public discourse, closes down these debates by portraying any consideration of sectarian issues in Egypt as an attack on the nation. In

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<sup>٥٢</sup> Omar Foda, “Saintly Soap Operas: An examination of three Coptic saint dramas” *Arab Media and Society*, Issue ١٢, Winter ٢٠١٠, <http://www.arabmediasociety.com/?article=٧٦١>.

<sup>٥٤</sup> El-Khawaga, ١٨٢.

<sup>٥٥</sup> Social services were increasing provided by the church and by Coptic religious foundations.



doing so, the regime was supported by the religious establishment of the Coptic Orthodox Church.

However, despite this strategic deployment of nationalistic imagery, the Mubarak regime invested in the emerging minoritarian identity described above. The cordial relationships between the regime and the Coptic Orthodox hierarchy are one factor in explaining this.

Relationships between patriarchs and presidents since the ١٩٥٢ revolution have fluctuated.<sup>٥٦</sup> Kyrillos VI offered the regime of Gamal Abdal Nasser complete support on behalf of the Coptic community, and Nasser dissolved the aristocratic *majlis al-milli* by presidential decree, restoring complete control of the community to the religious hierarchy, and effectively making the church the mediator between the state and Copts.<sup>٥٧</sup>

Their successors had a fraught relationship with the state. Anwar Sadat's decision to emphasize the Islamic nature of the Egyptian nation caused Shenouda to struggle with the regime, urging Copts to abstain from voting in the referendum on Article ٢ of the constitution which would make Islamic *sharia* the "principal" source of Egyptian law and Islam the religion of the state, and later staged a public act of defiance in ١٩٨٠ by withdrawing to a monastery in Wadi Natrun and cancelling Easter celebrations. In ١٩٨١ Sadat rescinded the presidential decree that recognized Shenouda as patriarch and kept him under house arrest at a monastery, where he was confined until ١٩٨٥.

After his reinstatement by Hosni Mubarak, the relationship between church and state was reshaped; Tadros characterizes it as an "entente". The patriarch once again became the official representative of the Coptic community, and the church supported the regime. Under this new

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<sup>٥٦</sup> The Egyptian state has a mandate over certain elements of the Coptic Orthodox Church's functioning. For example, the choice of patriarch, although the result of an internal process, must be validated by presidential decree.

<sup>٥٧</sup> Tadros, Mariz. "Vicissitudes In The Entente Between The Coptic Orthodox Church And The State In Egypt (١٩٥٢-٢٠٠٧)". *International Journal of Middle East Studies* no ٤١ (٢٠٠٩), ٢٧٢.

arrangement, the state supported the church hierarchy, for example granting licenses to build new churches directly to Shenouda, who would then be able to distribute these among his dioceses as he saw fit.<sup>58</sup>

The Coptic community was also marshaled by the church to support Mubarak's political projects; Mubarak's reelection in 2005 was celebrated by the ringing of church bells, which "according to orthodox doctrine are only to be rung on the commencement of mass and other religious rites."<sup>59</sup> During the 2007 constitutional referendum, which was widely opposed by the political opposition, Patriarch Shenouda encouraged Copts to vote and to support the amendment.<sup>60</sup>

This entente fostered the kind of minoritarian discourse that the Coptic revival process had created. By recognizing the patriarch as the official representative and voice of the Coptic community, the state endorsed this emerging ethno-religious identity, by which Copts are characterized by religion rather than by citizenship.<sup>61</sup>

## Divorce struggles

One key area of contestation between lay followers of the church and clerical hierarchies has been the right of Coptic Orthodox members to seek divorce. In 1938, the *majlis al-milli* outlined eight different grounds for seeking a divorce, including abandonment and irreconcilable differences. Pope Shenouda removed most of these grounds, keeping only adultery and change of religion, effectively restricting access to divorce.

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<sup>58</sup> Sedra, 227-228.

<sup>59</sup> Tadros, 276.

<sup>60</sup> On a visit to the Patriarchate in 2007, I sat with some Coptic friends in an internal meeting room waiting for Pope Shenouda to arrive and bless his visitors. On the wall of the front of the room were two official portraits; one of the Pope, and one of Hosni Mubarak.

<sup>61</sup> Tadros, 278.

The clerical hierarchy has defended its exclusive right to define grounds for divorce (and effectively limit it) as non-negotiable, despite challenges from lay members of the church. The church authorities have the power to dictate a particular (conservative) approach to access to divorce, and lay members have been unable to bring about change. Some have looked for alternatives,<sup>11</sup> but others continue to contest the church's authority to dictate divorce policy, proposing civil family laws that would remove divorce from clerical authority. These battles reflect the wider struggles between the clergy and the lay elite over questions of power.

After the January 2011 uprising, and with the opening up of political space that followed, various currents in the Coptic community have also been reconfigured. A renewed and active lay contestation of clerical authority over the divorce issue is taking place. A new campaign called the "Right to Life" has escalated the level of open contestation, with public protests against the church and threats of mass conversion.<sup>12</sup> It remains to be seen how the issue will develop as the political environment changes; but it seems likely that a reinvigorated laity will continue to contest clerical authority around this issue.

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<sup>11</sup> Tadros records an interesting example in her discussion of a renegade consecrated deacon and Coptic seminary graduate, Max Michel, who set up a rival church (the St Athanassios Church) and labeled himself Maximos the First, Archbishop of the Holy Synod for the Orthodox Church in Egypt and the Middle East – explicitly challenging the authority of the Coptic Orthodox Church. Tadros notes that some of his followers were "Copts who stood to benefit from Maximos's more lenient stands on divorce and remarriage", as Maximos followed the majlis al-milli policy (Tadros, 280).

<sup>12</sup> Emad Khalil, Yomna Mokhtar, "Copts demanding right to divorce will collectively leave Church" Egypt Independent, August 13, 2011. <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/copts-demanding-right-divorce-will-collectively-leave-church>

## Ch. ۳ Gender and Community

This chapter will provide an overview of official Coptic Orthodox Church precepts and teachings about gender roles, and will describe some non-official Coptic narratives about gender. It will show how ideas about female behavior and female sexuality are linked to the kind of minoritarian discourses and sensibilities identified in the preceding chapter, and using the salient example of controversies over “kidnapped” Coptic women, it will show that these group identities are often contested using women as symbols.

### Gender roles and the Church

Who does the New Testament say is the head, man or woman? This is mentioned in Ephesus, chapter ۵, and many times in the First Epistle to the Corinthians. ‘I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man. For man is not from woman, but woman from man. Nor was man created for the woman, but woman for the man. For this reason the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels.’ (1 Cor. ۱۱: ۳, ۸-۱۰).

On Homosexuality and the Ordination of Women, Patriarch Shenouda ۱۱۱<sup>۱۴</sup>

The Coptic Orthodox Church emphasizes a number of different elements when it discusses the behavior of its female members. One of the key precepts of the church on gender is that men and women are fundamentally different in nature, and are therefore suited to different roles. This discourse is supported by reference to scripture, both Old and New Testament, which is seen as supporting the view that men and women have different essences and therefore should take on different responsibilities. There is also a quasi-scientific element presented in discussions about male and female roles. The different natures and capacities of men and women are

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<sup>۱۴</sup> Patriarch Shenouda III, *On Homosexuality and the Ordination of Women*, (London: Coptic Orthodox Publishers Association, ۱۹۹۳), ۴۱.

presented as obvious and manifest through observation of the world and of human relationships.<sup>70</sup>

The differences between men and women in nature necessitates a difference in authority. The male-female relationship (particularly the husband-wife relationship) is modeled on the relationship of Christ to his church.<sup>71</sup> A Christian woman “feels man is her equal without forgetting to be willingly submissive to her husband, not out of fear or humiliation but out of love and respect for him just as the church submits to Christ of its free will.”<sup>72</sup>

Marriage is seen as a holy union, and the duty of all Copts, with the exception of those who choose to follow a monastic vocation. One of the most important purposes of marriage is to have children. The different roles of men and women are important within a marriage; the man exercises Christ-like authority, and the woman’s greater emotional sensibilities suit her to guardianship of the home and children. Women’s roles as wives and mothers is of paramount importance as they ensure the future of the community:

A woman has great responsibilities. Among these responsibilities, I may mention, is having pastoral care for children in order to prepare a new generation for the Church. One of our problems is that women have no time to care for their children.<sup>73</sup>

Rhetoric about the dangers of liberal, Western or feminist interpretations of gender roles is common. Women may work outside the home, and are valued as servers in church; but a neglect of wifely and maternal duties is problematic for the entire community. In his work on the

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<sup>70</sup> See Chapter 4, in which Christina recalls that her weekly church meeting for engaged couples covered not only various religious topics, but also discussed the popular psychology book ‘Men are from Mars; Women are from Venus’.

<sup>71</sup> One of the arguments presented in Patriarch Shenouda’s text against allowing women to become priests (after demonstrating that they are not called to be so in scripture or in tradition) is that “the priest represents our Lord Jesus Christ” – something that only a male can do.

<sup>72</sup> Bishop Moussa, *Dimensions of Human Sexuality* 7, PDF e-book, 74.

<sup>73</sup> Shenouda, *Homosexuality*, 44.

“virtuous wife”, Shenouda starts his book with the observation that “many speak about women’s rights but the more pertinent issue is that a woman is virtuous.”<sup>19</sup> This rejection of Western values runs through church discourses on sex and gender roles.

Sex is a spiritual act, reflecting the spiritual union of the married couple, and is strictly reserved for marriage. The topic of sexuality and relationships is an important one that often comes up in the official literature.<sup>20</sup> Sexuality, it is argued, is properly expressed in Christian marriage and there are dangers of succumbing to lust which must be resisted for emotional and spiritual health.

In these discussions about how to avoid sin and how to make the right choices, no distinction is made between male and female Christians. The instructions on appropriate sexual behavior – no sexual activity before marriage; resisting temptation; the natural experience of sexual desire; choosing a partner through prayer and reflection rather than attraction - are aimed at Christians of both sexes. Both men and women are seen as being capable of sexual desire, and both are responsible for keeping themselves “holy and pure”<sup>21</sup> by refraining from sex outside marriage.

However, alternative understandings of sexuality are common among the Coptic community. Pieterella Van Doorn-Harder discusses a different vision of sexuality, in which Christian women are evaluated by their sexual chastity in a way that men are not, when she describes how women who wish to become nuns are evaluated for their suitability. Van Doorn-Harder describes how Coptic women are required to vigilantly guard their honor and outlines the

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<sup>19</sup> Translated and quoted by Armanios, 110.

<sup>20</sup> For example, Youth Bishop Moussa has authored official books including the Dimensions of Human Sexuality; and Youth and Pure Living.

<sup>21</sup> Bishop Moussa, 28.

strategies used to achieve this - “confinement”<sup>yy</sup> i.e. containing the woman within the home as much as is possible and “protection” – accompanying the woman when she does leave the house.

In this gender schema, which Van Doorn-Harder attributes to “Egyptian society”, Coptic women’s sexual virtue is compromised by acting in ways that are considered inappropriate for “nice girls”, such as spending time outside the house without good reason, or “kissing or holding hands” with a fiancé.

Some of these behaviors are proscribed in the official doctrine of the Church; for example, Bishop Moussa responds to the question, “why are Egyptians so strict in regards to boys and girls talking together?” with the answer: “We are not strict, but cautious, for talking, results in phone calls, and phone calls result in dating, and dating may result in harmful sins.”<sup>yy</sup> To the questioner who asks if it is okay to have a boyfriend, if she does not do anything wrong, he responds: “By having a boyfriend or girlfriend we are leading ourselves into temptation. Let your relations be in groups from within the church until the time comes for you to select your partner for marriage.”<sup>yyz</sup>

However, in these official responses, dating and romantic relationships are forbidden as they may lead to sin; but they are forbidden for men and for women, and are equally problematic for both.

In the lived reality that Van Doorn-Harder describes, these proscribed activities are problematic primarily for Coptic women. “The responsibility of self-control falls upon the young

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<sup>yy</sup> Van Doorn-Harder, *Contemporary Coptic Nuns*, 82.

<sup>yy</sup> Bishop Moussa, *Youth Concerns*, question yy.

<sup>yyz</sup> *Ibid.*, question yz.

woman who is eager to keep her reputation as a ‘nice girl’ because her ‘nice girl’ behavior enhances her possibilities for finding a good husband.”<sup>vo</sup>

In Van Doorn-Harder’s analysis, a “nice Coptic girl” is one who “spends most of her free time in church, attending the liturgy, bible studies, social gatherings, and charitable activities....When a young woman does something that is considered wrong and loses her honor (for example, becoming pregnant before marriage), her shameful behavior is seen to reflect on the whole church.”<sup>v1</sup>

Women’s virtue, and particularly their sexual honor, is important not only as a relationship between the individual and God. At a community level, women’s honor is understood to have implications for the honor of the group. Women are therefore subjected to particular restrictions and their lives are policed by the church and the community with a greater rigor.

Van Doorn-Harder is describing contemporary judgments about ordinary lay Coptic women; but she notes, when discussing those women who wish to follow the monastic path, that the same relationship between individual female honor and the honor of the community exists.

One elderly woman in the church explained the situation as follows; “A nun has to be very sure of her call. It is just like in a marriage. When a girl does not feel happy in her marriage and wants a divorce [although this is forbidden in the Coptic Church], everybody will say, ‘what did she do wrong? Why did she not behave well?’ It always the woman who is to blame.”<sup>vy</sup>

Other manifestations of this policing of female honor include restrictions on female dress and on other behavior that is culturally associated with compromised sexual virtue. Coptic

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<sup>vo</sup> Van Doorn-Harder, *Contemporary Coptic Nuns*, 82.

<sup>v1</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>vy</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.



women who are not from the upper middle class may be expected to dress “modestly”.<sup>YA</sup> This takes different forms; for the women in Zaki’s study, who are part of the urban poor, this might take the form of an abaya or a hijab.<sup>YA</sup> In other environments, women might be expected not to reveal lower legs or arms; to wear high necklines, or to wear a one-piece bathing suit instead of a two-piece.<sup>A</sup>

### **Idealized images – the virtuous wife**

Febe Armanios has explored some of these perspectives on gender within contemporary Coptic culture. Her study is an analysis not of official Church precepts or doctrine on gender issues, but rather an analysis of how idealized images of women and wives are deployed in wider written discourses. She locates a “developing perspective on gender” that deploys “two discernible representations of the female prototype”<sup>A1</sup> – the virtuous wife and the virgin saint, appearing in the written discourses of the Coptic community. Her study uses a few official church sources (including a publication by Patriarch Shenouda) with a focus on lay Coptic authors.

The idealized virtuous wife who guards the home is not a new idea; Armanios argues that this particular image was originally deployed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century by lay Coptic writers as part of an identity politics that viewed modern Copts as inheritors of a pharaonic

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<sup>YA</sup> According to my interviews with Christina and Dina.

<sup>YA</sup> Although this is not an explicitly ideological statement but rather reflects the norms of the rural communities which much of the urban poor come from.

<sup>A</sup> According to my interview with Salma.

<sup>A1</sup> Febe Armanios, 112.

heritage. For these writers, the virtuous Coptic wife was an essential part of “retrieving the hidden/inner essence of the Coptic identity”.<sup>^†</sup>

Coptic nationhood would be preserved through the Coptic family, and woman would be the guardians of the home and family. “She was to police its purity and could achieve spiritual cleanliness by attending church, praying and fasting, hence compensating for her husband’s expected preoccupation with the outside world.”<sup>^†</sup>

Armanios argues that these images have emerged in contemporary Coptic discourse (including in official rhetoric) but couched in religious terms, so that the Pharaoh-husband has become a Christ-husband, with the same qualities of “authority, domination and control over the home”.<sup>^‡</sup> The home now, instead of representing the Coptic nation, is “a perfect spiritual sanctum” which is guarded by the Coptic wife.

She describes this process as the appropriation of older secular images as a result of the changing Coptic identity politics of the second half of the twentieth century, and she argues it reflects an “inclination by Coptic clergy towards a nationalist, predominantly non-religious and modernist rhetoric about the place of gender in the Coptic family”<sup>^°</sup> that links the survival of the minority community with the “role of its female members.”

The kind of contemporary representations of female roles and female sexuality that Armanios describes are somewhat different from the doctrinal judgments about sexuality outlined above. When Bishop Moussa deals with questions on sexuality, most of his responses are addressed to men and to women equally. The responsibility of staying pure is the

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<sup>^†</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>^†</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>^‡</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>^°</sup> Ibid., 111.

responsibility of a pious Christian regardless of gender. When he addresses questions about sexual desire, or about pre-marital sex, there is almost no specific emphasis on the specific value of preserving female virginity or virtue.

However, these official discourses do argue that men and women have different natures and are designed by God to hold different roles in society. The official literature on marriage argues that the wife's proper sphere is the home, and her responsibility is to home and children, and that the relationship between wife and husband will be one of submission to loving authority, on the model of the Church's submission to Christ.

The developing discourses on idealized images of Coptic women as virtuous wives and/or pious virgins that Armanios outlines incorporate some of these key doctrines while refining or ignoring others. The key image of a Christ-husband and a submissive wife is compatible with church teachings about marriage; the emphasis on female virginity is located in a burgeoning literature on female virgin-saints which “make an aggressive association between femininity and flawless virginity.”<sup>^1</sup>

### **Gender and minoritarian discourse**

Gender, like ethnicity, is a site where symbolic power may be contested.<sup>^2</sup> Deniz Kandiyoti has outlined how nationalist projects in post-colonial states deploy women as “the symbolic repository of group identity”.<sup>^3</sup> This symbolism manifests itself “in nationalist rhetoric where the nation itself is represented as a woman to be protected, or less conspicuously, in an

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<sup>^1</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>^2</sup> Sedra, 219.

<sup>^3</sup> Deniz Kandiyoti ‘Identity and its Discontents; Women and the Nation’. *Millennium - Journal of International Studies March* 1991 20: 434.

intense preoccupation with women's sexual conduct. The latter often constitutes the crucial distinction between the nation and its 'others'."<sup>89</sup>

In Egypt, gender has been deployed in this way, as a site in which cultural identity is contested. Gender symbols are deployed to "reproduce religious boundaries and to signify religious differences when used strategically in public discourse."<sup>91</sup> Women become the bearers of authenticity and are responsible for the reproduction of the community, and their sexual behavior therefore becomes a topic of communal concern.

Within the Coptic community, contemporary discourses about gender follow this pattern. Armanios shows that certain idealized images, particularly that of wifely virtue, are rooted in concern about maintaining the community's cultural (and spiritual) identity through female sexual purity and guardianship of tradition. These images are reflected in the lived reality described by Van Doorn-Harder, in the way in which female honor is policed.

This deployment of women's bodies as markers of communal difference is shown in the Coptic concern about the rights of unveiled women, who symbolize a Coptic nation under an oppressive Islamic regime. In the cases of "kidnapped" Coptic women, communities often literally struggle for the control of women's bodies. When women convert (many Copts assert that these cases are forced abductions), communal violence typically erupts as both communities assert their right to claim the woman. The case of Wafaa Constantin in ۲۰۰۴ was particularly high profile. Constantin was the wife of a priest in a village in Beheira, who disappeared from

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., ۴۳۰.

<sup>91</sup> Kathryn M. Yount, "Symbolic Gender Politics, Religious Group Identity, and the Decline in Female Genital Cutting in Minya" *Social Forces*, Vol. ۸۲, No. ۲ (Mar., ۲۰۰۴), ۱۰۶۵. Yount's study of female genital mutilation in Egypt shows how genital cutting was deployed as a symbol to demonstrate group identity by Christian and Islamic communities. She attributes a relative decline in the practice among Christian families in Mina compared to Muslim families to an Islamic ideological focus on women as bearers of tradition, in contrast to an emphasis by Christian voluntary organizations on combating traditional practices.

her family home. Mariz Tadros argues that Constantin was seeking a divorce after suffering from domestic violence,<sup>91</sup> and that having left her husband, she sought police protection as she tried to convert to Islam.<sup>92</sup> However, this narrative remains contested; several stories circulated among Copts at the time stressing Constantin's happy family life and the imminent wedding of her daughter, implying that she would not willingly have left the family home and must therefore have been coerced or kidnapped.

The story of kidnapping and possible forced conversion sparked protests over the course of several weeks at the Cathedral in Abbasiya. The reaction was particularly vocal because, as the wife of a priest, her elopement would jeopardize priestly honor, and her conversion would be particularly shocking and controversial. The church hierarchy, empowered by the state to define and police the Coptic community, was able to gain access (through a presidential decree) to Constantin, and to pressure her not to convert, and she retired to a nunnery.

This kind of case illustrates the way in which the church hierarchy, supported by the state, is able to police the religious limits of the community. Constantin was not treated as a full citizen whose legal rights regarding religion and divorce are defined by the state. Her status as a priest's wife made her case particularly sensitive and high-profile.

The church had the right to contest her choice to seek to change her religious identity. As Soliman points out "Wafaa was not dealt with as an individual having the right to choose her religion freely, but as a member of a community."<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Tadros ۲۷۹.

<sup>92</sup> Access to divorce is often cited as a reason for Copts to convert to Islam; under current Church regulations, change of religion to be one of the two permissible grounds for divorce (along with adultery), as Christian marriage, a sacrament, is only valid between two believers.

<sup>93</sup> Soliman, ۱۴۵.

Beyond this “communitarianism” identified by Soliman, and the high-profile nature of Constantin’s case, there are many more narratives of “kidnapped women” (or “disappearing women”) who are described as being taken away from families and husbands and forced to convert to Islam.

There is clearly a gendered element to these stories; although thousands of men convert to Islam each year, it is only cases of women that cause strong public reactions and lead to adult citizens being passed from state custody to that of the religious authorities.<sup>44</sup>

To touch on gender, and women, therefore, is to explore the contested space in which group identities are articulated and produced.

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<sup>44</sup> Kamilia Shehata’s case is similar; the wife of a Coptic priest who disappeared from her family home in ۲۰۱۰, she was located by the police at a friend’s house in Cairo, and was handed over into the custody of the Church, where she remains, despite some active public opposition by conservative Muslim public figures who claim she is being prevented from converting to Islam.

## Chapter 4 - The Politics of Class

In this chapter, I will introduce some elements of the theoretical framework related to class, status and social stratification that will be used to interpret and contextualize my fieldwork. Bourdieu provides useful theoretical tools for describing and analyzing the social organization and stratification of contemporary Cairo, and the place of the middle classes within this. The chapter will then use fieldwork to describe the kind of middle class culture and identities of which my informants are part.

### Concepts of class and status

Class is an essential tool for understanding the social and political realities of contemporary Cairo. Marx defined social classes in terms of their relationship to the means of production, and for Marx, culture was essentially a product of economic power; the ruling class reinforced their privilege by creating a ruling ideology. Weber found Marx's approach to be too economically reductive; although he agreed that class was based around relations to the market, he also introduced other culturally-based elements to explain social stratification and organization. For Weber, "status-honor" could be produced by non-economic elements (ethnicity, race, religion, education etc), and he deployed this concept to complicate Marx's reductionist system of three classes derived solely from their relationship to property.<sup>10</sup> Weber "affirmed Marx's equation of property and power, even while insisting that economic dominance

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<sup>10</sup> Weber's explanation for historical change also rejected Marx's historical materialism in favor of explanations that took into account cultural factors (rationalization and secularization leading to "disenchantment") alongside economic ones.

is always culturally mediated in patterns of socialization, lifestyles and discourses of honor and prestige.”<sup>96</sup>

If Weber never explicitly delineated the relationship between class and status,<sup>97</sup> his deployment of elements that can be labeled cultural (ethnicity, religion, socialization, etc.) to define, categorise and analyse social groupings and social stratification is helpful for anthropological research that attempts to deal with questions of class and identity.

In his anthropology of the Nepalese middle class, Mark Liechty notes that Weber’s insights are particularly valuable for this kind of research project because of his observation that “the middle class relates to economic or productive processes not primarily as sellers of labor (workers) or owners of capital (the capitalist elite) but as consumers of goods in the market place.”<sup>98</sup> This link between consumption and middle class identity was something I observed from my own fieldwork.

Bourdieu provides useful analytical frameworks for analyzing social stratification and middle class life in contemporary Cairo; in particular his description of the role played by symbolic forms of capital, for example, “cultural” capital such as educational experiences, and “social” capital such as connections. For Bourdieu, economic capital may be converted into these other forms of capital, and in so doing, hierarchies of inequality are concealed behind judgments about taste and aesthetic value.

These analytical categories and concepts provided me with a theoretical framework to interpret my fieldwork.

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<sup>96</sup> Mark Liechty, *Suitably Modern* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 14.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.* 16.



## Situating my fieldwork

My main informants were situated within the upper middle class of Cairo – an affluent sub-group within the broader urban middle class. Membership of the broader middle class membership is not explicitly linked to income; rather, according to Anouk de Koning,<sup>99</sup> following Armbrust<sup>100</sup>, membership is “figured primarily in terms of education; To be middle class meant having an education, being acquainted with modern institutions, and enjoying a ‘clean’ life, removed from Cairo’s lower class existence...”<sup>101</sup>

The upper middle class that my fieldwork dealt with are the wealthiest members of this broader middle class. De Koning defines them as “a relatively affluent professional upper-middle class whose members are employed in the more international oriented segments of the urban economy”.<sup>102</sup>

De Koning builds on Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic capital to articulate how this sub-group differentiates itself from the wider middle class:

What most clearly sets these upper-middle class professionals apart from other middle class professionals is what I call ‘cosmopolitan capital’: familiarity with globally dominant, first world repertoires and standards – for example, fluency in English – as well as the ability to participate in conspicuously cosmopolitan lifestyles. Whereas the urban professional middle class, symbolized by the engineer and the doctor, was the main protagonist of Naserite Egypt, young upper-middle class professionals employed in technologically advanced offices

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<sup>99</sup> Anouk de Koning, *Global Dreams – Class, Gender, and Public Space in Cosmopolitan Cairo*, (Egypt: AUC Press, 2009).

<sup>100</sup> Walter Armbrust, “Bourgeois Leisure and Egyptian Media Fantasies.” In *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere*. Dale F. Eickelman and Job W. Anderson, ed., 106-32. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

<sup>101</sup> De Koning estimates that this upper middle class group constitutes around 10 to 20 per cent of Cairo’s broader professional middle class (De Koning, 94).

<sup>102</sup> De Koning, 9.

of internationally oriented companies have become iconic of the national narratives and projects of Egypt's new liberal era..”<sup>١٠٢</sup>

De Koning's term “cosmopolitan capital” describes the cultural resources that defines this sub-group, and sets them apart from the broader middle class. These cultural resources are clearly products also of economic advantage – for example, private schools and universities are expensive and beyond the range of an average family income in Cairo, as are many of the consumption patterns that de Koning observes – but they also serve to continue to produce a kind of affluence. Young graduates with the symbolic capital of private university degrees, fluency with foreign languages and cultural idioms, and the social networks provided by middle class socialization, have privileged access to the kind of “internationally oriented” workspaces that de Koning describes, and accordingly earn much higher incomes than the wider middle class who are confined to less well-paying sectors.

My fieldwork has focused on the Christian members of this upper middle class sub-group.

### **Upper middle class culture and identity in the lives of my informants**

The upper middle class is primarily an urban group; some families still have connections with more rural areas, as in the case of interviewee Michael, whose father and grandfather were landowners in the Minya area and held the position of ‘*omda*’<sup>١٠٤</sup>. Michael had not inherited the title, although he continued to spend a considerable amount of time in the area taking care of the

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<sup>١٠٢</sup> Ibid., ٦.

<sup>١٠٤</sup> The ‘*omda*’ acted as an authority figure in the village with official responsibility for resolving disputes and maintaining security.

family business. In general, however, my informants led urban lives, and Michael, who spent his university days in Cairo, was now married, and had established a family home in the city.

Membership of the upper middle class requires a level of wealth; the financial resources of the family must be adequate to provide a comfortable lifestyle for its members and a measure of financial stability. Wealth – and class status – is held by family groups rather than individuals. Individuals can break through class barriers, but elite status is usually described in terms of family origins – being from “a good family” or “a good background.” My informants, primarily younger members of the affluent middle class in their twenties and thirties, worked in salaried professions in the kind of transnational and well-paying private sector workplaces that de Koning outlined above; but most also came from families that hold assets which provide a financial buffer, so that salaried income is not their sole source of wealth.

My informants were educated to graduate level, and some worked in middle class professions that are highly respected in Egyptian culture – physician, pharmacist, engineer. Others worked for multinational corporations that had opened offices in Egypt. Both men and women were expected to graduate from university and to find appropriate work; Christina, who was married and expecting her first child when I interviewed her, hoped to return to her job as an electrical engineer at a large corporation at some point, and her aspiration to continue to work outside the home after motherhood was fairly typical. Most of my interviewees had mothers who had also worked outside the home at various points during their childhoods.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> I was struck by the extent to which mothers of this class worked outside the home, almost without exception, during their children’s lives, and largely without introspection, guilt or much criticism. Coming from the UK, where the “stay at home mother” figure is an increasingly fetishised image of bourgeois motherhood, I was surprised to find so little anxiety about the same issue here. Most of my informants were not yet mothers; but within their extended social networks I rarely seemed to encounter women who had given up work entirely after having children.

A key component of upper-middle class life in Cairo is its geography. My informants lived in areas (primarily Mohandeseen, Heliopolis, Maadi) that were formerly considered to be desirable suburbs where wealthy Egyptians could raise families away from the *zahma* (over-crowdedness) and undesirable urban realities of the city center.<sup>116</sup>

Unmarried interviewees lived with their parents in flats that were often rent controlled, under regulations dating from the Nasserist era, rendering them effectively cost-free. Over time these formerly exclusive suburban areas have become less exclusive, and the focus of the wealthy has moved to new housing developments, established outside the city. These communities are marketed as suburban fantasies through advertisements that show wealthy, photogenic families escaping from the city, and many of my informants' families had already bought or were planning to buy property in these new developments.

The geography of upper middle class life requires access to a private car. Cairo has a substantial but incomplete public transport network, and private cars provide the convenience necessary to easily traverse an urban environment in which upper middle class social networks are widely spread between suburban locations at opposite ends of the city (Heliopolis, Mohandeseen and Maadi, for example). Private transportation also provides the safety of segregation from a public space that now feels visibly dominated by an alternative class culture.

Subsidized gasoline renders cars cheap to run and long car journeys have become an expected part of middle class daily life in Cairo. In many cases, private transport is also essential

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There is clearly a socio-economic aspect to this, as domestic work in Egypt, including childcare, is relatively affordable for the affluent.

<sup>116</sup> For example, Mohandeseen was, in the 1980s, a fashionable and chic new location in a quiet area of Giza. Two different family matriarchs recounted to me their experiences as young wives in the suburb, watching the view from their balconies change over the years as villas became apartment buildings, roads became clogged with cars, and “the quality of the people” in the neighborhood deteriorated.

for work, as multinational companies increasingly choose to locate their offices in the new developments located outside the city, with few existing public transport networks. Car ownership therefore becomes a self-reinforcing cycle; new developments are planned to cater to a small affluent section of society that already travels by car for almost every journey outside the home, and which values open space and segregation from the realities of congested urban living.

Accordingly, most of my interviewees came from households where there are several cars; in some cases, each adult member owned a car.<sup>104</sup> Owning a car is a signifier of wealth, as although gasoline is subsidized and cheap, private cars are subject to extremely high sales taxes in Egypt, making them a relatively costly item to purchase and reserving the privilege of private transportation for the relatively well-off.

Another key aspect of the lives of the upper middle class is a shared educational background, which helps reinforce a kind of class consciousness. Upper middle class families send their children to private schools which market themselves as having foreign curriculums and learning styles. Most of my informants attended English-language schools with strong British or American influences; a few attended Catholic French language schools. These schools, including those formed by Christian missions, accept both Muslim and Christian pupils.

Private education typically extends to the completion of a bachelor's degree at a private university, although students who had selected certain technical disciplines not offered in private universities such as Dina, a physician, were obliged to remain in the public sector.

As a result of this education, members of the upper middle class are usually fluent in at least one foreign language, as well as Egyptian Arabic. Members of the lower-middle classes

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<sup>104</sup> One interviewee, 19-year-old university student Salma, did not own a car, and relied on taxis and friends with cars to get herself around Cairo. She was also the only one of my interviewees who lived in downtown Cairo.

also study foreign languages as part of their education (sometimes at less expensive language schools), but are rarely exposed so comprehensively. The comfortable fluency of the upper middle class also gives them access to global popular culture. My interviewees and I shared cultural references to books, films, popular music, television programs, and a certain kind of Western consumerism, and these commonalities were less distinct when I spent time with Egyptians from different backgrounds.

Another element of this identity was the extent to which the young upper middle class have transnational experiences which have shaped their identities. In contemporary Egypt, there are many kinds of migrants and many migration experiences; the upper middle class, however, are located in a complex transnational space mediated by their bilingualism and their consumption of global popular culture. All my interviewees had travelled abroad and almost all had done so numerous times. These were generally not permanent relocations – shifts from a natal culture to an alien one that might characterize the migration experience of a working class Egyptian.

Nadine's experience was typical; she had grown up in Dubai, where her parents had moved to work, and she was part of a close-knit Coptic Orthodox community there. She visited Egypt every summer for extended summer holidays, as well as for other kinds of trips, particularly to see extended family. She was fluent both in English and Egyptian (not Gulf) Arabic. As a teenager, she had returned to Cairo permanently with her family, and now that she was married she was based in Cairo. Some time after our interview, she travelled to the USA

(where she also had extended family) in the later stages of her first pregnancy to give birth in the country and to ensure her daughter would obtain an American passport. <sup>108</sup>

### **A non-sectarian identity**

This shared class culture, and its valorization of cultural distinctions over economic realities, had important implications for how young affluent members dealt with religious identities.

The upper middle class is religiously mixed, including both Christian and Muslim families. One of the effects of sharing a class identity and class-segregated spaces – the private beach; the expensive restaurant; the suburban neighborhood; the corporate office– is that social groups may be class-segregated but religiously-mixed. My interviewees had formed friendships at school and at university across religious networks and these friendships, along with new connections made at work, typically formed the basis for adult social lives. At social events with my informants, I rarely came across an all-Christian group, with the exception of family gatherings or religious activities.

My informants also spoke about this during interviews, describing cross-religious friendships. Many also explained to me that friendships with Muslims of a similar background were easier than those with Christians from a different social group. Dina, from a wealthy Protestant family, described to me her initial experiences studying to be a doctor at Cairo university:

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<sup>108</sup> Christina, Nadine's cousin and another informant, also travelled to the USA to give birth to her first child, returning to her life in Cairo after a short stay.

Dina: “Medical school is not the AUC, it’s not like a very high class..you have all the classes.”

Researcher: “They were mixed?”

Dina: “Yeah, all my friends were Muslim at first; they were the Maadi crew...”

Many of my informants explained to me, when talking about class, that what they had more in common with and found it easier to spend time with Muslims from the same class background than with poorer Christians. The shared class culture was a stronger unifying force than religious identity was divisive.

### **Anxiety and unease**

The economic privilege that defines the lives of the urban upper middle class is obscured by a rhetoric that frames class difference in non-economic terms. My informants rarely described Egyptian society using economic qualifiers, and terms like “class” or its Arabic equivalents (*mustawa’ igtimaya* or *tabaqah igtimaya*) did not come up very often when describing self and others, unless I initiated a conversation about the topic. Instead, class differences between self and others were usually expressed in ethical, cultural, or educational terms. Egyptians from different backgrounds were “ignorant” or “not open-minded”; being “high class” meant being from “a good family” or being “the right kind of people”.

These kind of cultural distinctions reflect a kind of class anxiety that draws on memories of a bourgeois existence in pre-revolutionary Egypt, destroyed by Nasser’s socio-economic policies. These economic changes allowed some limited social mobility, and new groups were able to access wealth. Some members of the professional middle classes were able to find work in the Gulf and return to Egypt wealthy, but without the socialization processes described above.



The Egyptian 'nouveau riche' have acquired the economic standing to intrude onto protected bourgeois space, and their doing so caused my informants to feel anxious.

During a ۲۰۱۰ trip to a private resort development on the north coast (for several generations, the holiday destination of wealthy Egyptians during the hot summer months), I found myself walking along the sand with a group of Coptic friends, as we tried to find a shaded spot. Our visit was in September, after the rush of the high season, so the beach was not particularly busy but there were small groups of people already laying their towels on shaded patches of sand. The group I was with continued to pace along the sand, ignoring inviting empty spaces adjacent to these parties of beachgoers. I couldn't understand why we kept walking in the sun past empty shaded spots. My companions struggled to explain to me that they were seeking a space adjacent to the right kind of people. It was difficult for them to articulate a process that they did not need to verbalize to each other; and it was a struggle for me to understand why the other beachgoers were being rejected. They used phrases like "they're not the right kind of people," or "they don't look nice" to explain their reasoning.

After settling down in a spot that the group agreed was suitable, I asked my companions to explain more about their choice. A male friend told me that if we sat next to the wrong sort of people, the men might stare at the female members of our party, who were wearing two piece swimsuits and other kinds of beachwear, and make them feel uncomfortable. But we had not just passed young men; we had also walked passed a couple of family groups made up of veiled women or women in various kinds of Islamically-modest beachwear. My companions found these groups just as disturbing; the presence of women on the beach wearing hijabs was as discomfoting as the presence of men who might behave inappropriately.

Asked to explain why a woman in an Islamic bathing suit and a headscarf was a problematic sight, my companions would explain that “it doesn’t look nice”; “she shouldn’t be here”; and the middle-aged female relative who had accompanied her adult children and their friends on the trip explained to me that it didn’t use to be this way when she used to go on holiday to the beach; women used to look “nice.” “Even the Muslim women?” I asked, as this was an all-Christian group. She looked shocked. “Of course. This is a new thing.”

This encounter – and other similar experiences – happened on a private beach, at an exclusive resort. The same kind of anxiety and conflict was repeated in other privileged spaces which my informants were forced to share with Egyptians who had economic privilege, but whose dress and behavior marked them out as not from “the right family” or not “open-minded”.<sup>109</sup>

It is not surprising that an identity that is particularly associated with the middle classes – the new Islamic piety that reiterates modesty and sexual segregation – is looked on with disdain by large parts of the upper middle class, both Muslim and Christian. Knowing how to dress (which clothes to buy; what styles to adopt; which hairstyles to choose; avoiding the hijab or at adopting a loose style matched with more expensive imported brands of clothing that differentiates from the brightly colored, man-made fabrics of the young middle class women) involves a visual symbol that articulates not only religious cleavages, but also competing cultural identities. My informants were explicit in their discomfort around symbols of a resurgent Islamic piety that seemed to be not only invading the public space, but undermining a shared cultural project built on ideas about modernity.

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<sup>109</sup> This approach is not exclusive to Christians; many restaurants and nightclubs restrict access, not to Muslims, but to women who conform to a particular Islamic dress code, i.e. the hijab.

## **Class and denominational flexibility**

This upper middle class culture provided the context in which I carried out my fieldwork. The bible study group that I attended and observed operated in this context. Dina, one of the group leaders, explained how the group was created, after several of the members had completed a course at an evangelical church in Cairo:

Dina: We needed more time to talk and discuss um, issues, *kida*, spiritual things. So Youssef, one of the leaders in the group suggested that we start a bible study at his place so that we can have more time to talk about different things and discuss stuff. That's how we started.

Researcher: Okay. When was that?

Dina: That was almost a year ago.

Researcher. Okay. So it was just for people on the course or you invited others?

Dina: Then we started inviting others. With just five, and then everybody started to invite friends and now we're ٣٤, but not everybody's committed. Not everybody comes. We're about ١٥, ٢٠ every time.

Researcher: Are you still meeting in Maadi or you...

Dina: Um yeah, we used to meet a week in Maadi and a week in Mohandeseen, because some of the people were from Maadi and some were from Mohandeseen and Zamalek, but now I think it'll be just Maadi.

The group had no explicit membership criteria, beyond curiosity about the Bible and a willingness to commit to regular attendance; but the members of the group were nevertheless part of a cohesive upper middle class group. The geography of the group expresses this clearly. Members, in Dina's summary, live in the elite suburbs of Mohandeseen, Maadi and Zamalek. No lower middle class Shubra residents or working class Copts from Haram have found their way to the meeting, because the group has been formed by drawing on existing social networks (i.e. social capital).

The meetings also rely on some unstated rules to function; in particular, a lot of English was used during meetings. Initially, I was concerned that my presence as a foreigner had disrupted group's established pattern, and there were certainly initial attempts to make me feel comfortable through translation, despite assurances that it was unnecessary; but observing subsequent sessions, I felt more confident that the code-switching between English and Egyptian Arabic was an authentic representation of the linguistic patterns of the members of the group. One of the practices of the group was to read the Bible verse being examined in both English and Arabic, to ensure full comprehension by members of the group; and I noted that several, perhaps most of the members brought English language bibles rather than Arabic. Full comprehension of the group's session seemed to me to be restricted not to those who spoke English or Arabic, but rather to those who spoke both.

If the socio-economic status of the group members was uniform, the denominational backgrounds were diverse. The leaders of the group were mostly Protestant (or Protestant-oriented) and the idea for the group had taken shape when some of the members came together on an "Alpha" course at Qasr Dohara evangelical church. In this form, however, the bible study group was quite open; most members were Coptic Orthodox and there didn't seem to be any agenda pushing members towards Protestant activities or Protestant interpretations.

The presence of so many Coptic Orthodox members at a bible study that was not only outside formal church structures, but was associated at least informally with Protestant religious activities, surprised me. Why did my informants not choose to attend a similar activity within the Coptic church? The church provides a vast range of religious and social activities for every section of the community, including bible studies, *igtim'aat* (religious meetings) for women, for young people, for newly married couples, for graduates. Why had these young Coptic Orthodox

members chosen to drive across the city to attend this meeting, when they could have gone to a similar activity at their local church instead?

Class seemed to me to be an important part of the explanation. The group had been formed from existing social networks and awareness spread solely by word of mouth, creating a tiny community of peers. The shared social background created a comfortable atmosphere for exploration, debate and questions.

In one session that explored the concept of Christian discipleship, group leader Youssef told a story about persecution. Instead of drawing on the obvious examples of Egyptian persecution in the modern era, or on the lives of the saints, he illustrated his point with an account of a Russian Christian sent to Siberia under communist rule because of his faith. Telling global stories rather than local ones could be a politically distancing effect to avoid raising controversial debates about Egypt; but this was a private, trusting environment of close friends. Instead, there was a sense of Christianity as a transnational rather than a local identity. The focus of Youssef's interest was not national; it was the global.<sup>111</sup>

A year later, during a trip to Canada, I attended a Coptic mass at a church in the suburbs of Toronto, and I was reminded of Youssef's Siberian example. The priest, giving a sermon in Egyptian Arabic, told a story about a man who lived in Shubra, whose behavior carried a lesson about relationships with neighbors. I felt the same sense of displacement. Youssef's story (in English) had ignored the local context in favor of emphasizing a global Christian narrative about persecution. In Canada, the priest had deployed Egyptian images to make a point to a

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<sup>111</sup> Youssef's migrant background and experience may partially explain why he chose to use this example. However, I found a lot of elements of his religious discourse, including this global focus, somewhat reflected in interviews with Bible study attendee Irene, who had lived in Egypt her entire life, but travelled regularly to attend international (usually evangelical) Christian events such as camps, meetings, conferences etc.

congregation thousands of miles away from the country – the Egyptian experience had taken priority over any local specificities.

Interviewing Youssef solidified some of these thoughts about locating Christian identity in a global context. His parents were Coptic Orthodox, and he had been raised in Holland. As an adult with a loose sense of Christian identity, he moved to London and lived an unsatisfying “life of regret” which was transformed by a moment of spiritual clarity when he was invited to a bible study group. He spoke to me at length about his spiritual transformation and he was confident in his new calling to help others reach Christ and understand God.

Smartly dressed and articulate, he spoke English with a faint and hard-to-place accent. He had been in Cairo since ٢٠٠٨, living in Maadi and working for an oil company, and had been involved in setting up the first Alpha course in Egypt. I asked him about his religious identity, and he was reluctant to define his denomination. He termed himself “a follower of Christ” rather than a Copt, but said that the “Coptic church was a huge element in telling people about the truth.”

After learning more about Youssef’s background, the story of the persecuted Soviet seemed to be clearer. It fit into this kind of transnational vision of Christianity; a global struggle rooted in an eschatological battle not against the crude political realities of the Egyptian public space, but as part of a much wider struggle for salvation and for knowledge of God in a world of darkness. <sup>111</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Irene, who was raised Catholic but referred to herself as “a daughter of the king” rather than with a denominational category, reminded me of this focus when she told me during our interview that although Muslim suffered from their lack of self-worth, the sexual permissiveness of the West that she saw when she travelled abroad was equally bad for women.

Youssef's story seemed to me to be punctuated by encounters between Egypt and these global sensibilities; as a young boy living in Holland and speaking Arabic and English but not Dutch, or as a young man living in London, in love with a non-Egyptian woman his parents would not accept, and finally as a wealthy professional in Maadi, discussing his calling to bring people to Christ with the same confident, professional authority that he applied to explaining his consultancy career.

As I continued in my fieldwork, I found that the kind of denominational mixing I had observed in the bible study group was a feature of many of my informants' lives. Just as the Coptic Orthodox attendees had found something valuable in a non-denominational bible study, many of my other informants did not fit into strict denominational categories.

There was a social element to this that I had not expected; social networks were not structured around denomination. I had expected to locate discreet communities of Protestants, Catholics, Copts etc. who might interact in some limited ways but were bounded by these categories. Instead, my informants were situated in complex networks that were not structured at all around denomination. Denomination did not form a dividing line in relationships, and did not seem to provide an important identity marker for most of my interviewees. Many, perhaps most of my informants had family members who belonged to a different church.

As a result of these mixed social networks, many of my informants had participated in religious activities outside their church. Denominational mixed social groups led to denominationally mixed religious activities.

This kind of fluid approach to Christian identity and practice was obviously linked to class.<sup>112</sup> These Coptic Orthodox members shared a common class culture with non-Coptic Christians, and were not as reliant on the Coptic Church. They have the freedom to explore spiritual options outside the Church with limited censure.

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<sup>112</sup> Dina, the Protestant women from Maadi, told me that in her experience, some Coptic Orthodox treated Protestants as though they were “not Christian” or “worse than Muslims.” The exception, however, was “the open minded people.”



## Chapter 9: Gender and Class Culture

This chapter will look at the responses of some of my informants to key ideas about gender, and analyze what role ideas about class and about religion play in forming these ideas. It will also discuss other ethnographic work that has examined the lives of Egyptian Christian women and show how these ethnographic studies support the contention of many of my informants, that class is a major factor in determining women's roles.

I think Christian women have more freedom than Muslim women. I know I'm not going to get divorced just one day because my husband just decided that. He's not going to go marry someone else. (Interview with Christina)

I interviewed Christina, a Coptic Orthodox woman in her mid-20s, in her apartment in Mohandeseen. She was heavily pregnant, and rested her hands on her stomach as she talked to me. I had met her several times before, as she was part of the extended family of some of my friends and interviewees. Less than a year earlier, I had attended her wedding reception in a ballroom at a luxury hotel on the Nile. I had felt conspicuous in my plain cocktail dress, surrounded by women wearing extravagant ball gowns.

Christina talked to me about her religious upbringing. She was educated at a private Catholic girls' school, which had around 70 percent Muslim pupils and 30 percent Christian. Most of the Christian girls were, like her, Orthodox, with a few Catholics and "very few" Protestants. Her mother had attended the same school, and her grandmother before her, and Christina told me that she would like a daughter one day who could carry on the tradition.

She spoke to me about her religious practices. She had grown up in a family that made a point of attending church every weekend, together, and she considered this to be an important routine and something that she wanted in her marriage. “That's the one thing that I wanted in my house, and I prayed so badly that I'd have it.” When she first met her husband Amir, he did not have the same approach to attending church every week.

We fought so many times about this...and he's like you can't impose... it doesn't mean you're a better person because you go to church every Sunday. And then I tell him no, it's not about being a better person, it's something I want for my family.

After they had married, Amir's attitude to going to church had changed:

When we got married things got a little easier; he felt somehow responsible, you know, he's responsible for this house and he started to get used that we go every Saturday. And now whenever I'm lazy, he's like, we didn't go, let's go. We never go on time because that's a problem I have with him, but we try. But right now, thank God, we go every Saturday, and we go and we see families that have their babies, and I think, yeah, that's what I want.

For Christina, church was a valued part of her weekly routine; it was important spiritually to attend, and she valued the emotional and spiritual experience of the ritual and of confession.

Apart from attending weekly services, Christina also used to attend a weekly church group for graduates at her church, but had stopped because the sessions were on Friday afternoon, disrupting the Friday-Saturday weekend. But in the period leading up to her wedding, she and her then-fiancé had joined a group meeting at their church, specifically for engaged couples.

The weekly group sessions comprised of a maximum of 30 people. Under the supervision of the priest, different sessions were led by different speakers. As well as providing religious guidance on marriage and on relationships, the sessions provided quasi-scientific tools for

understanding and managing relationships, such as sessions devoted to personality assessments and compatibility.

We discussed men are from Mars, women are from Venus. And we talked. One time it was about what happens in the ceremony of the wedding. One time we discussed sex, and how it's different for men and for women.... One time we took something called the DISC analysis...it's a scientific thing were they give you like a text, ٧٤ questions, how do you describe yourself.. You get letters, tells you each person's pros and cons, you do it and your partner does it so you know what conflicts you're going to have...so *khalas* you know he's going to be around people, you like being the leader, he's always late...this took two sessions....One time we talked about parents, our relationship with the in-laws, what should be done....

The priest himself gave the session on the Coptic Orthodox marriage ceremony and the meaning behind it. Two young female psychologists– both, like Christina, AUC graduates – led sessions on psychological compatibility. Both were young Coptic Orthodox women. For the session on sex, a married couple talked to the group.

The topics covered and the approaches taken in the class, according to Christina's account, seem to be in harmony with the kind of official ideals about gender roles outlined in Chapter ٧. Notions of gender complementarity are an integral element of the marriage values that the weekly meetings promoted.

We talked about the role of the man and the woman...how in Christianity, the man is the head of the house, and the woman should say yes to the man, but it's not an imposed thing, and it should be done in love....And one time we discussed the financial. We discussed how in Christianity it's our money, because we tend to live in a Muslim environment where a woman can work or cannot work and the money's hers, and the man does not have to know about it, and he's fully responsible for the house, and she can spend her money on shoes or on her... or whatever, but in Christianity there is no such thing as my money and how much *I* make and how much you make it's *our* money and how much *we* make.

Christina's views about marriage reflected ideas about gender roles that the Church endorses. She believed that men and women should hold different roles because of their different natures, and this situation had to be explored and explained before embarking on a commitment. She was enthusiastic about her experiences at the meetings and told me that she always recommended the sessions to other engaged couples.

I think it helped us a lot in our engagement period. We avoided so many things that could have gone wrong...because you know, men do that..and because we both attended and we both put our heart into it...and when you know the fundamental thing is that Christ is in the house, that's the number one thing...when Christ is not the foundation of your house it's going to fall down.

In Christina's view, Christian marriage did not mean strict, uncompromising obedience to a Christ-like husband. She explained to me that it was a three-way relationship between herself, her husband and God. Husband and wife had different roles to play, because they had been given different natures - but this was a loving division of responsibilities based on mutual respect, rather than a hierarchy of power. In one of her weekly sessions, the couples had been taught the correct way to handle finances. In contrast to Islamic practice, under which wives are entitled to financial support from husbands and any income they generate from employment remains their own property, income was to be shared equally. Christina viewed this positively; marriage was a joint project and both spouses would contribute and share what they had, as part of a statement of joint responsibility. In Christina's words:

The concept about the money...I feel like I'm there I'm in the house, I'm doing something, we're together in this, you're not bigger than me, you're not better than me, you know? I feel that, I don't know, the church has given the woman a very good...I don't think there's a difference between a man and woman in the church...They have different roles because of their different nature, but no one is bigger than the other.

## **Gender roles and official church doctrine**

Christina was a religious person, committed to the Coptic Orthodox Church, who talked to me at length about the importance to her of her relationship with God, and of including God in her marriage.

Her views on marriage and relationships incorporated some of the basic official doctrines that the Coptic Church endorses, but not all. Her interpretation of these doctrines (and implicit rejection of some) seemed to me to be a product of her upper middle class background. Upper middle class culture has a particular gender framework with specific expectations about female roles and about marriage. Christina's views were therefore quite different from the popular rhetoric about female sexual virtue and behavior outlined in Chapter ۶.

The notion of gender complementarity was an important foundation for her in understanding her marriage. Her weekly church meetings had emphasized the different natures and roles of men and women, and accordingly of wives and husbands, both through theological explanations and through Western popular psychology (using books like *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*). Christina agreed that men and women have different natures and approaches to relationships, and she valued the sessions because they provided both spiritual and psychologically to re authoritative ways to deal with this reality, and to understand her husband and build a strong marriage.

However, Christina's interpretation and experience of complementarity had not led her to fully embrace the "virtuous wife" model. In her view, different gender roles were inevitable, but the marriage would be built on an equal partnership of mutual respect, love and responsibility ("no one is bigger than the other.") In place of the authoritative "Christ-husband" that some

modern Coptic authors envisage, Christina saw her marriage as a three-way relationship between herself, her husband and God.

In particular, the images of marriage that Armanios examines in the first part of her article emphasize that the key division between wife and husband is that the wife is responsible for the home, and the husband is the one to bear the burden of the outside world. This does not preclude women's employment or women entering the public space; but wives who do so must never neglect their guardianship of the Coptic home.

### **Gender and class**

Christina's social class had a major impact on her views about gender roles and on the realities of her life as an Egyptian woman. She, like all of my upper middle class informants, was able to enter public space without compromising her honor or her family's respectability. She was not subject to the confinement/protection strategies that Van Doorn-Harder describes in *Contemporary Coptic Nuns*. Freedom of movement is provided by private cars, and these women typically move through socially-segregated space that is quite geographically disparate – like my informants who journeyed from their workplaces or their homes each week to assemble in a private flat in Maadi for bible study.

Likewise, for Christina and her husband Amir, there was never a question of asking a priest to find them a marriage partner. They had no need to do so because they interacted in a social environment that was not segregated, and female virtue was not considered to be compromised by social interaction with men. She met Amir through mutual friends, and they spent time together getting to know each other and building a romantic relationship, before

discussing engagement. Just as Christina had not needed a respectable excuse to leave her house, she did not need to use church networks to find a partner.

Romantic relationships were not taboo among my informants; some had boyfriends and many had had them in the past. The Coptic Orthodox establishment has forbidden dating, as it may promote sexual activity, and enjoins young Coptic members to socialize in groups to avoid temptation.<sup>117</sup> My informants discussed the issue of class in relation to gender freedoms with me and most argued that, in general, lower socio-economic status resulted in less freedom for women and more “closed-minded” or “conservative” approaches to dating, to women’s clothing and to women’s roles in general. Upper middle class women like Christina ignore warnings against dating and relationships before marriage, as they do not conform to upper middle class gender norms.

Christina was also encouraged to go to university and to seek out a well-paying job at a multinational firm afterwards. She studied engineering at the American University in Cairo (a male-dominated major, she told me) and had worked as an engineer at a major telecommunications company. She planned to continue working at some point after the birth of her first child.

Zaki writes as an upper middle class Coptic woman, who had connected with her informants through a welfare program organized by her church in Heliopolis. She commented on the differences in the participation of women in the religious life of the communities, noting that in El Salaam, women are “recipients of the services rather than the participants” and, in contrast

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<sup>117</sup> Bishop Moussa, Youth Concerns.

to churches in “upper class communities”, they are not allowed to give speeches to the congregation at public meetings.<sup>114</sup>

The gender roles that Christina sought to conform to were influenced by her upper middle class status – her interpretation of official doctrines was colored by her experiences of middle class culture, with its expectation of how women should behave. Accordingly she expected to work without restriction from her father or husband, and possibly to do so after having children. She embraced some elements of the gender complementarity discourse endorsed by the church, and found these explanations to be useful tools in helping her build a solid marriage. However, as a member of the upper middle class, her responsibilities towards the home could be discharged easily through hiring domestic help. The confinement/protection strategy had no place in her life and she was able to enter the public space freely.

She had been free to socialize in mixed-gender groups, and she had made relationship choices that she considered uncontroversial (although they were officially discouraged by the church), by choosing her partner after a period of dating. She aspired to a marriage of mutual love and respect, rather than one characterized by subservience or obedience.

Christina’s selective approach to official church discourse on the behavior of female members is not purely about contestation. Her experiences suggest that the religious establishment, or perhaps some individual churches, are also selective in how they deal with their congregations. The religious meetings that Christina attended did not contest her lifestyle; they did not stress that pre-marital dating was wrong and that partners should be selected through church networks. Nor were there sessions that stressed the obligations of the virtuous wife to the

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 89.



home, above and beyond her participation in the public sphere. In fact, the meetings were led by a priest in cooperation with two psychologists – young, educated, upper middle class women – so they were a product not only of the church but of upper middle class culture as well.

If gender roles are interpreted selectively and through a filter of class culture by female members of the church, it seems that the church itself tailors its approaches to fit the needs and aspirations of an upper middle class congregation. There is some negotiation with these privileged lay members, as the church does not seek to rigidly enforce a particular set of gender norms.

## Chapter ٦: Contesting Faith and Discipline

This chapter examines how some of my informants contested gender norms, and how others explicated what they viewed as unjust or erroneous beliefs about gender by associating them with either other Christian denominations or with Islam or Middle Eastern values. It will argue that this upper middle class group has, in most cases, freedom to change denominations and to experiment with a variety of forms of Christian worship, and in the case of one of my informants, this process was prompted by a dissatisfaction in what she saw as unfair and unequal treatment based on her gender. It will argue that the symbolic capital of this group means that young members, including young female members, have relative freedom to leave their churches; but this spiritual freedom does not extend to conversion to Islam.

Many, perhaps most, of my female interviewees expressed some dissatisfaction with or opposition to some part of the conservative gender ideologies in Egypt, which contrasted with their “open-minded” attitudes. They consistently attributed practices and beliefs on gender that they viewed negatively to the impact of either Islamic or “Eastern” culture. These practices or beliefs, even when practiced by Christians or endorsed by Christian churches, were never considered to be valid religious interpretations. Rather, those who practiced them were religiously mistaken, according to my informants.

Protestant and Catholic informants also applied this othering process to the Coptic church; when confronted by ‘closed-minded’ approaches to gender, these approaches could be labeled a result of contamination from the Coptic Orthodox church (itself exposed to the corruptive influence of Islam or Middle Eastern culture).

Dina, the Protestant physician from Maadi, told me that:

Being a Christian, makes you have more of the Western culture; you're not, like very Eastern, you don't have this mentality. I mean, I have guy friends...The Orthodox church, some of them have this mentality of, Eastern mentality, it's more... they have Sunday school after ...*y'anni, massalan* like ١١, ١٢. They start separating guys from girls. It was not like that at Protestant church. So all my life I was with guys, so it's okay for me to have guy friends and to go out with them for coffee.

In Dina's view, Christianity is associated with a "Western" mentality, and Protestant Christianity better embodies this than the Coptic Orthodox church. To define this Western mentality, she discusses gender roles – specifically gender segregation.

Dina also explained that this Western/Eastern element was affected by class:

In Maadi, I mean even my friends who go to St Mark's Church, it's an Orthodox church, but they have a different mentality, different than St Marks' in Shubra<sup>١١٥</sup> for example. They are open minded. No separation between girls and guys, they go out as a group, so it's about *bardu* the place. So Maadi, Masr El-Gedida [Heliopolis], Zamalek - these churches are different, but Shubra for example, Alexandria, they are very strict, they are very eastern, they have some of the Islamic culture.

I asked her to tell me more about the topic and she explained the difference in terms of dress.

They won't wear *kida* [pointing to her own bare upper arms] I mean, some of the Christians would rather have short sleeves, but like this [she indicated her elbow]. They wouldn't wear *kida*, they wouldn't wear leggings, they wouldn't wear um, swimming suits, some of them...In Shubra, I'm not talking Maadi of course.

In Dina's view, the Coptic Orthodox Church had a more "closed-minded" approach to gender, a product of its Islamic and Eastern environment, but her Orthodox friends from Maadi and from other upper middle class areas were able to resist this conservatism. Clearly Dina finds it hard to articulate the precise boundaries of class and religion when describing different

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<sup>١١٥</sup> Shubra is a middle class suburb in Cairo with a high proportion of Coptic Orthodox Christians. It is considered less affluent than areas like Mohandeseen, Heliopolis and Maadi.

attitudes to gender; although she attributes more conservative attitudes to dress etc. to religion, she also acknowledges that class (being from “Maadi” and not “Shubra”) outweighs these religious differences.<sup>116</sup>

I was passed Salma’s details by a friend who knew that I was looking to interview Christian women. Salma had a friendly manner and she talked animatedly. She was a 19-year-old university student, who had been educated in a French language Catholic school. She had grown up in a Coptic Catholic family, and continued to attend the French-speaking Catholic mass, in memory of her father who used to take her to church with him and who had recently passed away. She also, however, attended services at Qasr Dohara Evangelical Church.

Like Dina, Salma described a relationship between the Coptic Church, Eastern culture, class and conservative gender attitudes. She told me that: “the Orthodox are less open-minded,” compared with Protestants and Catholics, but that Catholic churches in “poor areas” are closed-minded and that the Orthodox church in Masr El-Gedida [Heliopolis] was more open-minded.

Many of her Coptic friends would dress conservatively, unlike her:

They don't often wear shorts. I wear them if they are taking me with the car. And when I'm on vacation, I wear a *mayo* [swimsuit]; I don't wear a bikini because I have a bad body, but I would wear one if I was in shape. But my friends wear shorts under the *mayo*.

### **The minority of the minority**

Nadine, also a university student, was introduced to me by Salma. I initially spent some time socializing with the two of them in a mixed-gender, mixed-religion group. Salma was anxious to point out to me a Muslim friend of hers who she had until recently been dating; she had ended the relationship because she felt that he was too conservative and controlling.

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<sup>116</sup> My perspective as a researcher is that class culture, not religion, typically defines this group’s attitudes to dress, segregation, dating, etc, but my informants often intertwined the two as Dina does here, talking about Coptic Orthodox members from Shubra who belong to both a different denomination and a different class.

I felt both Salma and Nadine looked at me somewhat differently from my other informants. The six or seven year age gap between us seemed to create something of an aura of confession and supportive friendship. As with all my interviewees, I introduced the topic of my research as broadly as possible (Christian women and gender roles in Egypt) to create an open-ended conversation for my informants to respond according to their own interpretation. Nadine and Salma were the only interviewees who discussed these issues in a framework of justice. Salma talked about the problems in her relationships caused by Egyptian men (both Muslim and Christian) who were overly controlling, and her frustrating encounters with male friends and colleagues who considered themselves superior to her because she was a woman. Bearing in mind Abu-Lughod's warning against romanticizing resistance<sup>114</sup> and framing answers according to a Western feminist typology, I generally tried to avoid questions or lines of enquiry in interviews that framed the issues in reference to power, resistance, rights and so on. But Salma herself wanted to discuss with me her frustration about how women were unjustly treated in Egyptian culture, and her struggle against "closed-minded" people and men who tried to control her. At one point, she told me that she was interested in "women's rights" and wanted to work in the field one day.

Nadine struck me as serious and perhaps slightly reserved when I first met her. I had joined Salma and some of her friends at a pub in Zamalek. As others continued to talk amongst themselves, Salma moved the chairs around and invited Nadine to sit with us as a trio. Nadine, on learning that I was researching Christian women in Egypt, lit a cigarette and told me that she would definitely like to speak to me about her experiences being what she called "being the minority of the minority."

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<sup>114</sup> Lila Abu-Lughod, "The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power Through Bedouin Women" *American Ethnologist* vol. 17, no. 1 (Feb., 1990), 31.

I encountered many informants who were generous with their time, and took it as a responsibility to assist me in my research. But Nadine and Salma were different in that they were both genuinely interested in the possibility of a discussion, and during my interviews with them, they both asked me questions about my opinions on the topic of women and power.

Nadine was equally serious when I met her at a coffee shop in downtown Cairo for an interview. She had driven herself from Maadi, where she lived with her family. We sat in the smoking section and she lit a cigarette, and we started to talk. Just like Salma, she told me that the people in her church – the Orthodox – were “less open-minded”. Men were allowed to smoke, but girls were not. “It’s Egypt,” she said.

Nadine was unhappy with a recent experience at her church. She told me that she had “almost been kicked out for talking to guys.” During the breaks in the *igtimaa*’ (religious meeting), she would go out and talk to the male servants. “Someone would come to say hi, ask me about my father” and they would chat, and she had begun to be the subject of gossip because of her conversations with the male servants. She seemed to find the hypocrisy of the situation frustrating. “They don’t think it’s proper at church to talk to guys, but then, the servants who talk about us, they’re the ones who eventually date my friends.” She told me that it was “more important when you’re a girl, how people talk about you,” whereas “everything’s acceptable for guys.”

Nadine’s church seemed to have enforced a more strict gender code than some of the other churches described by my informants. This code also extended to socialization with Muslims. A priest had approached Nadine and summoned her to confession. “He told me... people are saying stuff about you in church, so I want you to come.” After hearing her confess, he spoke to her about reports that she had been seen with Muslims:

He said ‘you’re going out with Muslims, you have a Muslim group,’ and I said yeah, we don’t discuss religion; religion is private. And he said, eventually you will convert, you’ll do bad stuff. He said he had his own statistics of the percentage of Muslims who smoke...like 90 percent to 0 percent of Christians.” She laughed a little. “He’s supposed to be someone who really gets it... gets what’s going on...because he has to give good advice...And he said it’s not acceptable, because they want you to come to the religion...They have the concept of numbers. They want bigger numbers. In some ways it’s true, but you cannot judge a person according to that.

After this encounter, Nadine left her church. She said that no one at the church wanted to talk to her, because of her bad reputation. The same thing happened to five other girls who used to socialize with groups of Muslims friends. “No one really accepted us. One of them, she stayed home, and she said, ‘I’m not going to churches.’ And I went to a different church.”

Nadine chose to start attending a Catholic church. She had attended a variety of different churches during a period spent in the USA, and had particularly liked an “American” [Protestant] church. But she felt that attending a Protestant church would be too provocative. “If I go there, everyone’s going to gossip.” And she told me that she liked the fact that the Catholic church shared similar kinds of rituals to the Coptic church.

Her experience at the Egyptian Catholic church was radically different from that of her Coptic church. “When I go into church, during the mass ... everyone turns around to look at you, look at what you’re wearing..everything...but when I went to the Catholic church, I go in and I walk all the way to the front rows, without being stared at.”

The priest treated her differently. “I went to confess, and I said I smoke...I had alcohol, and the priest said, it’s alright, everyone has their own mistakes. Smoking is just like having the bad habit of needing coffee in the morning. It’s just a psychological addiction. It has nothing to do with sex.” The priest had provided Nadine with the kind of support and acceptance that she had found lacking at her Coptic church.

Her sister had told her a story about Pastor Sameh of Qasr Dohara Evangelical Church, which she repeated to me. He had given a lecture on homosexuality, and he said that “it’s fine to be like that...if that’s how God made you...it’s the same as if you have an affair, if you’re straight and you have an affair...it’s the same as being gay.” The Protestant churches were “open-minded. They accept new things.”

I asked Nadine how her parents had responded to her changing religious choices. She had been reluctant to tell her father (her mother had passed away three years ago) the extent of her problems at the Coptic church, because she was worried he would overreact and start arguments, worried that she was being talked about. He told Nadine that she could attend Catholic services but could not convert, and although she argued with him that it was “still Christianity”, he was strict on this point.

Her father was not “conservative” but was very conscious of “how people look at you,”, for example permitting Nadine to smoke at home, but not in the public space.

Nadine had challenged some of the practices that her particular church enforced. She had rejected the gender segregation that the church hierarchy and her church congregation attempted to enforce, because she did not agree with it. She argued that it was a product of a conservative mentality.

She told me about another incident which highlighted, to her, the frustrating attitude of her old church community. Several years ago, she and a friend had applied to become servers in church. “I went there and filled the application and four days later, they came to me and my friend, and they said no... they didn't tell us the reason. We insisted on knowing and the guy eventually said, ‘we saw you eating chicken on a Friday. How can you be a servant when you do



not fast?’<sup>118</sup> The comment was “ridiculous”; and it characterized the kind of intrusive judgementalism that she found unjust and spiritually and emotionally unsatisfying.

Like Dina and Salma, Nadine linked this attitude, and the unfair treatment of girls in comparison to boys (“No one ever talks about the guys,”) to the Coptic Orthodox Church’s “conservatism” “strictness” and “closed-mindedness” which was linked to its contact with Eastern culture and with Islam.

She recalled a meeting with a Coptic nun, who had asked her if she smoked and “I said yes; she said, it's okay, we all make mistakes.” Nuns may be less judgmental, she thought, because they were relatively insulated from Egyptian culture.

### **Changing denomination**

Nadine was not the only interviewee I spoke to who was raised in one church but regularly attended services somewhere else. Salma now split her time between Qasr Dobra, where she had friends and felt comfortable, and mass at the Catholic church that her father used to take her to. Youssef, the leader of the bible study group, was born into an observant Coptic Orthodox family and now was more comfortable describing himself as a “follower of Christ”. Irene, who described her faith as a personal relationship with God and was reluctantly to define herself by denomination,<sup>119</sup> was raised Catholic, and her mother had been born Coptic Orthodox but had converted for marriage. Both Dina’s parents were practicing Protestants, but both had been baptized in the Coptic Orthodox church and then converted.

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<sup>118</sup> Coptic Orthodox members are expected to abstain from meat and dairy products on every Wednesday and Friday, excluding Pentecost season.

<sup>119</sup> Although I would situate Irene and Youssef’s refusal to favor a particular church within a broadly evangelical Protestant tradition that emphasizes an individualistic spiritual relationship with God.

Although there are constraints on conversion, particularly from parents and families who were uncomfortable with spiritual exploration (Youssef and Nadine's parents fall into this category), these young upper middle class Christians have considerable freedom to reshape religious identities based on their personal choices.<sup>122</sup>

However, this denominational flexibility does not extend to leaving Christianity and becoming Muslim. Legally, Christians are able to do so in Egypt, but this possibility was not discussed by my informants and none expressed any interest in experimentation with Islam.<sup>123</sup> A few touched on the topic of mixed marriages. Dina said that she knew many Muslim-Christian couples during her time at university, but that none she knew of had ever chosen to marry. In fact, mixed marriages were most common among the "lower classes". She had heard many stories of poor Coptic women being convinced to marry Muslim men "because they're not very religious; they care for things more than religion, like just the basics. Love and food and a place to live."

Although the line between different Christian denominations and identities was very fluid, the dividing line between Christian and Muslim was, in the imaginations of my informants, unbreachable. While the increasing emphasis on Coptic identity in Egypt has not prevented young upper middle Copts from looking outside the Coptic community for alternative spiritual experiences, the Christian-Muslim binary remains absolute in the lives of these upper middle class Christians.

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<sup>122</sup> Protestantism was considered particularly problematic by many of my interviewees; Nadine chose to attend a Catholic rather than a Protestant church partly because this would provoke less gossip. Christina told me that she would have considered marrying a Catholic partner but probably a Protestant would have been difficult because Protestantism is "very different."

<sup>123</sup> An interesting contrast with the high number of conversions Zaki recorded in her thesis.

## Conclusion

This thesis has argued that class identity and class privileges play a role in the way affluent Christian women interpret gender roles and religious identities.

My informants were part of an urban upper middle class, defined by shared transnational and educational experiences, and by the physical segregation of different socio-economic classes in Egypt. Socio-economic divisions are reproduced starkly in the lived realities of members of the upper middle class, through the geography of their urban lives.

Suburban developments, private education, exclusive leisure spaces, private transport, are all isolating elements that ensure that extended, meaningful social contact with people from different socio-economic backgrounds is limited. Members of this group possess a “cosmopolitan capital” which is constituted largely in social, cultural, educational and linguistic terms, and which sets them apart from the broader middle class. In this way, the economic power of this group is reproduced culturally through the maintenance of a particular class culture.

One of the ways that this class culture is produced is through gender ideologies that use terms like “open minded” and “educated” to distinguish the upper middle class from other socio-economic groups that enforce different gender norms. Use of these value judgments conceals economic privilege behind perceived cultural or moral superiority.

This class culture allowed my Coptic Orthodox informants to selectively reinterpret church teachings and other popular discourses about gender. Their rejection of teachings that were not compatible with the kind of gender norms practiced within the upper middle class (for example, mixed gender friendships, and romantic relationships prior to engagement) was

formulated as a rejection of “closed-minded” or “conservative” thinking – not of Christian doctrine.

This selective appropriation of ideas about gender was mirrored by a degree of selectivity by some elements of the Coptic religious establishment. Some priests seem to have more “strict” interpretations of certain teachings than others.<sup>117</sup> Christina’s church in Zamalek seemed to provide interpretations of official doctrines that would appeal to its upper middle congregation – in contrast to Nadine’s experience of frustration at being judged by her church community and priest for associating with Muslims and for talking to male friends in church.

That my informants seem able either to avoid elements of church teaching that are incompatible with their lifestyles (Christina) or to challenge community and clerical authority by seeking out religious environments that they found more emotionally and spiritually satisfying (Nadine) suggests that they are not part of the same “imagined Coptic community” that has come to define the middle class Coptic experience. They feel a stronger sense of community and belonging with other upper middle class Egyptians from different religious backgrounds than with fellow Copts from the less affluent families.

Within the upper middle class, it seems that the bounded, inward-looking nature of neo-Coptic identity does not have the same power; instead, the Christian community is constituted around a common Christian identity, rather than around a common Coptic Orthodox identity. Denominational divisions are observed but do not seem to be rigid social barriers. Religious exploration, within Christianity, is socially acceptable, and in many cases does not provoke sanction or criticism. Interestingly, despite this denomination fluidity, the Christian-Muslim

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<sup>117</sup> Zaki suggests that churches in poorer areas exclude their female members from some kinds of participation.

binary remains absolute. Christian-Muslim marriages among my informants' social circles were reported to be extremely rare. Likewise, my informants' spiritual exploration was always within the boundaries of Christianity. None of my informants were interested in Islam as a possible spiritual alternative. This suggests to me that, whilst the power of the Coptic Church to police the community is somewhat weaker among upper middle class members, the wider division in Egyptian society –the Christian/Muslim binary – still retains its power. My informants' 'cosmopolitan capital', which had displaced or muted the power of a bounded Coptic Orthodox community, did not have any impact on their identification as Christian.

Overall, my research suggests that class remains an important factor for determining the religious identities and gender roles of upper middle class Coptic women. My informants' power to select, interpret, reject and reformulate certain elements of expected gender roles seems to be a reflection of the power of upper middle class culture. However, it should be noted that this power is not unlimited; there are non-negotiable issues, particularly access to divorce, where the church's teachings are enforced and policed. The power to define and limit divorce rests with clerical authorities and attempts to contest this are resisted and disciplined by the church, even when such contestation comes from upper middle class members.

This thesis also emphasizes the importance of gender as a site of identity production; just as the rural poor use gender symbols such as female genital cutting to articulate group so members of the urban middle class evaluate symbols and behaviors such as female dress, dating, and mixed-gender friendships to define the boundaries of their class community and locate others in a particular class framework.

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<sup>112</sup> Yount, ۲۰۰۴, ۱۰۸۳.

## Epilogue

The majority of the fieldwork that comprised this thesis was carried out prior to the revolution that erupted in January ٢٠١١. However, these dramatic events and the complex political restructuring that followed them and is still unfolding are worth reflecting on, because they have implications for some of the ideas explored in this thesis.

One key observation about the post-Mubarak era is the extent to which the status of Egypt's Coptic Christians remains a fraught, controversial and emotive issue. Despite initial hopes that the popular uprising would mark a turning point towards a more inclusive national citizenship, the months following the handover of power to the supreme military council were marked by frequent outbreaks of sectarian violence.

A new development, however, was the nature and scale of the Coptic response to this reemergence of sectarian tension. The political changes brought about by the uprising also lead to an opening up of space for political debate and participation. Critics of powerful actors are now more easily heard, and there is much greater space for all kinds of political action.<sup>١٢٤</sup> As a result, there has been an emergence of a large number of new political campaigns, associations and parties, among them a number of Coptic advocacy groups.

Samer Soliman discusses what he describes as a new element in Coptic activism emerging at a demonstration in ٢٠١٦, when Coptic protesters at the funeral of a Christian victim of an apparently religiously-motivated murder took their protest onto the street, rather than in or

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<sup>١٢٤</sup> Of course, powerful limits on freedom of speech and political action still exist, and various kinds of opposition are still regularly met by state sanctioned oppression, sometimes including deadly violence. Nonetheless, the public space is manifestly more open now than under Hosni Mubarak's regime in many key ways.

around the Orthodox Coptic cathedral.<sup>110</sup> This new kind of Coptic mobilization – as citizens who are demanding equal rights from the state, rather than as members of the Church seeking either to defend it or to be protected by it – is has become much more common in the relative openness of the political scene after the events of January 2011. Coptic groups like the Maspero Youth Union and Copts for Egypt which lobby for religious freedom and for Coptic interests were formed largely by young “revolutionary” Christian youth. These young middle class Christians took part in the January/February 2011 protests to oust Mubarak,<sup>111</sup> and in the aftermath of political transition, as sectarian violence continued to occur and responses were seen as inadequate, the issue of the status and rights of Coptic Egyptians came to the surface again, leading to the formation of these groups.

They stand in contrast, and sometimes explicit opposition, to the official church hierarchy on political issues. The policy of the Coptic Orthodox Church during the January/February events was to stand fast to its pro-regime policy, and Pope Shenouda explicitly condemned the protests and urged Copts not to take part. Observing events in Mohandeseen, a center of ‘pro-Mubarak’ support, I witnessed several protests in support of the regime in February 2011 at which contingents of Coptic priests marched through the streets in their distinctive dress, holding aloft pro-Mubarak banners. Following the exit of Mubarak and the transition to rule by military junta, the Church has generally maintained its policy of support for the regime and the status quo, although explicit criticism of protesters became less evident after it was clear that the uprising had captured popular imagination and would have a lasting impact.

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<sup>110</sup> Soliman, 146-7.

<sup>111</sup> Interview with Maspero Youth Union member F., October 2011.

The Maspero Youth Union, by contrast, was formed by self-described ‘revolutionary youth’ and continues to lobby and mobilize in favor of broader ‘revolutionary’ goals, for example attending anti-military council protests along with mainstream revolutionary groups. It also has at times explicitly criticized the pro-regime stance of the church hierarchy, for example in December ٢٠١١ when the group criticizing the invitation of military council members to celebrate Christmas in the Cathedral.<sup>١٢٧</sup>

Other voices have also been heard in the new political space, including Coptic groups lobbying the Church to change its strict policy on divorce. These campaigns constitute direct challenges to clerical authority, and in some cases these were met with a small-scale version of the violence that the Egyptian state deployed to silence its own challengers. Just as the Mubarak regime had deployed paid “thugs” (criminal elements hired to use violent tactics to disperse opposition) during the “Battle of the Camel” in Tahrir Square, so the Church, according to its critics, seemed to have hired thugs with a dog to violently intimidate a small group of protesters demanding their voice be heard outside the cathedral. Policemen on the scene refused to intervene as violence broke out “insisting it was a purely Coptic affair.”<sup>١٢٨</sup>

These kind of developments show that the categories and models that this thesis began by scrutinizing have not been swept away in the post-Mubarak period, but rather, form an important part of a dynamic and fluctuating political culture. New battles between lay and clerical elites seem likely to take place, and new modes of political expression are emerging which will have powerful impacts on the elements of Coptic identity and minoritarian discourse discussed above. The issue of access to divorce is creating direct and public confrontations

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<sup>١٢٧</sup> Jadaliyya, “Copts Protest Church's Christmas Invitation to SCAF and Islamists”, December ٣٠, ٢٠١١. <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/٣٨٣٩/copts-protest-churchs-christmas-invitation-to-scaf>

<sup>١٢٨</sup> Rasha Sadek, “Stalemate” *Al-Ahram Weekly*, August ٤, ٢٠١١. <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/٢٠١١/١٠٠٩/eg٧.htm>



between lay and clerical elites over key questions of whether the authority for such issues should be clerical or civil. The “entente” relationship between state and church may also be reformulated as new political actors gain power, a new pope occupies the See, and perhaps as young, middle class Coptic activists, who bring to the struggle a “revolutionary” experience, seek to change the status quo. Sectarian violence is another factor which will surely have an impact on Coptic identity, as will the sense of state persecution engendered firstly by a persistent failure to bring perpetrators of violent acts to justice, and secondly – critically – by the experience of brutal state repression on 9 October 2011, when a peaceful protest against the burning of a Coptic community center was attacked by the army, leaving 29 protesters dead.

Ideas about gender continue to be important for constructing group identity in this transition period; public protests about rights to divorce and possible changes in personal status laws have reemerged as part of a lay contestation of the clerical hierarchy’s control. The stories of “kidnapped women” are frequent, suggesting community struggles over female members. The Maspero Youth Union, in the opening lines of a statement to newly elected parliament members, demonstrated the extent to which gender remains an important faultline for defining group identities:

Gentlemen of the majority in the parliament, we address you with all respect. Will you rule us according to law or will you deal with us as a minority and Christians, and how will you deal with our women and how you will see their faces and their uncovered hair?”<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Mohamed Abdel Salam, “Egypt’s Maspero Youth questions Islamist parliamentary majority over Christians” *Bikya Masr*, January 19, 2012. <http://bikyamasr.com/04290/egypts-maspero-youth-questions-islamist-parliamentary-majority-over-christians/>

Although it is still unclear what long-term effects the unprecedented political changes of ٢٠١١ will have on the Egyptian Coptic community, it seems likely that the kind of themes analysed above, such as the minoritarian trend, the competition between lay and clerical elites, the “entente” between church and state, the impact of class on categories of religious identity, and the importance of gender as a space of symbolic politics will remain relevant.

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