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The American University in Cairo
School of Humanities and Social Sciences

Coptic Orthodox Christianity: Religious Transformation in the Time of Neoliberalism

A Thesis Submitted to
The Department of Sociology, Anthropology, Psychology, and Egyptology

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Arts
In Sociology – Anthropology

By **Marsil Kalliney**

Under the supervision of **Dr. Joseph Hill**

May 2010

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Abstract

While the Coptic Orthodox Church celebrates a unique historical trajectory, contemporary Copts' conceptualization of religious discourses reflects a transformation impacted by political and economic global forces. The international prevailing ideological paradigm of neoliberalism is highlighted by the shift from governments into individuals through economic and political practices. This thesis illustrates the transformation using an example of a Coptic charity organization redefining itself to be a non-governmental organization (NGO) in response to the dominant paradigm of neoliberalism. The organization is a microcosm reflecting global financial and political forces as well as members' religious beliefs as they relate to these global forces. This project highlights the narratives of the members of the organization and the church clergy.

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Coptic Orthodox Christianity: Religious Transformation in the Time of Neoliberalism

Chapter 1: Introduction

Moheb, president of a Coptic charity organization and a judge in his mid thirties, was invited by Youssef, a businessman in his early sixties and a member of the charity organization who has immigrated to Canada more than 26 years, to have a meeting in a restaurant in Heliopolis called *Kan Zaman* to discuss the possibility of receiving funds for the organization from the CIDA (Canadian International Development Association), the Canadian government's international aid agency. Youssef is a member of a voluntary committee (in Canada) that is composed of immigrant Copts, Christian Egyptians, who have a goal of providing funds to help the poor in Egypt. Youssef also invited Michal, a physician in his late thirties visiting from Canada, who is a committee member and was assigned the task to fill out and submit CIDA's application. Youssef invited his two secretaries, Teresa and Marian, to attend the meeting as they are a liaison between Moheb and him since they live in Egypt. Moheb invited me to attend this meeting because I had informed him about my interest in this project for my study as I joined the Charity organization around two years previously, but decided to examine it for this study for the past year.

Youssef had made the connection between Moheb and the committee members, a few months earlier, via e-mails and phone calls, but Moheb had not met any of them in person. Prior to the start of discussion, the owner of the restaurant came to say hello to Youssef reporting that they are good friends. Special arrangements were made for this meeting; the table was located by the window and the service was carried out by the head of the waiters and the food variety was

extraordinary. On the shelves attached to the walls were items representing Egypt in the past (*Zaman*) and the food served was authentic, traditional Egypt food. After a few minutes of small talk about who everyone is and his/her job and role in the project, Moheb informally introduced the organization highlighting its humanitarian mission and only obliquely mentioning its religious orientation to serve the poorest of the poor in Minia governorate in Upper Egypt who experience inhumane living conditions. He described how this mission is accomplished through a monthly visit by the members, who consist of prominent businessmen/women, owners and CEOs of multinational companies, people who hold top positions in government offices, and the elites in many fields. The organization's goals are insuring a healthy shelter that has water, electricity, a ceiling and a lavatory for each family. In addition, it targets better health, education, employment, and spirituality for the poor.

Moheb pointed out that, although the organization is funded through members' donations, these donations hardly cover the expenses, therefore obtaining funds from abroad has become essential. After Moheb has presented the organization, Michael responded by explaining what CIDA is and its guidelines which require the organization to become a non-governmental organization (NGO), adopt sustainable development as its system and serve all people without religious discrimination. These conditions left Moheb with a delicate mission, which would begin by taking a decision to establish this NGO and attain the members' consensus.

After an extensive discussion about the charity organization and CIDA, Moheb described to Michael that he had many chances to immigrate to Canada but he decided to stay in Egypt because he felt that he has a mission and responsibility toward the poor. He stated he thinks that members of this charity organization in Egypt have a better chance of getting into heaven because of their love for the poor which they express physically by visiting them to improve their

life conditions. Furthermore, he stated that Copts that live abroad have to work much harder to get into heaven. Michael's face expressed puzzlement and he defended his position by saying he is very dedicated to doing humanitarian acts through his work, he exerts time and effort to attain funds for the poor and he donates money himself. Youssef engaged in the conversation and also defended his position by saying he feels it was God's plan for him to immigrate; therefore, God is utilizing his position abroad to help Copts in Egypt and being a resource for them. While the conversation was full of tension, it ended peacefully when Moheb recognized and expressed appreciation of the valid points that Michael and Youssef had made.

The discussions between Moheb, Michael and Youssef about salvation, getting into heaven, God's plan or mission for them, and implementing the commandments of the Bible by serving the poor reflect larger dilemmas facing Copts in a time of globalization and neoliberalization. It accentuated the significant political and economic roles of immigrants which define and put pressure on the State to lessen the strains on Copts of feeling persecuted. For example, some Copts feel more secure in Egypt because globalization made tools such as the internet available where with a click of a button persecuted Copts could report incidents which may bring the attention of the world. A feature of globalization is technology which is a vehicle for transporting information across the world exposing people to different ideas, teachings, cultures, politics and others. It highlighted the transition from being a charity organization to becoming an NGO that reflects a global process that is the result of neoliberalism which is discussed in extensive detail in Chapter 3.

The Purpose of the Thesis

This thesis argues that conceptualization of religious discourses orchestrates Copts' behaviors and involvement in public life, politics, economics and church. While this conceptualization of

religion impacts their behaviors, it is also impacted by politics, economics, and spirituality. Thus, while the dogma of Coptic Christianity is not affected, how this dogma is translated into practice transforms significantly as political-economic circumstances change. These impacts are within a context that is framed by globalization and neoliberalism including a background of a historical trajectory of Copts, the regime and the Church.

While the Coptic Orthodox Church is keen on remaining traditional preserving and reminding its members of its historical trajectory of being persecuted which is reflected by the thorny interaction with the State, this thesis argues that there is evidence of a transformation influenced by globalization and neoliberalism. Copts' religious discourses are impacted by political and economic global forces. The global prevailing ideological paradigm of neoliberalism is highlighted by the shift from governments into individuals through economic and political practices (Elyachar 2009; Wiktorowicz and Farouki 2000; Huang 2009; Kaag 2008; Lerner 2005). For example, The Church has made itself be viewed as a spiritual, social, political and economic provider for Copts (Henderson 2005); therefore, many charity organizations became associated with the church. Numerous charity organizations around the world, both religious and non-religious, are redefining themselves as NGOs in response to the increasing dominant paradigm of neoliberalism.

Examples of Copts' conceptualizing of religious beliefs and the impacted behaviors include how their understanding of what the Bible demonstrates regarding involvement in politics is what orchestrates their involvement in politics. In other words, if they view the situation where St. Paul questioned authorities with positively, they would become active in dealing with the State. On the other hand, if they comprehend the verses of the bible that say "turn the other cheek" they become impassive when dealing with the regime. Similarly, while some Copts give their

donation to priests directly to utilize according to their judgments which might include church construction, others are keen on allocating this money towards charity organizations where they hand the money directly to the poor or use it for their benefits in direct ways. While some priests only concentrate on their religious duties, others are keen to have political awareness and even attend political gatherings. Similarly, some priests follow the rules dictated by the Church leadership while others face conflicts when they practice their own teachings.

This study required exploring the history of the Coptic Church, investigating the economic and political factors which are reflected by the relationship between the State and the Church, investigating the Copts' spirituality and examining the impact of globalization and neoliberalism on their conceptions and practices of religion. This project required a close ethnographic research among Copts to examine the larger economic-political context through interviews and participant observation. I have focused ethnographic research on a Coptic charity organization that is in the process of registering as an NGO as a site in which religiosity and these global processes shape one another in complex and unpredictable ways.

Ethnographic Methods

Although Copts belong to one religion, each has his/her own understanding of religion which is affected by political, economic and social factors. Being a Copt and through personal participation in church activities, I have established connections in numerous local churches and religious associations. Building on these contacts for the past year, I have interviewed a diverse group of Copts with a range of socioeconomic backgrounds, ages, gender, education, and jobs. I have conducted about 70 interviews with lay members of the church and 10 church clergy (priests and bishops) Some of the questions I asked include their definition of religion and church, their spiritual experiences, their experience with the church clergy and leadership, the

link between religion, economics and politics, and how globalization and neoliberalism explain these connections. In order to focus my research project, I selected a Coptic charity organization that is going through the process of being registered as an NGO. This organization was based in Cairo, but traveled to Upper Egypt once a month which gave me an exposure of Copts there. Most of the priests and bishops selected were located in Cairo and connected to this organization which allowed me participant observation. Participant observation took place through joining the organization in its organized meeting and activities. This allowed me to supplement interviewees' descriptions with my own observations. I exposed enough of the research and my role to them so that they would feel comfortable to be interviewed and observed and for me to be able to conduct the research. Some of the interviewees were interviewed a second time to validate the information given during the first interview and to investigate further questions which came up as the research progresses.

Background: Copts and Their Minority Status in Egypt

In order to analyze the responses from the interviews; it is essential to have an overview of the history of the Coptic Church which includes the economic and political context that is presented in the interaction between the Church and the State. It also reveals the role of spirituality in Copts' conceptualization of religious beliefs. Many scholars (Botors 2006; Hendreson 2005; Zeidan 1999; Rowe 2009; Ameen 1968) have touched on the unique historical trajectory of the Coptic Church where it has survived for 2000 years despite persecutions, its relegation to minority status and the long dominance of Islam in the region.

These stories are very important for Copts' self-understanding as they are a not just a record of the historical existence of persecution as Copts' religious identity and outlook today are shaped by many narratives of persecution and marginalization. Persecution is not just an accident or

something that happens but has a central place in Christian cosmologies. This torture is part of a deep narrative of persecution that affects how people view salvation, people's political self-understanding as minorities and perhaps their economic solidarity.

The persecutions began year 68 A.D. with torturing St. Mark the evangelist who is the founder of Christianity in Egypt upon his visit year 61 A.D until death. Malatey (1993), who is a priest and a Coptic scholar, narrates that St. Mark, on orders from the emperor, was dragged with a rope on the rocky streets of Alexandria by an ox which caused his flesh to be torn, then he was thrown into prison where Christ appeared to him in a vision to encourage him. The following day he was dragged again until death (Yohana, 1979). The bloodiest persecution for refusal to leave the faith, was in the era of Emperor Diocletian in 284 CE (Henderson, 2005) when he ordered the killings of Christians until it was reported that the blood reached the knees of his horse (Yohana, 1979), and such persecution continued throughout until the seventh century. Church historians tell that many women and children were victims of the persecutions where the women were tortured and the Christian children were offered as a sacrifice to the idols (Yohana 1979).

After the Arab invasion of Egypt in 641, when Copts sustained 80% of the populations (Henderson, 2005), their status changed to be *dhimma* (protected minorities); currently they are 10% -16% or 8- 12 million people (Zeidan, 1999). Muslim leaders imposed a tax called *jizya* on Copts where to survive they had to pay or convert to Islam (Henderson, 2005). Zeidan states that Copts could aspire to equality as an authentic part of the prioritized identity during the periods when mainly Pharaonic, liberal and secular-Arab identities prevailed. Copts were relegated to a secondary status when Arab-Islamic and pan-Islamic identity were present (Zeidan 1999:54). Botros (2006: 190) states that “the church addresses this era with tact, delicacy and diplomacy,

particularly when it comes to incidents of sectarian strife and spates of persecution by Arab rulers.”

Numerous interviews reflected how this history is engraved in the identity of Copts and explains many of their ways and reactions to the State and other non-Copts. It shows why the Church is keen on preserving its history which is highlighted in the *synaxarium*, a book of stories of martyrs and saints, in every liturgy (Botros, 2006). Copts’ current status as minorities leads them to emphasize past persecution and there are many parts of the New Testament that glorify persecution for Jesus’s sake. Henderson describes Copts as viewing their history as a long series of “persecutions, massacres, forced conversions and destroyed churches...martyrdom and suffering have a high symbolic mean for Copts as they perceive themselves as facing constant existential threat” (Henderson, 2005:164). Botros describes that the narrative of the church does not portray it as a “virtuous victim” but takes pride in its spirituality, strength and resilience to adapt and most of all “the miracle of survival” and “a lily among the thorns” which give a sense of triumph and hope (Botros, 2006:192). Many scholars Henderson (2005), a Western academic relying on Coptic sources, Hasan (2003), a Muslim scholar, and Karas, a Coptic scholar (1986) describe how much of modern Coptic identity is tied to the past where the two main Coptic traditions remain monasticism and martyrdom to this day.

Zeidan (1999) explains that Nasser’s land reform and nationalization (of church and personal properties) programmes broke the power of a large number of Copts who were upper bourgeoisie and marked an era of decline in Coptic participation in the government and public services.

During Sadat’s era (1970-81), *sharia* became the main source of legislation. Islamists who were anti-Copts gained considerable influence, and churches, shops and homes of Copts were burnt and many Copts were killed due to communal conflicts in which religion became politicized.

(Brown II 2000). Since becoming president in 1981, Mubarak slowly introduced political reforms depending on the socially permissive climate and the neoliberal project which was initiated by Sadat (the *infitah* programme) while maintaining the mastery of the governing party and the President by pressing freedom and civil society organization that might threaten them (Rowe 2009). Henderson quotes Karas (1986:207) who states that Egyptian Christians, still face the same policy of religious oppression and discrimination without physical attacks, as the government and media have intensified psychological and economic warfare while keeping the physical violence at a minimum to avoid Copt's reaction abroad.

In order to preserve their basic identity, Copts have voluntarily sustained their marginalized position, creating, according to Hassan (2003), an orbit and “metaphoric language of resistance couched in the legends of the ancient Christian martyrs.” . Rowe states that “in spite of the many challenges that Copts face both in the form of Muslim preference and a restrictive political environment, they have managed to create a strong and vibrant set of civil society institutions through a combination of communal solidarity, adept political maneuvering, foreign pressure, and operating as less threatening proxy for the secular opposition” (Rowe 2009:112).

In addition to politics and economics, numerous interviews reflected on spirituality and spiritual gifts which included interacting with Saints. Henderson (2005) describes that venerating the saints and praying for their intercession between Copts and God is a significant characteristic of their identity. Henderson uses Van Doorn-Harder's (1995) explanation of the similar significant role intercession or mediation play in dealing with authorities in social hierarchy to dealing with the supernatural in spiritual hierarchy. She gave the example of the power of healing by extreme devotion to a saint of his/her intercession. Hassan points out these experiences as being “directly proportional to the amount of social, religious and political adversity that they encountered in the

past and now in the present...where Copts are available to experiences of visions, locutions, inspired dreams, mystical apparitions, miracles and revelations” (Hassan 2003:215).

Several of my interviews with laity indicated the Church’s aim of keeping Copts faithful to it and why they continue to be despite disagreements with its leadership. Also, the interviews highlighted how some Copts view it as a provider. Henderson highlights the establishment of the Sunday School Movement by a group of Coptic university graduates of Egyptian universities to update the Church by re-establishing a Coptic identity that placed value on suffering and martyrdom and compete with Protestant and Catholics who were winning many converts. Hassan (2003) points out that the current Pope, Shenouda III, who was involved in the Sunday School Movement has structured the Coptic church today to involve more lay people, including women, by creating positions in the church for them as church-servants and appointed more bishops to cater for people’s needs which made people think of the church as a second government. He describes the relationship between the church and laity to resemble a citizen-state relationship and not just pastoral, one in which Copts expect the church to provide for their educational, occupational, housing and medical problems.

Neoliberalism

Many Coptic charity organizations tend to be associated with a local church with permission of the Church leadership (Pope and bishops). However, numerous charity organizations are redefining themselves as NGOs in response to the increasing dominant paradigm of neoliberalism (Elyachar 2009). Huang highlights that there is the growing number of groups known generally by the term NGOs have created “political space” around the globe that constitutes a global “association revolution” and “global infatuation with NGOs” (Huang 2009:348). Neoliberalism is characterized as the political preference for market mechanisms as a

means of ensuring economic and social well-being, demanding “the ascendancy of markets as society’s prime distributional tool controlling the allocation of resources on the basis of competition and placing responsibilities for well-being on the shoulders of the individual” (Larner 2005). It is a contingent discourse and process and is always in conversation with other discourses and processes especially political economy. Neoliberalism, which is backed by the World Bank, reflects a process of privatizing state enterprises, flattening tax rates, liberalizing trade and relaxing government regulations (Moreton (2007). The intervention of nongovernmental organization (i.e. Christian, Islamic and secular) are eased by the processes associated with neoliberalism include political and economic liberalization and democracy (Kaag 2008).

The role of NGOs is important because of the state’s withdrawal from social service provisions and the increased gap between the rich and poor (Kaag 2008). Wiktorowicz and Farouki (2000) describe the role of NGOs, in the case of Jordan, to provide social services (which the state is not able to provide for its citizens) without any intention of financial gains or other personal gains, including political gains; therefore, the activities are framed in terms of religious obligations of charity and *da’wa* (missionary work). Another example is in Upper Egypt where many villages, as reflected by the ethnographic study, lack water, electricity, healthy environment, healthcare, educational services, employment centers and vocational trainings, which previously might have been provided by the State, hence, charity organizations step in to compensate for this lack. Since international donors require the adoption of methods of “sustainable development,” the charity organizations redefine themselves as NGOs to get the maximum benefits from the State and obtain funds from abroad. NGOs grow out of distinctly international context and development agenda in which funding has been linked to programs to “develop civil societies”

since the 1980s where the paramount change in the civic associations discourse became organized around them (Elyachar 2009).

Another advantage of becoming an NGO versus continuing as a charity organization is the ability to operate in a new configuration of power to face the hegemony of the state. Elyachar (2009) gives an example to reflect on mapping the shift of power between the State, NGOs and international organization in the formal economy. It is a case of evicting 600 craftsmen (their homes and shops) to al-Hirafiyeen area which is state sponsored project to rid neighborhoods of northern Cairo of polluting workshops. This move is the result of a Social fund for Development that was started in 1991 by the World Bank which targeted youth microenterprises in Egypt. She states its official purpose to “offset the temporary disequilibrium of structural adjustment programs” by allocating a great deal of money from international organizations, international NGOs and bilateral development agencies (Elyachar 2009). After moving, the craftsmen had organized themselves into a *rabta* (an association) which was regulated by the state via the Ministry of Social Affairs, in order to negotiate with the Governorate of Cairo regarding their many concerns and complains about the neighborhood. This association might have been effective at first, but as the neighborhood and then microenterprises developed, “the craftsmen had to operate in a new configuration of power” to deal with the hegemonic form of power of the state (Elyachar 2009). Leaders of the craftsmen’s association changed their name to emphasize *tanmiyya* (development) and started to use the word “NGO” which reflected crucial shifts in national and global power configurations and the ability of the craftsmen to maneuver and exercise power where they worked and lived (Elyachar 2009). She says that NGOs are no less “Egyptian” than a *rabta* and the localization of global configurations of power in which the

international organizations and NGOs after the graduate microentrepreneurs had become co-residents of the craftsmen's neighborhood.

The Coptic charity organization which I focus on in my ethnographic research, is currently in the process of going through a similar experience of redefining itself to be and NGO which made a power shift to deal with the state and obtain benefits and rights for the poor. It has changed its name which made it operate with two identities. Huang (2009) highlights this idea by pointing out that here are two identities where a civic organization is viewed in the local and global contexts as a grassroots group and as an NGO on the global stage (Huang 2009). Chapter 3 will discuss in further detail the process through which this Coptic Charity organization is being registered as an NGO, along with the disagreements over whether such a move jeopardizes the organization's religious nature.

Organization of the Thesis

The purpose of this study is to investigate Copts' conceptualization of religious beliefs. This comprehension is impacted by factors such as politics, economics, and spirituality which are framed in the context of globalization and neoliberalism. This study has required the investigation of the historical trajectory of Copts, the regime and the Church which is reflected in the literature. It also required a close ethnographic study of lay and clerical members of the Church. Therefore, chapter 1 includes the historical background of Copts which illustrates their political and economic relationship with the State. It also points out the transformation of the Coptic Orthodox Church during the last four centuries through which its leadership (the Pope) restructured the church hierarchy to include more positions for the clergy (bishops) and other positions for lay members and assigned them roles that made the church become a provider for Copts. Therefore, the relationship between the church and laity resemble a citizen-state

relationship, as Copts expect the church to provide for their educational, occupational, housing and medical problems. Consequently, many charity organizations are organized and linked to the local church under the supervision of the Pope and bishops to serve Copts. Numerous of these charity organizations are redefining themselves as NGOs under the impact neoliberalism.

I study a Coptic Charity organization which is in the process of registering as an NGO. The organization is a microcosm reflecting global financial and political forces as well as members' religious beliefs as they relate to these global forces. Chapter two, therefore, illustrates how religious conceptualization orchestrates the behavior of each member of the organization in his/her involvement with politics, economics, the State, the Church and the world. Some members express their conflicts with the politics of the state and church leadership. The chapter also highlights the political, economic and spiritual factors that impact this conceptualization while they do not impact the dogma.

Since these members are going through a transition of belonging to a charity organization which is becoming an NGO, it is essential to demonstrate this global process. Therefore, Chapter 3 highlights neoliberalism and its impact on the organization, the reaction of the members, and their integration in this new process. The charity organization and its members exist within the context of the Church; so it is equally important to investigate their relationship with the Church which includes its leadership and clergy. Therefore, chapter 4 presents narratives of church clergy, their teachings, interaction with church authorities and the impact of these aspects on members' conceptualization of religion. It investigates the impact of politics, authority, possessing spiritual gifts and popularity in dealing with conflicts with the Church leadership. It reflects on the transformation of Copts and the Church in the time of neoliberalism. The findings and conclusion are highlighted in chapter 5.

Chapter 2: The Charity Organization

Unlike many trains that travel from Cairo to Upper Egypt is the 6:00 A.M. train which takes off on the first Friday of each month. What is unique about this train is the last car where voices full of excitement, singing and socializing are heard. As the train leaves from the central Ramsis station in Cairo, then Giza station the sight of tall buildings gradually disappears changing into scenery of green open fields embracing the golden rays of the sun and the clear blue sky, decorated by white cotton or yellow corn depending on the season.

The first time I took this train was two years ago when I joined a Coptic charity organization that travels from Cairo to visit poor families in the villages of Minia governorate in Upper Egypt. During the summer of 2008, I had attended a retreat in New York while I was visiting the United States. In one meeting, a fiery, young preacher, with his long, black beard typical of Coptic priests, mesmerized youth and convinced several of them to join him in Upper Egypt to expose them to the life of the poor who live there. Bishop Angeleous is assigned to serve in England where he resides, but was invited to lead this retreat. After the meeting I approached him and volunteered to go on the trip to help since I live in Egypt. Still dressed in his black garb and responding with a touching personal warmth, he immediately but graciously dismissed my suggestion of performing the more technical role of translator and instead invited me to become a full member in the project.

After a month of anxiously waiting and, for the main organizers, intense preparations, it was time for the trip. During the trip I first met Moheb, the president of this organization. On the trip, I learned that this organization's main purpose is to serve people who live under the poverty line in Upper Egypt. After being greatly impacted on my first trip by the families and the inhumane conditions they live under, I decided to become a member. I selected this organization, which I

am going to refer to with the name Rahma (Mercy), to be the focus of my study because it is a microcosm reflecting global financial and political forces as well as members' religious beliefs as they relate to these global forces. I had established trusting relationships with the members that would allow me to conduct interviews.

Interviewing Moheb has revealed important information about the organization and its establishment. After a few months of interactions and going on the visits to Upper Egypt, I approached Moheb for an interview. Since Moheb has a tight schedule, the interview had to take place over several meeting times. Moheb embraced the idea of this study and was engaged with the questions. Some of the meetings for the interview took place on the train, which the organization uses as a mean of transportation to Upper Egypt, or over the phone which is how the following part of the interview took place.

Moheb vividly narrated his first visit to a few poor families in Upper Egypt which was the sparkle of establishing the organization. Moheb is originally from Bani Mazar which is a big city in Minia governorate, but had come to Cairo for college and decided to reside there. Rami, a friend of Moheb's from home, called his attention to the severe need of helping poor families in the villages around Bani Mazar. On a Sunday afternoon in November of 1994, Moheb went with Rami and Magdy (another friend) to visit the first family. Moheb says when they arrived at the first house, or at what they had expected to be a house, they found a small room made of clay, where a widow and her five children lived. Moheb describes that the room was dark and the walls were falling apart, the roof was made of a few sticks that barely covered the area and the floor was made of dirt. The room did not have any water, electricity, a bathroom or any essential elements for living. The only furniture it had consisted of a frame of an old iron bed.

When the widow met Moheb and his two friends, she recognized Rami because he had visited her before. The first question the widow asked when she saw them was why they were late. She said that her kids were very hungry the night before and she did not have any food or money to buy it for them. She went to her next door neighbor (whom she called Om Samir) to ask her for a handful of the food that she uses to feed her chickens. The widow said that she soaked the chickens' food and fed it to her children.

Moheb asked the widow about her means of income and she replied that they live on her husband's pension which is 49 Egyptian pounds (LE) each month (about \$8). She added that the church gives them a monthly payment of LE 20 (\$3.5). She reported that this money is not enough for living. She said that they sleep on the floor each night and it gets very cold during the winter. Also, when it rains, the raindrops seep through the roof since it is not covered.

Moheb describes that he left the widow's house feeling shocked that poverty exists to this extent. He says his heart was so touched by this experience that he felt the obligation and the desire to take an active role in helping the poor. He classifies and distinguishes the poor into two types which he called *moadam* (poorest of the poor) or *fakeer* (poor). He explains that *moadam* means a person lives under inhumane conditions to the degree that he/she does not have the means to even buy food. This person would be living in a room with no roof, electricity, water and a bathroom. He/she would not be able to buy medicine or afford medical treatments. Basically, it is a person who is not able to afford or has the means to meet life's essential needs. However, *fakeer*, for example, would be able to afford buying food, but does not have a refrigerator to store it.

The next catastrophe, as Moheb describes, was waiting for them in the second house they visited. He reports that the next family they visited consisted of a widow and four daughters. When Moheb asked the widow about the well being of her children, she said sadly that she used to have another daughter, but she is gone. When he asked her how, she said because they do not have a bathroom; therefore the daughter used to go to the field to use it as a bathroom and that is when the catastrophe happened. One day this girl was raped; eventually she decided to leave and marry the person who raped her, who was a Muslim. When the widow was asked why they do not have a bathroom, she said because it cost LE 750 which they are not able to afford.

Poverty, according to Moheb, puts people under tremendous pressure to the point that they might sell their conscience and even their bodies. On the other hand, Moheb believes that there are people who are poor but are satisfied, content, and grateful for what little they have. These people tend to have strong relationship with God and feel that he is a kind God that fulfills their life with inner happiness. They feel that he takes care of them and provides for their needs. They believe that he knows best and has a good plan for their lives that only he knows. Even if they cannot foresee God's plan at the present time, God reveals it in bits every day. Moheb says that he concluded these beliefs according to his experiences of visiting hundreds of families and talking with them.

The trip back to Cairo was full of mixed feelings for Moheb. While he felt great sympathy for the poor people, he felt appreciative of his life circumstances. Moheb says that he could not stop thinking about the poor families that he visited; therefore, he decided to take practical steps to improve their life conditions. Accordingly, he arranged for a group of his friends who are prominent businessmen/women to have a social gathering at his house. He described his experience in Upper Egypt to them. Moheb's friends told him that they were impacted by the

stories of the families and were willing to help. The group of friends started telling more people about this service and encouraged them go on the trips.

After each trip, the members who are also called servants, according to Moheb, feel that they are the ones being served. Moheb reports that while they serve the poor, they feel spiritual happiness and satisfaction. He explains that the members/servants consist of prominent businessmen/women, owners and CEOs of multinational companies, people who hold top positions in government offices and the elites in many fields. While these people have high positions of authority in their everyday lives, when they visit the poor, they humble themselves. According to Moheb and my own participant observation, when they enter a house, they do not identify themselves as the center of attention according to their work positions. Instead, they separate their work identity and present themselves as regular people who have come to visit as guests. They treat the poor with kindness where they try to make them feel that they are equal human beings. Furthermore, they might sit on the floor with the poor. They might say statements that reflect their care. They might joke around with them to lessen the tension. They might hug the children to make them feel accepted and loved.

Another humbling experience, according to Moheb and from participant observations, is when the members distribute new clothes and shoes to the poor children prior to the feasts. First, they divide the clothes and shoes according to gender and size in a large room. The children of each family come in the room to receive their new clothes and shoes. The member greets and welcomes them with kind words. The member may choose the task of either helping the children to try on the new clothes or the shoes to figure out which ones fit. He/she may sit on the floor, take off the old shoes of the children who have very dirty/muddy feet, and fit the new shoes until

they find the perfect pair. Moheb describes that the smile the member sees on the poor child's face is worth all the exhaustion of taking the trip to Upper Egypt.

Moheb says that serving the poor is comprehending and following what the Bible says in the book of Mathew, chapter 25, verses 34-40 (New King James Version):

Then the King will say to those on His right hand, 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me. Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?' And the King will answer and say to them, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.

Although this statement of Christian economics seems to reflect a straightforward and timeless reading of the New Testament, the precise ways in which serving "the least of these" is understood have changed along with the global economy. One of the things this thesis shows is how particular and historically situated ways of "serving" are discursively rooted in "timeless" religious beliefs. Moheb says that the more he serves the poor, the more families he visits and the more widows he takes care of, the more he feels that he is serving Jesus himself. He says that he sees in the poor Jesus himself and realizes that Jesus meant to live on earth as a poor man to identify with the poor, to give them hope and to exemplify a lifestyle for them.

Moheb describes verses 20-23 in John 17, New Testament, as a commandment and an order that has to be obeyed. The verses state that Jesus prayed

I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me.

Therefore, the rich and the poor have to be one. While showing humility and solidarity with the poor, this claim also suggests that class divisions and poverty are necessary and permanent, serving the higher purpose of saving rich people. Many Rahma members share Moheb's vision to the extent that they believe God might have allowed for poverty so that he would give a chance for the rich to enter heaven.

Moheb's attitudes toward soci-economic class are inseparable from his religious beliefs. This is reflected by his belief, mentioned above, that there are two kinds of poor. One kind is people that are content with God although they have needs that are not being met. The other kind is people who might leave the religion or no longer worship God because their needs are not being met. Another link between religion and economics is reflected by the relationship between the rich and the poor. For example, some of the rich share their money with the poor because, on the religious level, they feel this is how they can get to heaven. On the spiritual level, they share their money because they feel that they are serving God himself (Mathew 25). On the humane level, giving to the poor makes the rich feel fulfilled, satisfied and happy.

Another notion which is reflected by Moheb's conceptualization of religious beliefs is authority. For example, Moheb mentioned that most of the members are people of authority in their jobs being directors and managers. When they serve the poor, they tend to humble themselves and forget about their identity for a few minutes. They become servants which is the opposite position they have at work where they are served by their employees. In addition, the poor welcome the members to enter their house and trust them enough to answer personal questions about their income and living conditions because mostly likely the members are accompanied by someone (the local volunteer) whom they recognize from church. Because this service is linked with church, it gains the license which creates trust and security for the poor who view the church as a provider. Viewing the church as a provider reflects on how religion, economics, and authority are linked.

Overview of the Organization

In order to explore the members' conceptualization of religion, I will present an overview of the organization and some of the members' roles are going to be presented. The organization takes a trip on the first Friday of each month to Upper Egypt to visit certain cases of the poor who live under inhumane conditions and who have been designated and prepared for the visit. In addition, the members have a general monthly meeting on the Friday preceding the monthly trip. Several meetings of different committees take place throughout the month. The members might attend a monthly liturgy together and might have a prayer meeting once a month. Other un-planned activities are announced through text messages to the members when they arise.

Media are an important vehicle for the organization to reach new members and to reflect its authorization by the church. The organization has a general audio CD that gives an overview about it and another audio CD which is especially for the sick cases; both CDs have a recorded

introduction by the Pope and some of the bishops to show that this organization is authorized and trustworthy. Similarly, the organization has a monthly newsletter, an annual magazine and several publications that reflect on the organization which have articles by bishops. It conducts an annual fundraising event where 500 people are invited to learn and contribute to the service where some of the bishops are invited which might reflect an atmosphere of authorization and trust.

Since this organization is not connected to a specific local church or led by one of the priests or bishops, it has to show that it is authorized by the Church (the Pope) so that people can trust it and consider it credible. This credibility attracts Copts to donate money to serve that poor. Therefore, the organization's publications have to be linked to the church which could be represented by the Pope and/or the bishops. The organization's bank account was approved by the Pope and the receipt which is issued when receiving donations has the Pope's Patriarchal stamp.

During the monthly general meeting that precedes the trip, a carefully chosen speaker is invited to deliver a spiritual word. I observed and then confirmed with Samir, who is responsible for selecting the speaker, that while there are many gifted speakers who would deliver a powerful message, they might not be selected if they are not favored by the bishops. Most likely, a bishop would be invited to give the spiritual word because this creates an image of alignment with the church leaders (the Pope and bishops).

Samir's conceptualization of religious beliefs is not as simple as having a relationship with God, practicing rituals and being a spiritual person. Samir believes that religion goes beyond the walls of a church and it intertwines with politics and economics. Samir is in his late forties, an owner of

a prominent company in the field of engineering, and a well known person among church authorities. He is a critical thinker who is keen to attend cultural (specifically Coptic) meetings where controversial issues are discussed. Some of these issues include the debate about whether Copts are segregated in society, whether this results from the Church's politics or the State's and what Copts can do to integrate.

Samir says that Copts have the responsibility to be integrated into society. He suggests that they should not depend on or blame the church of their status in society. He says they should take an active role to mark their existence in society. He says that Copts should educate others about their religion in a way that does not offend anyone. This was his response to Malek, another member, who was sitting next to him on the train on Rahma trip and told him a story. Malek shared that her grandson came home from school complaining that a Muslim student spoke in a negative way about Christianity. Therefore, his mother, Malek's daughter, told him to keep away from this student. However, Samir disagreed and suggested that the solution is not segregation, but it is tolerance, respect and education. He said that the ideal solution to Malek's grandson's problem is not ignoring the problem; instead, it is educating both students about each other's religion and teaching them respect and awareness of each other.

Samir and Malek are among 650 volunteers from Cairo, only 100 of whom go on the monthly trip. While all the members are encouraged to participate in the trip; not all of them go at the same time. They participate according to the availability of their schedules. Many of them give donation in the form of money, equipment, construction materials and others. Around 80 members go consistently and hardly miss a trip. According to Moheb, the organization has served 35,000 poor persons in around 500 villages in Minia governorate. There are 80 paid employees where 10 are in the Cairo office and 70 are in Bani Mazar office (Minia). The

organization has another branch in the USA. There are other members who live in Canada, England, Holland, and others countries (this part is mentioned in details in the NGO section).

In order to become a member of Rahma organization, the interested volunteer has to be interviewed by one of the board members or has to be recommended by an existing member.

The process creates a sense of security to the organization and gives it a sense of prestige. Patsy is a volunteer/member who is responsible for the organization's database. She communicates with the members through phone calls, mobile messages and e-mail. She is also responsible for receiving the confirmations of the members who sign up to go on the trip.

The preparation of the monthly trips starts a couple of weeks before the actual date; however, the night before the trip is when everything is finalized. After, Patsy receives the confirmations of the members, she informs Moheb of who is coming and who has canceled. Moheb divides the members into groups where each group typically has a leader (volunteer from Cairo), a couple of members (a volunteer from Cairo and a volunteer that is going for the first time), a member from Upper Egypt (volunteer or employee) and a volunteer from each village. Patsy assembles a spreadsheet that has all this information and e-mails it to Moheb the night before the trip.

Patsy reports that the night before the trip is when the volunteers make the preparations for it.

The volunteers call each other to arrange rides to the train station. . Some of the volunteers have the task of preparing or buying breakfast and drinks for the morning trip. The train takes off from Ramsis station first then 15 minutes later, it stops at Giza station. In order to have as much time as possible to spend with the poor in Upper Egypt, the volunteers take the 6:00 am train. The train takes around 4 hours in order to get to Upper Egypt. Usually, there is one train car that is reserved a couple of weeks in advanced for this trip. The train consists of around 12 cars which

are separated by a door. Normally, around 60 volunteers ride from Ramsis station and 40 volunteers ride from Giza station.

Patsy, who is in her mid thirties and an American University in Cairo graduate, conceives of religion as symbolized in practicing rituals where she follows a set of rules that have been defined by the church. She describes being brought up to go to church every Sunday, read in the bible, and practice the principles of religion such as being kind to others, being honest and obeying other commandments. She does not view herself as a spiritual person because she says that she does not have the ability to say spiritual words to others, pray out loud and discuss religious matters. She says that she needs the church and the priests to guide her religious beliefs. When I asked her about the relationship between religion and politics, she answered that religion was separate from these categories.

Patsy like many others might initially react to the categories of politics, economics and religion to be separate; however, their religious identity does not separate from them when they are put in economic or political situations in society on daily bases. They might not recognize this, but it is embedded in their actions. Patsy's conceptualization of religion through rituals might represent the majority of people I have interviewed. Many Copts report that they find essential need for the church and the priests to help them understand religion, do the commandments of the Bible and practice all the rituals which they believe will increase their chance of going to heaven.

Other interviewees describe having a direct relationship with God; usually the same people describe practicing rituals because they understand the meaning and significance of them, going to church and communicating with the priests as a reference and educators, and considering the Holy Spirit to be their spiritual guide.

Lily, another Rahma member in her late twenties, describes herself to have a direct relationship with God and calls herself a “believer.” Lily explains the word “believer” means believing that Jesus has taken each person’s place on the cross to grant him/her eternal life with him if he/she believes that Jesus is the only way for salvation. She says many people might agree with this belief with their minds; however, true “believers” realize this belief in their hearts.

Consequently, believers ask God to reveal himself to them, experience that he is a living God and have a relationship with him. She says, only then, they practice rituals with understanding and not just as a routine.

Lily’s conceptualization of religious beliefs is greatly impacted by her spirituality which she describes as empowered by her relationship with God. She says that while she realizes that religion is embedded in politics and economics, these factors do not affect the dogma of Christianity but might affect her behavior. She says that her spirituality is inseparable from her identity, personality and actions in her daily life. She states that through her relationship with God, she is able to understand life. She realizes that globalization plays an important role in exposing Copts, through satellite channels, to other Christian teachings which they have not heard before in their Orthodox church or by the particular priest of their church.

Lily tells the story of how life was changed because of one question. Lily lived for part of her life in the United States and then decided to move back to Egypt a few years ago. She has a tattoo of a cross on her right hand which is right above her palm resembling the same place where the nail was in Jesus’ hand. . She describes herself having this tattoo because it reminds her of what Jesus has done (being crucified) and how she should take him as an example by living her life with integrity and being kind to others. Other Copts have this tattoo has a sign of social belonging and cultural identity. While she was attending a social event at work in New

Jersey, an American, non-Coptic guest in this event recognized her tattoo asked her if she is a Copt. She was surprised to hear this question because this tattoo is mainly recognized by Copts that live in Egypt, so she affirmed that she was a Copt. He told her that there is a group of Copts that meet regularly in a nearby city (New York City). He offered to send her e-mail address to them to add to their e-mailing list. A week later, she was excited to receive an e-mail from this group because for years she had been looking for an opportunity to connect with other Copts. She never saw this guest again, but she was grateful to have met him.

Lily took the train to get to her first meeting with this group. While she was very anxious to meet the group, she was looking forward to seeing them. When she reached the address that was written in the e-mail, she did not find a Coptic Orthodox Church like she had expected. She walked into a Greek Cathedral which was rented for the purpose of this meeting. She found about 25 young men and women in their mid twenties to late thirties. The meeting was led by a young priest who had just moved from Egypt to the US especially to serve this group. Lily had always thought that church means the physical building, but she says she learned through this meeting that is a community of people that share the same beliefs.

The question that changed Lily's life was why she thinks God has created her specifically. This question was the first question that Fr. Bolous (the priest leading the meeting) asked the group. He asked each person why God has created him or her specifically and not just as people in general. Lily thought a lot about the question and thought the answer was because God loves her, he created her. Each person gave a different answer to this question according to his/her thoughts or experiences.

Fr. (Father) Bolous said that God created each person specifically because he wants to adopt him/her, make him/her a part of his family and because each person has a mission. Everyone was surprised to hear these words which they might have not heard before. Most often, when a Coptic Orthodox priest is invited to give a spiritual word, he talks about repentance, the sacraments (there are seven sacraments in the Coptic Orthodox church which are Baptism, Christmation (Confirmation), Eucharist, Confession, Orders, Matrimony, and Anointing of the sick) of the Coptic Church and commandments that are in the bible. However, Fr. Bolous was not a traditional priest as he talked about a personal relationship with God as opposed to a relationship with church clergy and mere adherence to the Church as an institution.

In order to discover God's plan for each person, Fr. Bolous said to them, a person has to know who God is first, has to learn to recognize his voice, and has to unite his/her will with God's. He said that a person should sit daily in a quiet place and ask God to reveal himself. If the person desires this with his/her heart, God will communicate with him/her through verses in the bible, a spiritual word he/she hears, or through spiritual friends. This person will learn how to recognize God's voice and follow it willingly as God gives free will to people.

Lily says that through the months, she has experienced what Fr. Bolous was saying and her life was changed. Instead of having her career being the first priority, God has become her first priority where she asks herself in every task she does if this task glorifies God or not. She says that Jesus is her role model and she tries to exemplify him. In other words, she would act like Jesus which would be a testimony for him.

Lily is a member in the organization which consists of men and women varying in age (college students to retirees). A few couples bring their children with them on the trip to teach them how to serve other people. The volunteers from Upper Egypt hold very modest positions in

governmental schools and offices. When the volunteers first ride the train they say hello to each other; some of them only see each other on this trip each month while others are friends and meet throughout the month. Usually a train car has around 58 seats and they've reserved a whole car rather than seats for each person; therefore, not all the volunteers get to sit on a chair. They either share chairs or stand between the chairs or in the hallway. They switch seats, those who sat for a while giving up their seats for others throughout the trip. The organization reserves this car ahead of time and pays extra money. This is the only way to insure that the volunteers can sit together. Each train station has assigned seats reserved for the people who travel from this train station. However, there is one car of the train where all the tickets could be purchased by one person but costs more.

The preparations that take place on the train are carried out by a few paid employees who join the volunteers on the trip. George is responsible for bringing the microphone and the speakers on the train. Amged is responsible for bringing the prayer books (Agbia) and spiritual songs' book (Ketab El Taraneem) on the train. Mina brings the paper icons and the candy which are distributed to each house according to the number of families.

On the Train

The trip's program starts a few minutes after the volunteers get on the train and figure out seating arrangements. Moheb leads the prayer (using the microphone) by asking everyone to join him by reading the first prayer from the Agbia out loud at the same time. Once the prayer is finished (it takes around 15 minutes), Moheb asks one of the volunteers to pray alone out loud not using a book. The whole group sings a few spiritual songs together using Ketab el Taraneem. A speaker, one of the volunteers who was asked by Moheb in advanced to prepare a spiritual word, delivers

a message or a story that inspire the volunteers to say similar words to the families that they visit during the trip.

Some of the volunteers and employees distribute breakfast. In addition to buying sandwiches, a few of the volunteers bring homemade food for the whole group. Most Copts fast (eat food that does not have animal products such as meat, chicken, fish, butter, milk, eggs,..etc) on Fridays and Wednesdays. The significance of fasting on Fridays is a reminder of Jesus' Crucifixion and on Wednesdays is as a reminder of Jesus' trail. Therefore, the sandwiches are fowl (fava beans), falafil (patties made out of fava beans), and fries. Aunt Malek, a volunteer around 55 years old whom everyone calls "aunt," prepares special desserts and sandwiches that she brings on the train to distribute to everyone. Uncle Effat, a male volunteer who is around 48 years old, prepares special sandwiches and treats that he gives out to the volunteers. Other volunteers may bring snacks and food to share with each other. Magdy, a 45-year-old volunteer, brings balloons and toys that he distributes to the volunteers to give out to children of the poor families that they are going to visit.

The volunteers anxiously wait to hear their assigned groups while the breakfast gets distributed. Moheb announces the group number, the name of the leader, the names of the volunteers from Cairo, the name of the volunteer from Upper Egypt, the name of the villages where they are going and the train stop where they are going to get off. Moheb divides the volunteers from Cairo (around 100) into 50 groups. He assigns other volunteers from Upper Egypt and employees to each group. Once Moheb announces the groups, he says to each group where they are supposed to have lunch. It is usually provided by the center where the bishop of this area resides, or by one of the wealthy people in Upper Egypt who want to participate in this service by providing food for the volunteers. Then, Moheb announces the times the train leaves from

each station to come back to Cairo which is around 5:00 pm and it arrives to Cairo 4 hours later. Each group leader or a representative from the group picks up a bag that has paper icons for the families and gifts for the children whom they are going to visit.

There are two types of trains; an express which only stops at each governorate or a train that stops in the major centers in each governorate which takes a longer time. The group prefers the latter train because it brings them closer to their destinations since the train does not stop by each village. In order to save money and to have the most seats in one car, they purchase second class tickets. Volunteers explained that doing so maximizes the amount of money saved to give the poor. Additionally, the thought of these business elites condescending to ride in an overcrowded second-class car doubtless makes an impression of humility on outsiders.

Each group gets off at its assigned station, then each group leader meets the local volunteers assigned to his/her group. Volunteers from Cairo and Upper Egypt meet each other at “microbuses” (minivans) outside the train station that have a piece of paper with the group number. These microbuses are rented specifically for the purpose of this trip. The volunteer from Upper Egypt brings a file that has the cases which are supposed to be visited on the trip (around 12 cases). Usually the cases are located in one to three villages that are close to each other. Another volunteer who is from the area that is being visited joins the group to act as a guide to tell where the houses are located. In Upper Egypt, it is common that the streets do not have well recognized names. Instead, people know the houses by memorization of landmarks or by the name of the owner of the house. It might take around 45 minutes to reach the first house from the train station.

Milad, a member who has experience with NGOs and development, has observed that a large proportion of rural population in Upper Egypt, women, men, and children are deprived of basic needs and are living below the poverty line. He says that thousands of women, men, and children live in villages in Upper Egypt in these sub-humane conditions. He noticed that people live in shelters/shacks that do not have roofs, electricity, potable water, washrooms, and sanitary sewage system. He says that many families do not even have a shelter. He reports that overcrowded housing of as many as 15 persons, different genders and ages living in one room, sharing everything, including one bathroom (if exists). He senses that they are deprived of privacy, dignity and feeling protected from various climate or environmental conditions because they do not have roofs. Furthermore, he says that lack of washrooms cause them to being harassed when they go to the open fields or the river banks. Most importantly, he says he finds it essential to have clean water for drinking, cooking and bathing.

Milad reports that people who live in villages in Upper Egypt are extremely poor with very low or no income. He says that those who work are engaged in menial jobs. Some men are agricultural seasonal laborers with no steady monthly income, about \$ 1-2 a day when they do find work. Others have very small sale windows which is a space in their room or house where they sell some vegetables. Some work as helpers in construction or carrying things.

Unemployment rate is about 80%. These statics pertain to 35000 people that have been served by the organization.

Milad reports that many of the villages in Upper Egypt still lack basic services and infrastructure. He describes that many inhabitants of these villages still use the Nile River for bathing and washing their belongings, while others nearby are drinking from same water. He says as a result and due to the inhumane conditions, many of those people are sick with different diseases.

Diseases thrive in the absence of sanitation and clean water include dysentery, typhus fever, typhoid, Hepatitis A, B, C, and trachoma. He states that the only means for women, children, and men in the absence of washrooms is to go to the open fields. He points out that women and children are ashamed to defecate during the day time, they have to wait until it is dark to go to the open fields and that is when a bigger catastrophe for those poor girls, women, and little children awaits them, many rape incidents were reported. This rape if discovered is a dishonor and shame. In some situations the result could be an unwanted pregnancy which could result in a secret abortion with primitive means increasing the risks subjecting them to infections, bleeding, or even eventual sterility. Milad says that he reached these conclusions based on actual cases.

Milad states that as a consequence of living below poverty line, there is no education, no awareness of basic hygiene, high stress level and frustration, lack of hope, misconception of living principles, illiteracy, very poor healthy conditions, in short “inhumane living conditions”. He noticed that most people are illiterates or of low education level. He says about 65% of the people are illiterates, 60% female and 40% male. He reports that there is an increasing rate in petty crimes, sexual harassment, rape, marriage of minor girls, and circumcision of girls.

Many of Milad’s descriptions conform to what I have witnessed by going on the trips. I had the opportunity to join a different group each time I went on the trip where each leader has his/her way of conducting the visit. I joined Miriam’s group for one trip. When the group came on the microbus, she asked the group members to say a little prayer to ask for God’s guidance and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. She prayed for God to grant the group wisdom and mercy when dealing with the poor people. Once they finished praying, Miriam started reading the cases. When she was finished with the first one, she passed it around to the rest of the group until all

the cases were finished. If they had any questions, she asked for the local volunteers help to clarify the matter or to give extra background information about the case.

Visiting Families in the Villages

One of the families we went to visit was that of Ayaad, his wife Foula, and their seven daughters. When the group entered the house, as usual composed of one room, the leader (in this case Miriam) took the lead of introducing the group. Miriam greeted them, then said that they were representing Rahma group and they came to check on their well being. Miriam's first priority was to check on the family's spiritual well being by asking them questions such as if they have a relationship with God, if they go to church and if they take communion. In general, if they said yes, then she encouraged them to continue in their spiritual growth. If they said no, then she explained to them the importance of knowing who God is and having a relationship with him. Other volunteers participate in the discussion. Miriam's spiritual approach is not the dominant approach in the organization; however, Moheb always reminds the leaders that they are not social workers that help the poor and they should have a spiritual approach.

Robert, one of the volunteers in Miriam's group, had a role of engaging with the children of the family. Robert asked them if they knew how to make the sign of the cross by placing their hand on their forehead (in the name of the Father), then on their stomach (in the name of the Son), then on their upper left arm (in the name of Holy), then on their upper right arm (Spirit) and then say "one God amen." Robert asked them if they go to Sunday school and read in the bible. He asked them if they obey their parents and help them with chores. He asked them if they go to school and if they are successful. In general, if they are doing well at school, he encourages them. If they fail their classes, he tells them that they are the children of God; therefore; they should ask for God's help and study well in order to succeed.

Miriam asked the father about his means of income, where he works, how much he gets paid monthly, and if it is enough for living. For nearly every family the organization visits, the income is barely enough for survival and the father does not have a steady job, working only a couple of days per week if at all to work in a field or to do odd jobs where he gets paid daily. In many cases I observed, the father's daily income was around LE 10 (\$ 1.75). The average income is around LE 200 per a month (\$36). Miriam asked the father about his skills, areas of interest, willingness to apply through the Rahma employment center for a better job which would provide a steady monthly income. In this case, Ayaad worked in a store that sells electric sets where he was paid LE 150 (\$27) per a month.

Robert asked the family members about their living conditions such as if they have a bathroom or not, if they have electricity, and if they have water. He asked them where they sleep and who shares a bed (most likely the parents and the children share the same bed if they own one, but most of the time they sleep on the floor). He examined the ceiling which is made out of a few sticks that barely cover the area. He also looked at the walls to evaluate if they are falling apart or are solid enough to house the people. He asked if they have a stove or if they use gasoline operated stove which is harmful for health and is dangerous because it is unpredictable where it might explode in people's faces.

Miriam asked the family members if they are sick or take medicine. Almost in every house there are sick due to inhumane and poor living conditions. Disease is a major concern because people cannot afford going to the doctor's, buying medicine, and being medically treated. Later, Miriam reported to me that there are only public government hospitals in major cities, which themselves are in a very poor shape. They have very limited specializations, the staff and the doctors are very negligent of the patients, the equipment is always broken, and the facilities are not clean.

She said these hospitals are not equipped by doctors, staff or equipment to handle emergencies, or critical cases. She described these hospitals as only offering very basic medical services which are not even administered properly to the point that patients are scared to go there. She explained that there is only one private hospital in the area which is too expensive for poor people. She reported the number of the sick far exceeds the number of available government hospitals. Because there is such a demand on these hospital (lack of other available ones), sick people have to wait for their turn which might be for months.

According to Miriam's and my own observations, traveling to Cairo for medical treatment causes a scare and a panic for the poor who live in Upper Egypt. Some of them report that they have never been outside their village. Some have traveled at the most to the city which is in the governorate where they live. They report that they might only know about Cairo from other neighbors or relatives that traveled there. Because most of them do not own a television, they are not able to learn about Cairo through the media. They say that they imagine it to be a huge city with tall buildings and crowded streets where everyone gets lost. Because Rahma recognizes this scare, it has a van that transfers the sick to Cairo and sends a representative to accompany them in order to create an atmosphere of security.

One crucial question that most of the volunteers ask almost every family is if they have a relationship with the church. This question is followed by investigating about the priest of the church' if he visits the family and contributes in aiding them or not. People report that they view the church as a provider for both spiritual and economic needs. They might link both to the degree that if the church does not provide for their economic needs, they might decide to boycott it. When this happens, they might go to a different church and not go at all.

At the end of the visit, Miriam asked the members of the family and the volunteers to stand up to pray together. It is a ritual that they face the east while they pray, because when Jesus was crucified he faced his disciples towards the west and faced him towards the east. Miriam asked the father to lead the prayer. Most of the time he or members of his family are not courageous enough to pray out loud because they say that they are not educated people, or they do not know how to pray or they want to one of guests to pray because they think it is a blessing. However, Miriam invited him or the other members to imagine that Jesus is standing in the middle, to try to forget about all the people standing and focus on what they want to say to Jesus. If they say that they do not know how to pray by themselves, Miriam asks them to repeat after her simple words of thanking God, asking him to bless the family and meet their needs. They end the prayer with intercession of St. Mary and the rest of the saints and The Lord's Prayer.

After meeting with the family, the group walked back to the bus, and as the bus was driving Miriam discussed the assessment of the case with the group members and wrote the decisions of how this family should be serviced. I observed the leader always discusses the cases with the group, then they decide what to do. For example, in some cases she might request a roof that is made out of wood which is laminated by plastic materials to prevent rain from seeping through. She might request a bed or two to separate the children from sleeping with their parents in the same area and on the floor. She might request the local volunteer to visit the family and invite the priest from the church to come along with him to meet the family's spiritual needs.

Miriam's behaviors are impacted by her spirituality, economic and politics. She made a conscious choice to participate in the organization to share her spirituality with the different families she meets. As a group leader who belongs to this organization, she makes decisions about their source of income. Since she is the same person, her spirituality is not separate from

her decisions. Because she is a leader, she is given certain authority to enter the house and make decisions but she has to be aware of the different rules and benefits that might be given by the government. In this case there is a link between religion, economics and politics.

The leader's decisions get sent to specialized committees that implement them. The office of the organization in Cairo is the center where all the paperwork is received. The group does a follow-up visit a few months later to insure the implementations of its decisions took place and to check on the family's well being. After visiting the cases which have been designated for the visit, the leader and the group meet with other groups to have lunch and to get to the train station for the trip back to Cairo.

On the train back to Cairo, the members start sharing stories of families that they visited and how they were impacted by the visit. They may discuss what big projects they might implement if there is a common problem in the area of numerous villages. Important news and the service updates might be announced on the train. It is also a suitable time for discussion and feedback on the service's upcoming events. It is a chance for networking and making plans among the members to benefit the service. An auction of hand-drawn wood icons which are donated by one of the volunteers who is an artist takes place on the train. It is a way for the volunteers to donate money which goes to the benefits of the poor.

This chapter has reflected that the members' conceptualization of religious beliefs orchestrates their attitudes towards making economic, political and spiritual decisions which is illustrated by joining and participating in this charity organization. Their ideas about salvation and more general religious conceptualizations, which they describe as anchored in their comprehension of the bible commandment to serving the poor, place a high value on showing humility and

solidarity with the poor. Spirituality was not the only aspect of serving the poor, however; the members were also involved in the development of the families by providing social services for them where the members had to be aware of the state's policies and regulations. The next chapter will reflect on the need for the charity organization to become an NGO which is a global process making a power shift in facing the hegemony of the State. The dominant orientation among members towards the poor is one of serving the poor in imitation of the scriptures, with relatively little attention to "sustainable development" programs with active field operations designed to change poor people's ethos through sustained programs.

Chapter 3: Becoming an NGO

Yousry, an employee at the Cairo Office who is in his early thirties, is responsible for receiving the requests and assessments of the cases when the trip is finished to distribute them on the appropriate committees for implementation. There are three committees, each of which is responsible for a program that has a specific purpose to enhance the lives of the poor. The first program is for sanitation and construction of healthy houses. The second program is divided into three branches which are kindergartens to serve children of the poor families prior to being enrolled in schools. The second branch is for awareness and literacy to serve adults and especially women. The third branch is to prepare and implement conferences especially for widows and children to develop their spiritual, cultural, sanitary and social wellbeing. The third major program consists of three branches to develop the economic status of the poor. The first branch consists of employment centers. The second branch has centers that teach the poor practical skills in order to find a job (i.e. carpenter, plumber). The third branch is for small informal businesses or projects and small loans.

Samia, a volunteer from Cairo in her mid forties, is responsible for administering the education and employment programs. Samia is a manager in the field of development, human rights, children's rights and NGOs. She uses her work experience to contribute in the organization. She is responsible for establishing kindergartens, educational centers for the adult illiterates, employment offices and skill training centers. Samia is one of the advocates for registering the organization as a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO). She realizes that in order to utilize governmental benefits and funding from a multitude of international sources, the organization has to be registered as an NGO.

Applying for funds from charitable organizations abroad was another import motive to register the organization. For example, the USAID, CIDA (Canadian Aid) and the European Union might only consider registered NGOs for contributions. Many donors that live abroad require that they get tax deductible receipts which might be only issued by registered organizations.

Being an NGO required that the organization serves all people without any religious discrimination. It required knowledge and application of the law. It required keeping accounting books to present to the appropriate government departments. It required changing the name to reflect a non-religious name. It required having a scale to weigh religion, economic and politics in order to make decisions.

Samia has a significant role in adapting the notion of becoming a developmental NGO. In order to apply for funds from abroad, it was not enough to become an NGO, development had to become the system followed by the organization. Organizations from abroad required that Rahma organization present a developmental plan that reflects long term planning and sustainability. In addition, there are only a few major charitable organizations that serve poor Copts and most of them build their work on development. In order to keep up with these organizations, speak the same language of work and coordinate roles with them, the Rahma organization was motivated to adopt “development” as its system.

As part of this shift to “development,” in order to attract prominent corporations that would contribute to Rahma, it had to be registered as an NGO. Some Coptic businessmen that head top corporations in Egypt may refuse to contribute to charity organizations that only serve Copts, reported Afaf who is one of the volunteers that tried to approach them. One of these businessmen had made it a point on national television that he only aids charity organizations

that serve all people without discriminations. Afaf commended that in order for this businessman to attract clients, maintain good relationship with the state and for political reasons, he broadcasted these policies.

The Transition

In order to prepare the organization to become an NGO that adopts development as its system, a committee was formed to set goals, plan implementations and create new forms to be used on the visits to assess cases. Mourad, a member of this committee, reported that the idea of becoming an NGO and having development as a new system had to be marketed via phone calls at least to particular members that are considered the founders of the original organizations (about 12 members), the members that have the most influence and those who are decision makers.

Mourad indicated that a few members of the committees who are well known and liked among the founders were asked to accomplish the marketing mission. He said this step had to be taken in order to prepare for a general meeting where the idea is presented to all the members.

Moheb called for a general meeting (January 2010) and asked all the members to attend. The invitation, via a text message, emphasized the importance of this particular meeting because it was going to mark a shift in the way the organization operates. The meeting took place in a large meeting room in a basement of a church which the organization always uses to host the meetings. Moheb and other members attend the liturgies and activities of this church regularly; therefore, it is a legitimate reason to get permission from the priest of this church to use a meeting room. The meeting started, as usual, with prayers and a few spiritual songs then it was time for the presentation.

Since the foundation of the organization is built on serving the poor which is a commandment from the Bible, the new system of development could not suddenly divert the organization into a purely non-religious direction. It had to be tied and generated from the same foundation. Salwa, who is a member, in her sixties and has a PHD in divinity, gave an introduction prior to Moheb's presentation where she tied what the commandment of the Bible which is striving towards perfection to resemble God who is perfect. She used the parable of the investing the talents (Mathew 25) that Jesus spoke to explain to the members that development is practically investing the talents and gifts God granted them such as the mind, health, will, money, time and others to serve other (particularly the poor).

After Salwa's introduction, Moheb explained the definition of development in general then in particular for the organization, and the goals of the NGO and how to implement them, via a power point presentation. He highlighted the mission of the NGO which is viewing the poor as humans with potentials and abilities that they can use to develop in the areas of spirituality, economics, health, education and shelter. He said that the poor have the right as citizens to utilize all the benefits might be provided by the government such as health care and pension (in particular cases). He emphasized it is the NGO's role to raise awareness of how the poor can become healthy, educated and productive members in society.

Moheb communicated the goals and the practical steps to implement them. For example, the first goal is to develop the spirituality of the poor by not only connected them with a church which was done in the past but also by providing tools at home such as a bible or Coptic channels through providing a television and a satellite for the cases that severely need them. The second goal is to develop their houses to become healthier by not just providing roofs, water,

electricity, a bathroom and beds, but also painting the house and inserting a cement floor if needed for sanitation.

The third goal is for the poor to become healthier by improving their personal hygiene and working toward a sanitary environment. On the long term, the NGO is responsible of providing lecture to teach people how to adopt better healthy habits and hygiene/sanitation which will impact the whole environment. The NGO has a goal encouraging the poor to utilize the health care that might be provided the government for the disadvantaged; otherwise the NGO would cover the medical expenses.

The fourth goal is to provide the poor with the tools to become economically independent. For example, instead of giving them monthly payments to help their income, the NGO would cooperate with them in a small business or a project that will provide a steady income. The organization would buy them the materials needed for the project and might ask them to contribute a tiny monthly installment to make partners so it would not be so easy for them to give up on the project or misuse the money invested in the project. The NGO decided to provide monthly payment for poor how are elderly and the sick who are not able to work. Another option is to refer the poor to the NGO's employment centers where they connected with employers (members of the organization that have companies and open slots for the poor in particular to help them).

The fifth goal is educational development by encouraging children to be enrolled in schools and adults to enroll in literacy programs. The sixth and last goal is make the poor aware of their duties and rights as citizens. For example, the NGO will help the poor obtain a birth certificate

(if they do not have it), a national I.D., election I.D. and any other documents that would help them utilize services provided by the government.

Moheb explained that each group leader will be in charge of 50 families in nearby villages that he/she will develop in one year. He suggested that the group can visit 12 families per trip and have a change to follow up on implementations on another trip after finishing visiting all the families at least once. This would allow the group to visit each family two or three times per a year. Moheb said in order to achieve these goals they have to be measurable and sustainable; theretofore, the results would be evaluated at the end of the year. Moheb indicated that this plan is flexible where each group leader can use his/her judgment to organize the visits and make decisions. He concluded by saying that each member should treat the poor as if they were part of this family because the Jesus prayed in John 17 for all his followers to become one.

Sonia, who is a member in her late fifties, described the heated discussion that this new idea of “sustainable development” generated—a discussion that I observed simmering throughout my research. This meeting, according to Sonia was the biggest meeting in the organization’s history. It was attend by around 400 members from Cairo, members that are donors but do not go on the trip, members from Upper Egypt, and members that rarely come to any meetings. Many members initially questioned why the organization is making a shift from only serving people under the poverty to bring them to humane living conditions to taking a step further in developing them. Numerous members were concerned about handling 50 families in one year and having the responsibility to develop them. Many members raised an issue about measuring the goals, evaluating the result and sustaining the development plan.

Other members like Rafic who is in his early thirties and American University in Cairo graduate, were intrigued by the idea of development. He participated in the discussion by asking the members to explore with the ideas in their first trip and to have another discussion upon their return. After the discussion was tabled for the following meeting, Sami presented the new forms which should be used to evaluate each family and explained to the members how to use them. The difference between the old and new forms is that they address many questions about the six goals development. While Moheb and members of the committees tried to address most of the questions, most of the members left the meeting with worries and unsettled feelings.

At the end of the meeting the NGO membership forms were distributed for the members to fill out to keep as a record of names that are going to be registered as NGO members and not just volunteers. Some members, like Magda who is in her fifties and is a businesswoman, said she chose to register their name and remain as volunteers in the organization and not in the NGO as they reported that did not want to be on government records. I asked some of the members their opinion about being an NGO. Magda reported that many of the members do not understand what an NGO is, the benefits of registering to be one and do not want to deal with any obligation; however, they are still interested in being part of the organization. However, members who work in the field of development (such as Samia), or deal with funds from abroad, or who deal with other NGOs, or involved with government organizations and who are updated about current activities embraced the idea. Samia reported that the ratio of the members that are familiar with development and NGOs in general is less than 10%. Other members, like Adel who is in his late forties and is a businessman, chose to be a registered member of the NGO because he said it sounded important, empowering and prestigious.

The first trip the members went on after the discussion was in February. On the way to Upper Egypt, the members were nervous about using the new forms and applying the development system. However, on their way back these worries seemed to lessen. Hani, who is member in his mid thirties and who is a manager in a prominent company, reported that the visits and the paper work went smoothly for him. While the questions he asked during the visit addressed development, he enjoyed getting to know the members of the family more. He commented that he found the questions helped because he used them as a tool to decide how the NGO can provide the maximum benefits for the families. He described how the members of the poor families were receptive and excited about development although they were not familiar with it before.

I noticed during the following trip which took place in March that the members were much more excited about development to the extent that their language changed. They started using vocabulary pertaining to development. Mona who is a member and businesswoman in her early fifties reported that she was very excited to replace the monthly payments of some families and substitute them with different projects that suited the families. For example, she said she helped one family to start a grocery project operating out of their house's window. She reported that she assisted another family to buy a couple of goats to provide the family with milk to drink or sell and eventually offspring to sell. On the way back, while on the train, the members exchanged success stories and came up with new suggestions to support the idea of development.

Narratives of Members

While some members are aware that they have become a part of an NGO which models development as its system, others belong to it regardless of names or knowing what it is.

Mourad, who is in his early fifties and has been a member of the organization for 5 years stated

during his interview that economics, politics and globalization impact and are impacted by religious beliefs. I selected Mourad to interview because the previous conversations I had with him reflected his intellect. Also, I aimed to conduct an interview with someone who is seasoned in the organization, in the business world and in life.

Mourad is a CEO of a leading national company and therefore seems to have experience in the market. Other members take him as a reference and a guide for the organization. He is viewed as somewhat a spiritual person, but he is known for doing good deeds more than being spiritual. What encouraged me to interview him is because he is outgoing, approachable, keen on being heard, respected among the members and has distinct opinions that attract the attention of the group. I had built a good enough relationship with him which encouraged him to trust me while this trust might not be granted easily to others.

On the train to Asyut during a special trip to visit a few exceptional cases there, I spoke with Mourad, noticing that he takes the time to think before he answers a question. He is courageous, confident, highly organized, and structured. Usually, he does not talk hastily; rather, takes the time to know the full details before answering. Mourad seemed intrigued by the idea of this study and was eager to hear the questions, commenting that no one had ever asked him these questions before.

After I asked him for an interview, we picked two seats on the train next to each other, and several of Mourad's friends, curious about this interview, sat as close as possible to our seats. One of them ordered tea for Mourad, me and three other friends who were there. Mourad did not mind that they were there to listen in on the interview; he seemed to be happy that he was the one

picked to do this interview amongst his friends. He said he felt valued because his thoughts are going to be a part of this study.

Before delving into the interview questions, I asked Mourad his story about joining this group. He said that a friend who is a member invited him to go on the trip several times, but he kept putting it off. One day he decided to go on the trip, but on the way there he kept thinking why he was going and wanted to turn around to go back to Cairo. He decided that he was going to visit the first house, then he was going to take an early train and go back. Once he entered the first house, the people greeted him with happiness and said that they felt Jesus was visiting them; this is an expression that Copts in Upper Egypt use when they want to express how happy they are to see someone who is going to serve them. Mourad said that these words touched his heart and gave him the desire to stay for the rest of the visits. His first trip was a memorable one and since then he has hardly missed a trip. Mourad says that the impact of the first visit, which left a feeling of how much people appreciated his visit, stayed with him since and pushed him to encourage others to go on the trips.

The first question I asked Mourad was about his definition of religion. He took a moment or two to think then he said that it is a relationship between man and God. Then I asked him about the definition of church. He took a couple of more moments to answer and said it is the official place where religious feelings are expressed. He continued to say that it is a holy place where there are icons, priests and where he receives communion. He shared a personal experience with me by saying when he was young, he went to church because his father made him go and this became a routine. He said that he passed through many stages in his life which were up and down, but there was a turning point in his life when he started having a real relationship with God. He said it was when he had to go through critical surgery in his heart. He said he did not

know whether he was going to live or die. Moments before the operation, he remembered all the times that God has stood by him throughout his life and how he has made it easier on him. He remembered how asking for God's help, God would be there to answer his prayers. Mourad said that the operation succeeded and he felt God's hand in it making everything go smoothly, such that he did not feel pain which was his biggest fear.

When I asked Mourad about the relationship between religion and economics, he was not sure what to give for an answer. I suggested work as a possibility. He described himself depending on God to make work related decisions and praying for God's guidance before he does any work. He started having fluency in answering and made connections on a larger scale between religion, economics in society as a whole. He gave an example of how in Egypt, the law prohibits construction in certain areas; however, people go around the law and use religion (building a mosque underneath the building they want to construct) in order to get a license to construct in the area where it is prohibited. He stated that in Islam, people believe investing in a bank is *haram* (forbidden by religion); therefore, some banks form policies to go around that. The bank does not call putting the money in it investments; it calls it partnership where people take the interest after the project is over.

Similarly, Ashraf, who is in his late thirties and is an owner of a prominent company which has a branch in London, stated that there is a link between religion and economics. Ashraf is one of the organization's founders who hardly misses any trips. Other members view Ashraf to have a charming personality, welcoming all the new members and trying to make them feel that they fit in the organization. When I first approached him about an interview, he kept putting it off because he told me later that he thought it was going to be a personal interview. From participant observation, Ashraf is careful about any statements he says because he is keen on

maintaining being liked by everyone in the organization. He might have been hesitant about the interview because he likes to appear neutral. When Ashraf realized that many of his friends participated in interviews, he was then eager to do this interview. What encouraged Ashraf the most is when Dr. Gamal, another member and has a PHD in divinity asked to listen in on the interview. After listening to Ashraf's answer to the first question, Dr. Gamal encouraged Ashraf by saying that he was saying valuable and significant statements. After hearing Dr. Gamal's opinion, Ashraf became more confident and started answering freely with many details.

Ashraf stated that some Muslims were under the impression that putting money in the bank is haram (forbidden by Islam), therefore, they boycott banks. However, when one of the Shaikhs (Muslim leaders) came up with a fatwa (legal opinion) that putting money in the bank is not haram, Muslim started putting their money in the bank. Some Muslim or Christian employers tend to hire employees from their same religion. Businessmen/women tend to want to invest money with owners of business from their own religion. Similarly, clients or customs tend to support people from their own religion.

Dr. Gamal elaborated on the link between economics and religion. He defined economics as planning and spending with a limit. He indicated that Christianity teaches Christians to think about what they spend before spending it. He said they have to be wise when spending money as there are so many people who are needy and poor. He stated that they have to acknowledge their feelings and do something positive to help them. He described that first, they have to make it possible for the poor to know what rights that they are entitled to from the government, then help them to gain their rights. He smiled and said that in Egypt, there is an idiom that says let's spend money that people have in our pockets now, then beg for money without shame.

Sami, one of the founders of the organization who is a businessman in his mid thirties, also linked economics and religion. He gave the example that people in the Muslim world or the Middle East decided to boycott products made by Denmark because of the cartoons of the prophet that offended Muslims. This incident shows how religion impacts economics. Another example is boycotting Israeli products by some Muslims because of the Palestine case. When slaughtering animals, it has to be according to the Muslim rules in order for them to eat the meat. Muslims do not eat ham or any food that uses ham as an ingredient. Hindu consider cows to be a religious symbol, therefore, they do not eat their meat. Muslims might not drink alcohol. When Copts fast (are not allowed to eat animals or their products such as meat, chicken, fish, milk, butter, eggs, ...etc) the prices of oil and vegetarian products go up while the prices of meat and its products go down. During the fast where Copts are only allowed to eat fish, the prices of fish go up.

When I asked Mourad if there is a relationship between religion and politics, he confirmed and gave an example of how terrorism takes the facade of religion which effects national security. He continued to say the state has an important input when it comes to selecting religious leaders such as the Pope or the head of Al Azhar because it wants to make sure that this person would be a cooperative person with the state. He believes that the state plays a role in orchestrating the relationship between the different religions in order not to have tension. Furthermore, he stated there are laws that define social relationships such as the personal status law. He pointed that the state has an important role in the external relationship between countries. He gave an example of the relationship between Egypt and the Vatican involves religion where the state could use the Vatican as an example to apply laws on the Copts that are in Egypt. He continued to say the Vatican represents Christians of The USA and Europe; therefore, if the state has a good

relationship with it, it is expected that it would have a good relationship of the Christians of the world general. He concluded by saying religion is embedded in politics to the extent that it might rule the country such as the Muslim brotherhood of Egypt where it is a possibility for them to rule Egypt.

Ashraf stated that Religion and politics are inseparable because in Egypt, Islam is the religion of the state and sharia is the law. It is most likely when a Christian runs for election that he or she will not get elected. Christians either tend to give their vote to other Christians or to no one. Elections are about personal benefits. Some people strive to support the ruling party regardless of its religion because of personal benefits.

Dr. Gamal said that as Christians who are citizens, they have to submit to authorities. He stated, as Christians, they honor truth, righteousness, justice and equality. He spoke about his role as a Christian who works in the government to make people acknowledge their duties and rights. He indicated that his aim is to make it possible for people to gain their rights and guide them to do their duties. Poverty is loss of rights.

Mourad related to globalization and spoke about its impact. He explained that Christians are persecuted in Egypt; therefore, they ask for help from the USA to interfere to find resolutions. Copts, he said, run away to Europe to work because they are persecuted. He explained there are two kinds of Coptic emigrants: poor ones who wish to work in a country where they would not be persecuted, and wealthy Copts that run away to Europe and the USA to protect their money because they do not trust the State or the Islamists. He sees both of these more as political/religious emigrants, not economic ones. He apparently doesn't see anyone as primarily economic emigrants simply looking for a better job. He stated that the connection between Copts

in Egypt and Copts who live in the USA and Europe puts pressure on the State to deal with persecution. He continued to say the pressure is a way to get the State's attention to view Copts as people who have human rights though they are a minority.

According to Zeidan (1999) the outnumbered religious communities, about 500,000 Copts who have immigrated to the United State and Europe, took advantage of the new information technologies associated with globalization to become politically active and mobilize around religious beliefs. Copts became a vital link between Western political movement and the indigenous Christian community in their host countries, fostering ecumenical, economic and political connection (Rowe 1996:86). Christians have accepted a position of communal subordination in exchange for peaceful coexistence with the Muslim majority; however, the impact of Coptic lobby made Coptic concerns significant in American- Egyptian relations to the government.

Ashraf said that globalization is an economic notion or commercial project that opened the market for a lot of countries to interact. He said that globalization has connected the world where people are impacted maybe in different ways but by the same disasters, policies, international agreement and other matters. It is like having a ripple effect by when a political or economic crisis happens, it has an impact across the globe. For example, if a tourist gets hurt in Egypt, it affects national security not only in Egypt but it draws the world's attention to this incident. Ashraf said that there are rules agreed upon internationally that keep organization in the world and between countries which might be political, economical or social. Religion has to be taken into consideration when agreeing on these rules since it is embedded in the identity of millions of people and inseparable from their thoughts and actions.

Mourad's conceptualization of religion has two aspects, one of which is the dogma of Christianity and the second is behavior. The dogma might not be impacted by factors such as economics or politics; however the behaviors and the laws that govern these behaviors impact and are impacted by these factors. He gave the example of religion defining the personal status law or family law that includes divorce, marriage, etc. A second example he gave was the language he sometimes uses where he might have to use words such as *el salamo aleekom* (peace be upon you) which is an Islamic expression to be accepted by certain Muslims or gain their liking. A third example is when people choose act a certain way like in Ramadan (Muslim fasting), Christian might not eat or drink during the day in front of Muslims while they are fasting so that they would irritate them.

Ashraf said that religion is also embedded in people's daily practices. He gave the example of when some a Christian soccer player has just scored a goal, he might practice showing a sign of a cross with his right hand on his body. Similarly, when a Muslim soccer player scores a goal, he bows down to thank God which is a religious sign. Also, he indicated that religion, Islam in the case of Egypt, is embedded into school curriculum where both Muslim and Christian children study it in school.

When I asked Mourad about Mubarak's era, he gave an answer that I was not expecting. He said that the eras of Nassir, Sadat and Mubarak are similar; however, during the era of Egypt being a kingdom is different. His voice and face features became saddened when he said nationalism took land from wealthy and gave to others. He explained during that time the wealthy were known to be Christians especially in Upper Egypt; as a result of nationalism, the wealth was divided. He continued to say some villages were owned by and named after Christians, but after nationalism, Copts only became owners of pieces of land. He said with disappointment that

ministers were Christians, but now rarely one of them becomes a minister. He said that the Islamic Sharia states that by law no leadership of non-Muslim can be over Muslims.

He paused for a moment and asked me to imagine if Egypt was atheist or without a religion, how this country would have been governed. He commented with puzzlement that the Egyptian national I.D. states if the person is Christian or Muslim and asked how this impacts the State. He then answered by saying this is a way for the state to select certain people for certain leadership positions. He gave an example of how he cannot find a president of a university or the Parliament to be Christian. Furthermore, he commented that the national I.D. is a tool to determine how the state is going to treat people which is according to their religion.

Mourad said that as a result of the embeddedness of religion in economics and politics, Copts stick to their religion more. He explained that the Bible says, if you become persecuted because you are Christians, be happy because you will be rewarded in heaven. Mourad described himself tolerating persecution because he knows that he would be rewarded in heaven. He is puzzled that people depend on Church to do something about persecution; however, church itself is persecuted. He indicated that it is everyone's responsibility and not the Church's to have a role to stop persecution. Church has tried to have a role to help stop persecution by applying pressure on the State which is an act that upsets the State. Consequently, the State considers the church to be a trouble maker which weakens the relationship between them. Furthermore, the State becomes stubborn and would not want to grant Copts rights. Mourad indicated that the Church does not have a lot of authority over the State. He gave the example of how the state has the ability to send the Pope away so that he cannot rule the Church anymore. When the Pope goes against the state, the state reacts negatively to the Church and its Copts. Therefore, he argued, Christians must take personal responsibility for finding ways to encourage that state to take a

stand about marginalizing Copts and lessening persecution rather than expecting the Church organization to be in forefront.

Mourad concluded by saying when it comes to religious beliefs, none of this impacts the dogma of Christianity. However, uneducated or simple people might evaluate Christianity to be weak to the extent that they might convert to the ruling religion. He describes as a result of globalization and the external relationship of Copts that live abroad, the State started to pay attention to Copts. He indicated that this has not happened in the past years where Christians were always persecuted and could not do much about it. He stated the support of Christians abroad is making the State take into consideration how it deals with Copt. He said while this might not impact Copt's religious dogma, it impacts their behavior and their relationship with others. He gave the example of how as long as he knows he has support of Copts abroad; he is more tolerant with Muslims. He described that the support from abroad has a psychological impact where he accepts other people even if they persecute him instead of hating others and not wanting to deal with them. He explained that the competition between religions creates a lot of tension between people to convert from one religion to the other. He stated the support from Copts abroad makes this tension clam down as it strengthens Christians which makes them more tolerant of the State and others that persecute them. He concluded by saying that the relationship between religions in one country impact how people have a relationship with each others, behave in facing certain problems and dealing with the outside world.

Other members who were interviewed for the purpose of this study similarly indicated that there is a relationship between religion globalization, economic and politics. The members include elite businessmen/women, people who hold top offices in the government such as a judge, an Assistant Minister, presidents and CEOs of international companies, owns of touristic villages

and 5-star hotels, directors and managers of different entities and people with various other careers. Therefore, they described the great importance of being aware of international trade agreements, laws and policies across the globe, the market and its needs, economic and politics in general.

A Guest from the Parliament

I selected the following interview which was conducted with a Coptic member of the Parliament to investigate the relationship between religion conceptualization and politics. I first learned about Georgette from national television as she is one of the few Copts and women who has been appointed as a member of the Parliament. She presents herself to be active, courageous and helpful. She appears to be in her late forties. I first met Georgette in person when she came as a guest on one of the organization's trips to Upper Egypt. When Moheb introduced us, I told her that I recognized her from national television and that I had been watching some of the Parliament meetings. She was pleased but told me that she was happy that I am an "AUCian," or a student of the American University in Cairo, but have an interest in national news, telling me that in her experience AUCians generally are not interested in such things. I told her about my study and we exchanged phone numbers to make plans for the interview. When I called her to make arrangements, she invited me to come to her house. However, when she realized that is very far away from where I live, she asked me to meet her at workplace in The Egyptian National Council for Women in Tahrir square next to the Center for the National Democratic Party.

When I arrived to Georgette's office, I was asked by the security about the purpose of the meeting. I was asked specifically if I am a reporter. I said I have a personal appointment with her, so I was told that she was in a meeting and to wait for her in the Salon (the waiting room

where all the reporters were). While I was waiting in the Salon, I did not feel very comfortable because the atmosphere was full of tension. Georgette had told me that she was going to be in a meeting before the time she scheduled for our interview. All the reporters were waiting anxiously for this meeting to end so that they can interview the people who were at the meeting. While waiting, I overheard the reporters speaking about current issues, the assignments they have to do and the upcoming events they have to cover.

When the meeting was over, the reporters stormed out the door to interview the people that were at the meeting including Georgette. However, she came to sit with me at the Salon to conduct our interview. Many reporters approached her, but she refused to give any statements, instead she spoke with them off the record. The reporters were asking her about her stand in the Parliament regarding the Nagh Hammady incident which took place on Christmas Eve 2010 where a Muslim shot a group of Christian youth who were going out of the church. This incident was discussed in the Parliament (was broadcasted on national TV) and the governor tried to show that it was not a failure on his part that his incident took place. However, Georgette courageously stated that this incident happened because of the lack of security although it was Christmas Eve and Churches were supposed to be protected by policemen. The head of the parliament responded aggressively describing Georgette to want to draw attention to herself by acting in a heroic way as he described this incident to be a single criminal act. However, Georgette pointed out this incident to be sectarian killing; this resulted in an attack by another member of the Parliament calling her a “criminal.” This person is called “El Ghou” (the monster) and was accused of being involved in this incident as his political history shows a connection with the killer. She reported this latter insult to the police and they took away the immunity of this member for a day, but quickly gave it back to him. The morning of our

interview is when she learned that they took the immunity away and that is why many reporters were trying to get a statement from her. Christians applauded Georgette's courageous stand in the Parliament.

While I was sitting with her, many people who work for the government (whom I recognized from national television) came to speak with Georgette. I noticed that a reporter came to sit close to us and it seemed that he meant to listen in on our conversation. There was a telephone on a table near us, so he came to use the phone but he only held the phone without using it.

While I was asking Georgette questions, her eyes were moving around the room to detect and become aware of who is present. As I was asking her questions, she seemed not to answer very freely. She seemed to give answers that she might say in public. Every now and then, she would give a personal answer to the question and her face would change as she would be smiling. She seemed to be a very confident woman with a strong character. She does not hide her identity as a Copt despite political pressures.

The first question I asked Georgette is her definition of religion. She seemed surprised that I did not ask her a typical question about her job or political position or the parliament. At first, she said it is a relationship between a man and his creator. She gave a very general answer which could be applied to any religion, apparently because people were around us and might have been listening. When people went away, she gave a more personal answer by saying it is a relationship with God that is based on principles of the bible. She said with a smile that she needed God, she obeys him and he gives her hope. She described herself of submitting to him and asking for his will to be done and not hers. She smiled again and said that she senses God in every breath she takes. She explained that she feels he is her father, her children's father and the

one she depends on. She described him as being there to solve every problem she was not able to solve and blessing her and her children. When I asked her about Church, she said that it is a place where people meet with God, converse with him and it is God's house.

Personalizing the interview, Georgette shared about her spirituality by saying her life purpose is to deserve to be called Christian. She described feeling that she is the daughter of the king of kings; he always fights for her and stands by her side. Her face became slightly sad when she said that her father passed away when she was 14 years old. Despite her sadness, she had faith in God. She described feeling connected with God and communicating with him throughout the day. Furthermore, she indicated witnessing God in very simple ways because he is everywhere. She described their relationship as a father to his child, with the Holy Spirit as her guide.

It is not very common that Copts who are Orthodox mention the Holy Spirit. When someone mentions him, it hints having a strong relationship with God, experiencing God's guidance clearly and connecting with God on a deep level. I was also surprised when she said that people most likely would assume she is a person who has ambitions and runs after positions by setting and achieving goals, but she said that she is not this person. She stated that she does her job with dedication. She said she realizes that if people are after certain things, these things have control over them and nothing has control over her. She described her faith as of a child's where she lets God take over her life and he always conquers the challenges she is not able to face. She concluded this part by saying she is a Christian whose purpose is to submit to God's will.

While Georgette describes her favorite identity as that of a grandmother; her role changes depending on what role she is playing such as being an active member in women's rights organization, a member in the parliament, and a member who is advocate of human rights.

When I asked Georgette if there is a relationship between religion and economics, she confirmed by saying Christianity reminds her of socialism where if people own something, they share it with others. She gave the example of Jesus performing a miracle where he took the two bread loafs and the five fish and distributed them to everybody. She commented that she considers economics to be social where poverty affects people's decisions of buying things. She states that although she is a wealthy person, she tends to think twice before buying expensive things because she is surrounded by poor people in society which makes her buy the things she only needs. She gave the example of how it is not appropriate to buy diamonds while people are starving in Ethiopia.

I was most surprised by Georgette's reply when I asked if there is a relationship between politics and religion. She said that she likes to separate religion and politics because religion has morals. When I asked her about relationship between religion and globalization, she stated religion has an effect on globalization and not the other way around. Finally, said that religion has an impact on economics, but she likes to keep it separate from politics; however, Georgette did not elaborate on these statements.

I interviewed Georgette specifically because it is a rare opportunity to interview a Copt who is a member of the Parliament and how is a woman. I had the expectation that she would speak about the relationship with politics and religion in extensive details. I got the impression because I explained my investigation about conceptualization of religion to Georgette, she focused on her spirituality. If she were in a public situation where she was expected to play the role of a secular feminist, she might behave differently like how she acted in the Parliament when discussing the Nagh Hammady incident. Maybe because Georgette is a public figure and the setting for the

interview in a place that was accessible by reporters, she had to be careful about every word that she said. Had the place been her house, her answers might have differed.

Claiming Spiritual Gifts

While Georgette's interview was remarkable because she is a Copt who is a member of the Parliament who focused more on spirituality than politics, Ahdy's interview was remarkable because of his claim of having spiritual gifts and how spirituality is an intrinsic attribute of his personality. Ahdy, who is a Gynecologist in his late forties, indicated that he practices his profession 3 days of the week and serves God the whole week even while working. Ahdy is known in the Coptic community to be a spiritual speaker. He was invited to give a spiritual word to the RAHMAgroup. Ahdy's interview took place while we were on a retreat (as part of the participant observation) with Zamalek church (a church in Cairo which serves mainly upper-class who live in this area). He says that he has a direct relationship with God.

Many members of the Zamalek Church, especially college students and graduates, consider Ahdy to be a counselor. During the retreats, many people would watch anxiously if Ahdy has a few moments when they can sit with him one on one to share with him personal and spiritual dilemmas. Monette who is a graduate in her early thirties, reported that she asks the organizer of graduate meetings and retreats about Ahdy's scheduled times so that she would not miss any of his spiritual words or any opportunities to speak with him even for a few minutes. She said he is able to address spiritual not as a separate category from being a human. She indicated that he is able to solve personal dilemmas in both a practical and spiritual ways that make sense.

When I asked Ahdy about his definition of religion, at first he said that he does not have any idea, but then he gave the unusual answer that he does not like the word religion, especially in

Egypt because it gives a connotation with being prejudice and gives the wrong impression. It doesn't have a real depth; on the other hand, it results in divisions. He defined religion as experiencing God which enables him to face the world. He stated no matter what the arguments are, the bible tells what is righteous. He characterized religion to create men of God who have lived experiences with him. He described God to be his heavenly father where God has the upper hand and he is the child. He stated that he talks with God all the time through prayer and he feels encouraged because God talks back with him in different ways.

Ahdy defined church quoting the bible by saying to be the body of Christ where Christ is the head in this living body. When church assembles and people call Christ with their hearts, he is right in the middle. He makes it as simple as that. He described the relationship between religion and church to be like giving birth where each member of the church is a living organ by experiencing God. Ahdy shared his spiritual experience by describing how Jesus gave him a new life by lifting up the burden of his sin through his forgiveness; Ahdy realized this when he was 16 years old. Remembering when he was about to go college, Ahdy said God attracted to him people who are his children and share the same beliefs in youth group in 1975. He said together they started service groups of Bible study and youth meetings.

Ahdy shared a story of when he was working as a doctor in Al Kasr El Aini during the period of Sadat, he established a magazine and called it Trinity. He reports the purpose of the magazine was for everybody to experience God. He said he decided to hang this magazine in public where on the board in Al Kasr El Aini hospital where the non Christian magazines were hung. He said his Christian colleagues warned him, saying in order to avoid problems he should not hang the magazine. He stated he heard a lot people saying that non Christians were not happy about this magazine and they wanted to take it off the board. He described the day that was scheduled for

them to do so, he went by the magazine early morning and stood beside it. He reported this magazine was attacked heavily by Muslim Brotherhood to the degree that a big group gathered and tore it up, but he stood there courageously. He said that he questioned why they ripped it and was it because it is the truth. He mentioned how they told him that they wanted him to join the Muslim brotherhood. He reports they hung a magazine instead of it with fabricated stories falsely telling immoral stories about Christian doctors.

Hossam, who is a doctor in Kasr El Aini hospital, is in his early thirties and knows Ahdy from Zamalek church, is keen on attending the meetings where Ahdy gives a spiritual word or leads a bible study discussion. Hossam said and from my participant observation that when people break up into smaller groups during the retreats for a bible study, people skip out on their assigned group and find where Ahdy's group is to join it. He described that his own understanding of certain parts he read in the bible to be very shallow in comparison to the extremely deep meanings that Ahdy brings to the discussion. Hossam claims that Ahdy seems to be led by the Holy Spirit because his words fulfill people's minds and souls and are beyond regular words that just anyone could say.

Nancy, who is a member of the Zamalek congregation in her mid thirties, reported that Ahdy is a very successful Gynecologist. While she was pregnant, she went to visit Ahdy for a checkup. She described his office to have very interesting books laid on the table in the reception. She said a title of one book is *A Balanced Meal for Everyday*. Which she was sitting in the reception waiting for her turn, she picked up this book because she was interested in eating healthy. When she opened the first page, the description of the first meal was in order to have a healthy day: read a portion of the New Testament or a portion of the Old Testament and for desert sing a few spiritual songs.

Nancy, like other people who have heard Ahdy's talks, describes him as a very spiritual person. She said his voice sounds like music and he speaks from his heart. She described him sending very powerful messages that he expresses in very simple ways yet they are extremely deep, effective and powerful. She indicated that he speaks with an authority and he has a very attractive, convincing, and logical way. She said when he leads a bible study, people who hear him say that he is filled with the Holy Spirit because he gives beautiful meanings and unexpected points of view which make people feel that they were there experiencing this certain event which is mentioned in the Bible. She further said their souls and minds become engaged and fulfilled with what he was pondering on.

During the interview, he insinuated subtly that he has spiritual gifts such as prophesying, speaking with different tongues, knowing how to translate several languages without knowing them and others. He said that he has a very strong relationship with different saints and indicated that he has read about many and knows their stories. He said that sometimes he has dreams or vision about saints that he does not recognize who have passed away but they introduce themselves to him in the dream and he starts reading about them later. Ahdy's interview demonstrates how spirituality is the dominant theme of his religious conceptualization in a way that is different than the other interviewees that are presented in this chapter because of his spiritual gifts. This chapter has highlighted the organization being a microcosm reflecting global financial and political forces as well as members' religious beliefs as they relate to these global forces. It shows the impact of neoliberalism which is illustrated by redefining the charity organization to an NGO. Becoming an NGO has made a power shift to maximize the benefits for the poor by civic engagement of the members with the state to acquire the rights of the poor as citizens. It has broadened the opportunities to attain funds from abroad which require the

NGO to adopt sustainable development as its system. This has impacted the members' conceptualization of religion which is reflected in their convention development which they view connected to the bible and the global forces so accordingly they making decisions that illustrate it.

Chapter 4: Transformation of the Church

This chapter reflects on the transformation of the Coptic Church through the narratives of priests and bishops who are associated with the charity organization. Each narrative illustrates an aspect of the current state of the Coptic Church through the relationship with the Church leadership, the larger context of society, lay members of the church which are impacted by politics, economics, possession of spiritual gifts, popularity and authority. Globalization and neoliberalism play an important part in exposing the priest's teaching, adding a layer of power to him through technology (internet) and satellite channels that increase the number of his audience. The clergy's behaviors are reflective of their conceptualization of religion which is impacted by the mentioned factors.

These narratives, conflicts and behaviors are a mixture of historical trajectory of a series of interactions with the state and Church leadership which is currently framed in the context of globalization and neoliberalism. The engraved history of the Coptic Church, its rituals, sacrament, Coptic language and traditions are passed from generation to the next using the approach of mnemonic practices and collective memory (Botros 2006). Burger states that "The religious experience is inevitably embodied in tradition because it is tradition that regulates the presence of the supernatural in the mundane world (Burger 1990:43). Botros (2006) states there is continuity between the present and the past through this process where pride in this religious heritage is manifested by laity and clergy. This heritage encompasses the stories of the martyrs and saints since the beginning of Christianity.

In this chapter, I present the narratives of several priests: Father (Fr.) Paula who is considered by Copts a living saint; Fr. Luka who is described to have spiritual gifts which are a shield to his conflict with the Church leadership; Fr. Bolous who is a non-traditional priest who is not

described to have spiritual gifts but who is in a conflict with the Church leadership; and Fr. Rofaial who narrates the calling of being a priest. Conflicts usually are the product of traditional versus non-traditional teachings and whether they are “authorized” ways by the church leadership.

The contemporary Saints of the Coptic Church who are living or who passed away are a mirror of the past with difference in life circumstance in the era of globalization and neoliberalism. As throughout the Church’s history, each Saint has his/her own unique story, way of describing his/her relationship with God, and connection with the people who call on him/her. Each saint is described to have spiritual gifts which elevate him/her in status which is recognized by the Church leadership and laity which becomes a shield in a time of conflict. However, elements of their narratives are remarkably stable throughout Church history, including the kinds of miracles, visions, and experiences they describe. At the same time, globalization through the internet and satellite channels has made it possible for the priests’ teachings to be exposed drawing a large audience that lives in Egypt and abroad which acts as another shield in a time of conflict.

Fr. Paula: For Many, a Living Saint

Hundreds of people claim that miracles happened to them because of Fr. Paula’s prayers. Fr. Paula is about 80 years old, his education is modest and he mostly spends his time serving poor in Upper Egypt. He makes it very easy for the poor to relate to him because he welcomes, accepts and helps them. He welcomes and encourages wealthy people to help the poor as he considers them the brethren of God as the Bible says. Fr. Paula is always invited to give a spiritual word during the 3 day trip that the organization takes prior to Christmas and Easter. Fr. Paula lives in Upper Egypt in one of the villages in Minia Governorate, but comes to Cairo a couple of days during the week to serve Copts there. A friend of Fr. Paula has arranged an apartment where he stays when in Cairo. Dozens of people at a time (Copts and non-Christians)

go to ask for Fr. Paula's prayers hoping for miracles to happen because they consider him a living saint.

I tried to conduct an interview with Fr. Paula while he was in Cairo. When I asked him about his definition of religion and church, he did not really understand why I was asking these questions although I had explained to him what this study is. Instead he started describing the living God he loves and worships. It is typical for people who are more accustomed to preaching than to being interviewed to set aside questions and to deliver monologues about topics they are used to preaching about. While I was sitting trying to conduct the interview with him, dozens of people entered the room to ask for Fr. Paula's prayers. One of them, whose name is Reda, came with his father and a couple of other people kept thanking Fr. Paula for his role in his father's operation. He started telling his father's story out loud to the people that were sitting in the room. Reda said that he called Fr. Paula to tell him that his father was in the hospital and was in extreme pain and fear because he had to go through a heart operation. Reda said Fr. Paula told him not to worry and he was going to pray for his father. A few hours later, the father was still in pain, so Reda called Fr. Paula again and asked him to pray.

Reda's father went through the operation and it succeeded. When the father woke up from the operation many hours later, he said that he saw three people attending the operation with him who were not doctors or nurses. He said that one of them looked like a priest, the second looked like St. Mary and the third look like St. George. Fr. Paula went to visit Reda's father in the hospital whom he had never met before. As soon as Fr. Paula entered the room, Reda's father said that this priest is the one who attended the operation with him. Fr. Paula asked him if he felt any pain and Reda's father said he did not. Reda said Fr. Paula prayed for them and left.

Botrous, Fr. Paula's disciple, who is always with him stated that hundreds of people report stories

like Reda's where by the prayers of Fr. Paula a miracle happens to them. I was not able to conduct a question/answer interview with Fr. Paula, but I heard numerous stories while I was sitting with him claiming many miracles and resolution of difficult problems because of his prayers.

Many Copts consider Fr. Paula to be a living saint. Usually Copts call someone a saint when he is able to do miracles. What distinguishes Fr. Paula is that he claims communicating with saints, who are in heaven, on a daily basis, especially Virgin Mary. He reports having a very strong relationship with Virgin Mary who occupies a special place in his heart because she is the mother of God whom he loves greatly. He also reports having a strong relationship with St. George who is a very popular saint to Copts because he was tortured for 7 years as he refused to deny the name of Jesus Christ. His third favored Saint is Anthony (Anba Antionious) because Fr. Paula became a monk in his monastery.

Fr. Paula does not tend to speak about himself and seldom does he tell a story that reflects his claim of having a spiritual gifts except to people that are extremely close to him such as Moheb (the president of the organization). When Mobeb invited him to come give a spiritual word at the three day trip prior to Christmas which I attended for participant observation, Fr. Paula came which he seldom does with any other invitation because of his age, difficulty in mobility and scarce free time. Fr. Paula said that he loves the organization because it serves the poor and that is the way to heaven. Moheb asked him to share a few stories that about his direct experience with God.

Moheb started the conversation by announcing his claim of Fr. Paula to be a *Saiah* ("traveler" who has out of body experiences). Fr. Paula then shared a story, recounting that the night before

he was supposed to be conducting liturgy, a guest priest came to him and called him to conduct it at that moment. Fr. Paula said he was not happy about that and he did not even know if this guest priest was properly prepared to share conducting liturgy with him. He continued to say the guest priest insisted on conducting the liturgy and they got started. He reported that at the start of liturgy, Fr. Paula realized that this liturgy was not a normal one. He said he realized that it is being conducted by a living saint (the guest priest) and by people that are “swaah,” or people who are only there by spirit and can travel to distant places such as across continents in seconds. Fr. Paula said that he has never been to places like America or countries in Europe physically but had been there through his spirit. People who know Fr. Paula claim that he is a *Saiah*.

Another out-of-body experience he recounted was visiting heaven and hell, which he described as a special request that God granted him after 3 years of praying. He claimed being there for a few hours. He explained details and descriptions of the saints he saw in heaven. He described heaven to be a beautiful place and described some of the saints such as St. Paul and David. He described hell to be dark and to smell extremely bad. He said that while this experience was happening, people that live with him were trying to speak with him, but he did not respond. He explained that they thought he was asleep for a few hours, but they witnessed the bed shaking and him being unconscious.

Fr. Paula reported that he has served in Jerusalem for many years and has many interesting stories that took place while he was there. One of these stories is his revolutionary role with the Egyptian Army. He stated that during the 1973 War between Egypt and Israel, he was able to get some members of the Egyptian Army to go back safely to Egypt on a bus. He described that when he went back to Egypt to visit, the army wanted to honor him but he refused because this would have jeopardized his stay in Jerusalem.

Fr. Paula told numerous stories that support his claim of possessing many spiritual gifts given by the Holy Spirit such as prophesying. He recounted a dream when he was in Jerusalem that the head of Pope Kirolos the 6th was cut off. He said when he woke up, he decided to go to Egypt to visit the Pope. He described when he arrived at the airport, he found Pope Kirolos who informed him that the Head of St. Mark (who spread Christianity in Egypt) was moved from Alexandria to Cairo which explained the dream.

Fr. Paula's conceptualization of religious beliefs is summed up by his spiritual experiences. In his case, there is a link between religion, economics, politics, and globalization. The connection is demonstrated by his claim to communicate with God and the saints directly asking them to provide for him. The economic connection is demonstrated by his claim that whenever he needs money to build a church or a hospital or to help the poor, God answers his prayers and sends him money through people that he might not even know. The political connection is demonstrated by his claim that whenever he needs a permission from the government to do any construction, he asks the saints for their help, and they do miracles to get him this permission. He says he has his own spiritual fights and struggles, but he gets his strength from God.

Close people that know Fr. Paula say that because of Fr. Paula's spiritual gifts, the church is very careful in dealing with him. They report that the Pope knows him very well and tries to not restrict him into rigid rules. They observed that Fr. Paula tries to follow all the rules of the orthodox rules of the church, but he gets his guidance from God and the Holy Spirit.

When I wanted to validate these kinds of claims (spiritual gifts and miracles), I went to visit the priest who live in Mokatem mountain. The History of Coptic Church book states the story of moving the Mokatem Mountain in the year 978. When I meet with the priest, Fr. Samaan, and asked him about the history and validity of miracles, he invited me to come to his general

meetings to witness for myself. He said that dozens of people came to the meeting on wheel chairs and left walking on their feet. Others who are sick come and leave healthy. He said this happens because God is a living God since forever and will continue to be a living God forever.

Claiming Spiritual Gifts is Fr. Luka's Shield

Another priest who many Coptic describe having spiritual gifts is Fr. Luka. Fr. Luka is around 65 years old, has been a priest for 33 years and is married with 3 children and many grandchildren. He serves in a modest area of Cairo near Tahrir square (downtown). He seems to come from a middle class himself. Besides serving in church mass, he has a weekly general meeting. Although people from all different classes attend this general meeting, the majority seem to be from a lower middle class to poor.

I attended Fr. Luka's general meetings a couple of times in person and watched it several times a Coptic satellite channel. I noticed and according to many Copts I spoke with who have attended that the general meeting that it is extremely popular. Both Christians and non-Christians attend these meetings. This priest seems to be a very popular and well known priest. He is known for doing miracles and the ability to see through people by knowing what is on their mind without them saying it. In this meeting, the priest prays out loud, says his word, and sings spiritual songs. He always starts his meetings by declaring the presence of Jesus in the meeting. In the meeting, he prays for sick people, and healing miracles take place. If someone has a problem, when this priest prays for them, the problem gets resolved. He is most famous for healing demon possessed Christians and Non-Christians.

Fr. Luka was invited by Moheb to give a spiritual word to the members of the organization in one of their monthly meetings. When he came, the members seemed to be happy to see him and

a few walked quickly to the door to say hello to him and kissed his hand. It is a tradition that Copts kiss the priest's or Bishop's or Pope's hand, most commonly explaining that these hands carry the bread and wine which turn into the body and blood of Jesus during liturgy. He started the meeting with a prayer (while all were standing) and a spiritual song using his own words that he made into a song. Nevine, a member in her early forties told me later that Fr. Luka often writes his own spiritual songs. As soon as he sat down, he declared the presence of Jesus in the middle which he explained by reminding the members that the Bible that says when two or more people essemble in the name of the Lord, he is in the middle. Nevine told me that he always declares the presence of Jesus in all the meetings he attends.

He has a very distinct voice which is both powerful and compassionate at the same time. When he talks, most of what he says consists of a whole series of lines that rhyme. His teachings seem to be centered on Jesus Christ mainly unlike most traditional Coptic priests who might focus on rituals, sacraments and Bible commandments. Fr. Luka gave a spiritual word, then he stood up and asked the members to stand up to pray, then he left.

When I asked Nevine how I could reach Fr. Luka, she said Fr. Luka is extremely popular and active so it is very hard to reach him as his phone number is only given to people that he knows. She said he does not have office hours at the church because hundreds of people would go to visit him every day. I asked Moheb to connect me with him so he called him and explained that I am doing a study and would like to interview him. Fr. Luka gave him permission to give me his phone number. I called him and he invited me to go to his house for the interview. When I went, I first met his wife who is in her sixties and one of his daughters who is in her early forties. They welcomed me and asked me to go to into a room which they called Fr. Luka's office.

I noticed that the apartment was very organized. The walls had icons of Jesus, Virgin Mary and different saints hanging on them. There were a few statues; one of them with the nativity scene of baby Jesus, Virgin Mary and Joseph. There were crosses made out of wood, glass and bronze in all different areas of the apartment. When I entered the office, I found Fr. Paula sitting at a desk which was wood, but had glass covering the wood. Underneath the glass, there were religious icons of Jesus. Behind the desk there were a many shelves which were full of mostly religious books.

Icons are very important to Coptic Orthodox Christians and always hanging on the walls of almost every Coptic Christians house, or at work or in the car. They report that they believe that the person whose picture is in the icon is a saint that they can communicate with even if he/she passed away. In this case, they say they believe while his/body is buried and gone, his soul/spirit is alive in heaven in a body made out of light. They say they only pray for God, but ask for the saint's intercession. They indicate what assures them of this belief is the miracles that happen with some of them or feeling that their prayers are being answered when they get what they prayed for or understanding why God might not have granted it because of a better plan he has for them or to prevent them from getting hurt as they might only be viewing it from a narrow perspective.

I felt happy to meet Fr. Luka in person and I explained what my study is. He asked me to write down all the questions first, and he started to look at them. I started the interview by asking him why he became a priest. He answered by saying that he loves God and wanted to glorify God by serving him. He stated that God has lifted up his eyes to see him, so the world became nothing and he started thinking about eternity and spiritual things. He said that he used to serve him as an employee at a company, but that was not enough because he wished to be his. He describe that

God made his heart desire to be a priest which he appreciates and considers that it is God's grace that he love God. He said he could have studied to have a doctor, but he thanks God because he has made him a priest.

This answer was different than Fr. Rofaial's answered who said become a priest is a calling from God. Fr. Rofaial has been a priest for 7 years. He seems to be around 45 years old. He serves in a very high class area. It seems that he comes from a high class himself. Besides serving in church mass, his meetings and bible study serve graduates and newlyweds. His teachings are described to include a balance between rituals and having a relationship with God.

When I asked Fr. Rofaial why he became a priest, he answered it was not his choice, but a calling from God. He explained he used to be an architect who had a very active life. He said he was extremely involved at work, was enjoying spending time with his wife, and had a full social life. He reported he was a servant at the church, but had never thought about being a priest, especially that he loved colors and enjoyed having a stylish wardrobe. Coptic Christian priests must wear a black galabia (one piece of clothing like a long shirt that comes down to their feet).

He explained that one night he had a dream that he was standing in the middle of a town square in a circle; branched off from the circle were five streets. He said his work assistant was standing at the end of one street and when he was about to walk through the street to meet his assistant, the entrance of the street got blocked. Then Fr. Rofaial said he thought that maybe he could walk through the second street then turn left to reach his assistant. When he was about to walk through the second street, it got blocked and this was repeated with all five streets.

I asked him what was blocking the street, so he said it was a sheep, but not a normal one. He described this sheep to have very long legs as tall as the distance between the earth and the sky.

He stated after the sheep blocked each street, the whole square started being filled up with sheep then they lifted him up and raised him above all of them. Fr. Paula reported he woke up wondering what this dream might mean but not linking it to being a priest at all. He said when told his wife and father of confession about this dream, he told him it means that you will be a priest and asked him not to do anything but to wait until God declares his plan.

Fr. Rofaial explained that in Coptic Christianity, people of each local church are supposed to choose and nominated people that they think would be good priests to the eldest priest of the church. He indicated the eldest priest is supposed to convey the message to church authorities at the Cathedral once he has approved. He said after six months have passed, one of the servants who did not know anything about the dream suggested to the eldest priest of the church that he should think about considering Fr. Rofaial for priesthood. He stated the eldest priest approved of the idea and recommended him to the authorities at the Cathedral. He said he was chosen to be a priest, so he had to go to the monastery for 40 days and upon his return, he was assigned to the church where he services now.

The second question I asked Fr. Luka was his definition of religion. He took a moment to think then he replied with a question which was if I have ever wondered how the universe works. I replied by asking him how it works. He said that the universe is made of the sun, the moon, the earth, and the stars which move in a very precise way and nothing gets out of order ever.

Between the earth and the sun there is 8 minutes of the speed of light which is $8 \times 60 \text{ sec} \times 360000$. Between the sun and another star is 100 light years which equal $100 \times 12 \times 30 \times 24 \times 60 \times 60 \times 360000$. He commented by saying that this system works in such a precise and an orderly way. He said there has to be a greater power than it that has created it, organizes it, and keeps its order. He said that this supernatural power is God. He asked, if I have ever wondered about

seeds. He described that once these seeds are planted, they flourish to have different colors, shapes, smells and tastes. He asked if I have ever wondered about a baby; then he said a baby is a copy of his father and mother where the baby might have the sound of either parent or the color of their eyes. He stated that God has created all this; therefore, people have to worship him.

Fr. Luka said Christians believe that God has created them from dust which he gave a breath of life to become Adam, Eve, and all mankind. He says God told Adam and Eve not to eat from the tree of life because the consequence of eating the fruit of this tree is death. He explained that death means to be forbidden from being with God eternally. He stated in this land of death and rejection, Adam and Eve gave birth to all mankind. He said all who are born in the land of death God has loved and wanted to save since forever through Christ. He explained Christ who is the word had to be a human with no sin so that he would accept death instead of people. He indicated that everyone that believes in him has a life. He said if people do not believe, they live in darkness and have no life. He stated Christ is the only way to heaven as he is the only gate; he is life and through Jesus Christ is salvation. Fr. Luka continued to say that religion in Christianity is worshiping God and his son Jesus Christ by being righteous, keeping his commandments, loving him, serving him, and giving glory to him.

After the first question Fr. Luka stopped although he did not pause at all while answering the first question and declared to me that he was ready for the second one. I asked him about his definition of Church. He said that everyone who believes in Jesus Christ and gets baptized is a disciple and together they are the Church. He explained through baptism, everyone becomes an organ in the body whose head is Christ and he/she becomes a branch of a tree which is Christ. He stated believers are saints and members of his family and they assemble and gather around

the redeemer, shepherd, and savior who is Jesus Christ. He explained that the bible says when two or three are gathered in my name, Jesus will be in the middle.

Furthermore, Fr. Luka has said that church is the virgin and bride of Jesus who her heavenly groom through the Holy Spirit who engaged them. He described church to be the light of the world, the salt of the earth, the representative of Jesus Christ on earth and the spokesman for Christ in the world who witnesses for him. He said she is waiting for her bridegroom and he is coming soon as their wedding is going to be soon and they will get married and be forever joined in glorious heaven. I was surprised to hear this answer because I was expecting him to talk about church leadership (the Pope and the bishops) and their disapproval of the way he conducts his meetings and the spiritual words he gives are not traditional Coptic Orthodox teaching that focus on rituals and sacrament. His teachings focus on Jesus himself and having a direct relationship with him while a traditional priest would say that Copts can have a relationship with God through church clergy, rituals and the sacraments.

I asked Fr. Luka a follow up question hoping that he would address this issue, so I asked him about the relationship between religion and church. He said that the church worships Christ, glorifies him, witnesses for him. He explained that Christianity worships Christ through communion which is his body and blood and Christ, himself, makes the bread and the wine holy by turning them into his real body and blood. Furthermore, he described that Christ, himself, gives his body and blood to believers because he said in the Bible that this is his body and blood for the new covenant. Fr. Luke said while they only see the priest give the communion which is a ritual, in reality Christ is the priest and the sacrifice even if they do not see him.

Fr. Luka added that spiritual assemblies gather around Jesus to glorify and praise him and his name. He said they are happy because of him and he is happy to see them every time. He stated they worship God who has become human and God is with them (Emanuel). He describe that God is with them all the time: when they are in and out, sleeping and awake as he never forsakes them. He explained that God is like their shadow. He said if a shadow can leave a person, Christ would leave us. He said they are happy with him; faithful people are friends with him and are saved by him. He explained they depend on him and seek to make him happy all the time. He indicated that faithful people live life in a relationship with God as the psalm says “I am a prayer.”

Fr. Luka’s answers to the questions indicate his teachings of having a direct relationship with God. He does not seem to emphasize that through the church clergy, rituals and the sacraments people can reach God. When he spoke about one of the sacraments (communion), he was speaking about Christ himself and not the ritual. He even turned the ritual which people might see in Church (the priest giving communion), to be Christ himself as the priest and sacrifice.

I still was hoping that he would mention anything about the conflict with church leaders, so I asked him about his reaction to lay members that have a conflict with the Church (what I had in mind is the Church leadership). Also some lay members that I interviewed strongly link religion with church. Their relationship, understanding and definition of church might shape their attitude towards religion. For example, if people reject the church, they often reject the religion and its teachings, morals and values. In other words, they might not make a distinction between the religion, the church and the values they have been gaining from the religious teachings.

When I asked Fr. Luka about Copts that might leave the church because they have a conflict with it, he answered by saying that people know their duties and there are no excuses. He said that they should focus on their salvation by praying to God. He stated that he loves God because he is the way. He indicated that he trusts eternal life is only through Christ and he wishes that everyone knows the way and reaches eternal life. He described the world to be nothing and that the earth will vanish. He said people should believe in Jesus to gain eternal life, happiness, joy, and paradise. He described with Jesus, they will have peace. He said if anyone is sad, or depressed, or does not have true joy or blessings, or missing something or scared of death or illness, he/she does not have a Christ. Fr. Luka concluded his question by stating that Christ is the solution. Again, I was surprised that he did not mention anything about the role of the church or its leadership to resolve the conflicts that would make lay members leave the church.

While the church leadership might not agree with the way Fr. Luka expresses his teachings of having a direct relationship with God instead of putting emphasis on the role of church clergy, rituals and sacraments as much as the Church leadership would require, they would not take the chance to make him go through a church trial because his followers would protest. When it was mentioned in an Egyptian newspaper (El Masry El Youm) that the church leadership has a conflict with Fr. Luka, many Copts became inflamed. In order to calm the situation, the church leadership published in Wattani newspaper (the biggest Christian newspaper in Egypt which is distributed abroad) that the article in El Masy El Youm was not accurate. Fr. Luka says that he follows the Orthodox teachings and his teachings are led by the Holy Spirit as he always experiences (may see) the presence of God. He is extremely popular and has the support of thousands of Copts in Egypt and outside. As a result of globalization, people are able to watch Fr. Luka on satellite channels and the internet, and his global following provides a

counterbalance to church hierarchy. He has followers in the USA, Canada, Europe, Australia, and throughout the world. He is also an example of the contemporary struggle between lay Copts and the Church.

Fr. Bolous's Conflict with Church Leadership

Another priest with whom the church leadership has a conflict is Fr. Bolous, a nontraditional priest whose teachings were centered on Jesus himself. He used to tell Copts he preached that they can and should have a direct relationship with God. However, church authorities seem to want him to say that only through church clergy, rituals and sacrament they can reach God. Although Fr. Bolous told me in an interview that his teachings come directly from the Bible, Church authorities seem to want him to submit to their "authorized" teachings only. While he was popular, he was not as popular as Fr. Luka. His general meetings used to be attended by an average of 500- 700 people. However, he does not do miracles and does not claim to have spiritual gifts, and therefore he does not have a global audience as does Fr. Luka. His is in his late thirties and has only been a priest for around 12 years. The Church leaders put him through a church trial and took the decision of forbidding him from teaching or preaching in the Coptic Orthodox Church. He is still a priest who does the liturgy but is not allowed to say any spiritual words. He is allowed to take confessions, but not allowed to give guidance.

According to Maged, one of Fr. Bolous' followers and a member of the congregation where he serves, the meeting kept attracting more audience to the point that the church would be filled with extra chairs that were not enough so people would attend standing and even then there was nowhere to stand because of the crowd. This drew the attention of church leadership to investigate about the charismatic young priest who was magnetizing not only members of this congregation but audience from all over Cairo with different ages. Maged reports people came to

listen to this fiery priest who is focusing on Jesus expressing how he is good, holy, pure, merciful, just, kind, and strong, how he is the light of the world and how he is present everywhere waiting for anyone to call on him to come into his/her life to change it for the better. Fr. Bolous, according to Maged, said that the first step to welcome Jesus in people's hearts is to repent and ask for the Holy Spirit's help by confessing sins directly to God. Maged describes how Fr. Bolous would speak about Jesus with passion and as if Jesus was a close friend of his whom he knows very well. Maged describes Fr. Bolous to have a loud, clear, strong voice full of energy and authority, speaking spiritual words that capture people's minds, hearts and souls. Fr. Bolous' primary message was salvation has one way which is through Jesus explaining that no matter how good people are and how much they try, it is not enough because God is very holy and does not accept less. However, when people accept Jesus as a savior who died on the cross instead of them because they are sinners to exchange their death with a new life, God accepts them.

Maged highlights the points of conflict between Fr. Bolous and the church leadership to be having a direct relationship with God without focusing on the role of the priest. For example, his teachings promoted taking the Holy Spirit as a guide instead of asking the priest about every action, running to God first to talk about problems and asking for solutions instead of running first to the priest and repenting directly to God by confessing sins and asking for his forgiveness. In the Coptic Church confession is one of the sacraments which is practiced by people going to the priest to confess their sins and the priest would pray for them. However, according Maged, Fr. Bolous shocked the people when he said that people are supposed to repent by going directly to God to confess their sins and when they go to the priest, they still confess their sins to God in the presence of the priest. These teachings are alarming because the church leadership consider

them lessening the role of the church clergy. In addition, they consider them similar to Protestant teachings which are not accepted by the Coptic Church.

The Coptic Church, as mentioned earlier in the literature, is keen on reminding its members of the persecution and sufferings of the martyrs and saints. It encourages them to always take the narrow path by increasing spirituality and lessening earthly temptations. The Church highlights the suffering of Jesus himself; therefore, when Copts suffer, they get rewarded later if they bare it with thanksgiving and take it as an experience in solidarity with Jesus. Even the most of the songs Copts sing have a down beat tone. Suffering becomes a sign telling them that they are on the right path which is the narrow path that leads to eternity where God will glorify them.

Therefore, the Church promotes that Copts have to make a lot of effort to the last minute of their death to go through the narrow path, pray constantly, attend liturgies, go to church meetings, fast for long periods (around 265 days of the year), practice rituals, honor the sacraments, obey the commandments of the Bible and follow Jesus' teachings in order to attain salvation. The Coptic Church tends to criticize the Protestant Church in making salvation sound very easy where if people accept Jesus, they are saved without all this work.

Fr. Bolous is among a few other priests and a minority of Copts who are called "mostanireen" (enlightened or brightened) describe their beliefs that salvation is only through accepting Jesus as a savior which is the work of the Holy Spirit resulting in changing people's lives "born again." This is reflected by repentance, praying constantly (not as a commandment, but out feeling connection to God and wanting to share their lives with him), fasting to focus on spirituality distracts thinking about earthly matters, going to church/practicing rituals/honoring the sacraments which are conducted by the Holy Spirit using as the visible actors and obeying Jesus' teachings/the Bible commandments out of love for God. These acts do not become the target for

salvation, a list of steps, or a heavy load win eternity, instead they allow for experiencing living with Jesus on earth and eternity becomes a continuation of this life but without the human body which suffers on earth.

It seems that the Church leadership is threatened by this group because their teachings marginalize the role of church clergy and call it “protestant.” One of the bishops commented that his concern is these teaching might mislead people to take the wide path by thinking that they will be saved only if they believe in Jesus and that he will always forgive them when they repent regardless of living a life style that does not resemble Jesus’ and step by step they are going to forget to repent which will result in their condemnation. Also, the Church sometimes might link this notion of suffering with the verse “turn the other cheek” and is able to direct people’s economic and political actions in certain ways that support the Church leadership which might not happen if people become independent from the church. The Church has the authority to put priests that do not follow its orthodox teachings through a trial but there are exceptions such as Fr. Luka. The Church leadership decided to put Fr. Bolous on trial which generated a lot of heated discussions by his congregation and other churches in Cairo. They did not declare a list of accusations, but justified by stating that his teachings are not traditional Coptic orthodox teaching and it is a way of protecting the faith.

I interviewed Fr. Bolous after he had gone through the trial, but I knew him from before. I attended his general meetings a few times and spoke with some of servants that organize the meetings and who are his followers. The interview with Fr. Bolous took place at his apartment. He is married with two sons. He serves in an upper middle class area. Fr. Bolous reported that when he first became a priest, he served in Africa for around 7 years which was a difficult service but he says that he amazing experiences with God. Fr. Bolous’s apartment was full of

African symbols such as statues of wooden brown elephants, a bronze hanging clock of a forest, as shelf that has wooden statues of different animals and other.

After serving in Africa, he served in Cairo for a year, then the Pope selected him to serve the youth in New York City about 6 years ago. Fr. Bolous decided to go back to Egypt after six months of being in the USA. He reported that the reason he came back is because he felt his service was not fruitful there. He said that he felt many Copts in the US depend on themselves to reach their goals and do not feel the need for God. Therefore, he decided to go back to Egypt to serve Copts here. He described after coming back, he used to conduct a Bible study general meeting every Thursday night which was attended by 500- 700 Church members ranging from youth to elders. However, after three year of investing in these meetings, Fr. Bolous was put through a church trial by the bishops and had to bear some consequences.

Cherry, who goes to the church where Fr. Bolous served in Cairo and is in her late twenties described that when other church members heard the Pop's decision about sending Fr. Bolous to the US, they rented 6 buses and went to the Cathedral to try to change the Pope' mind. She reported that they loved Fr. Bolous and found his nontraditional teachings to be exciting, insightful, practical, powerful and real. She described that many spiritual words that she has hear from other priests before often talked about rituals, sacrament and commandments of the Bible. She described them to be frustrating and a heavy load because they were above her abilities as a human being. She stated that not much of practical steps were given to teach her how to follow these teachings. She described feeling confused because traditional priests always separated spirituality from real practical life that people live.

On the other hand, Cherry described it was the first time in her life to hear what Fr. Bolous had to say about Jesus. She said Fr. Luka pointed out that in Romans chapter 3 verse 12, the Bible says

“They have all turned aside; They have together become unprofitable; there is none who does good, no, not one.” Verses 24 and 25 say “Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed.” In other words, she reported that Fr. Bolous explained that humans are sinners, no matter how good they are, or how much they try to be perfect, no one is. Jesus is the only perfect one, has no sin, offered himself as a sacrifice to lift the sin off everyone that believes in him and his salvation.

Cherry continued to explain that according to Fr. Bolous, the Bible says the result of sin is death which is separation from God and not being able to be in his presence again like what happened to Adam and Eve because he is completely holy and does not tolerate sin. She reported that Fr. Bolous said in order for a reconciliation to take place between God and man, a sacrifice which has certain characteristics of being human (because the sin was committed by a human), has no sin (to be able to remove the sin), and indefinite (because God is indefinite). She said that Fr. Bolous describe that God himself had to come on earth as a human while his God characteristics never separated from his human characteristics to sacrifice himself so that those who believe in him would have remission of sins and eternal life with him. She reported that Fr. Bolous said when people sin and repent, God the Father looks at the blood for Jesus and forgives their sin and it is not because of their own goodness or the good deeds they do.

According to Cherry, Fr. Bolous said that after a person accepts Jesus and his salvation, his/her life changes to reflect the new life Jesus has given them; therefore; their actions become reflective of Jesus’ characteristic like love for others, forgiveness, and others. She reported that he said these people start to go to church, take Jesus through communion and practice the rituals

and sacraments with understanding and just as routine. She stated that he said these people might sin, but quickly repent because at his point they do not want to do anything that would hurt God's feelings or ruin their new relationship with God.

Cherry reported that when she learned these teachings, she felt that a heavy load was lifted off her because all her life she was under the impression that even if she work hard all the time not to sin, she was not assured that she would make it to heaven. She said having a direct relationship with God and accepting Jesus' salvation in her heart has changed her life, leading her to feel happier, experience the presence of God in her life on earth and is assured that heaven is a continuation of her life with Jesus after death.

The category of those who have a direct relationship with God may often lead to conflict with the Church leadership because they report that are not dependant on the church clergy, rituals and sacraments to reach God. They state that they have accepted in their heart the salvation of Jesus and say only through him they are accepted by God because they explain how he has lifted the heavy load of sin through his grace and not out of their goodness. They describe that God is Holy and does not accept less, so they say if they accept Jesus, God accepts them because they state that He sees Jesus when he looks at them. They indicate that the church leadership seems to want people to follow all the rituals, practice of sacraments and guidance of church clergy to hopefully reach heaven. Coptic who report having a direct relationship with God say that they focus on Jesus himself and do the rituals with understandings, not just as a list of steps.

Hani, who describes himself as a traditional Orthodox Copt Christian who is in his mid thirties, reported that he accepts salvation in his heart, but he is hesitant to accept Fr. Bolous' teachings. Hani said that hear agrees with one of the bishops who said Fr. Bolous' teachings might

encourage people to think the way to heaven is very easy and they could be assured of it. He said that the bishop indicated Coptic Orthodox Christianity calls for taking the narrow path and making an effort until the moment of death to repent, practice rituals and sacraments and ask for church clergy's help to hopefully get into heaven.

During the interview I asked Fr. Bolous to define religion, he said he does not like the word "religion" because as Christians, they do not have a religion as he considers "religion" to be a list of commandments or steps that people do so that God is pleased or satisfied which Christianity is not. He indicated Christians take Jesus through baptism and faith where they are filled with God's Spirit that makes them know Christ. He added by Christ they take the Holy Spirit, get filled by him and know the father. Fr. Bolous continued to say, it is not about religion; it is acceptance of Christ himself in their lives, obeying and submitting to him until he is imprinted on them. He said that His picture becomes imprinted on them so that they change or turn into a Christ that walks on earth. This new Christ (new them) has weaknesses but he repents fast and his purpose of life is to carry the message of Jesus Christ to the whole world. He said this is why he does not like the word religion because sometimes religion is like tree leaves that Adam covered his nakedness. As humans, they try to satisfy God by their efforts and by spiritual practices and forget that God is not satisfied except by the acceptance of Christ in the heart. In other words, religion focuses on what humans must do, when in reality it is Christ who does the important part.

When I asked Fr. Bolous about his definition of church, I was expecting that he would mention church leadership; however, he defined it to be the body of Christ and the union of a group of believers by eating bread which is the body of Christ and through the union of their thoughts. He clarified this does not mean that there are not any differences in the personalities or opinions of

this group but they share the same spiritual principles which separate righteousness and unrighteousness. He said there is leadership by the Holy Spirit of this group so that they see righteousness because with the leadership of the Holy Spirit, righteousness will be declared. He stated there are a lot of people who are not led by the Holy Spirit like Pilate when he asked Christ what is righteousness although it was apparent and Pilate truly knew that Christ was innocent but without the Spirit of righteous, he did not set Jesus free.

I noticed that with many interviewees give a particular definition as an initial reaction to the question. This definition might have been in the back of their head, or have been memorized, or have been recorded in their mind because it was remarkable. When they are asked about this term, they automatically give the definition for it. For example, some interviewees when asked about the definition of church, said it is the body of Christ which is definition stated in the bible. However, when they are asked further or different questions about church, they define different aspects of it such as its rituals, teachings, or church clergy.

I wanted to investigate Fr. Bolous' experience with the church clergy so I asked him about the relationship between religion and church. He said that the Church presents ways which help people to be embedded in Christ. He hinted that Church presents the word of God clearly and righteously to declare Christ himself where it leads believers to know righteousness, make it firm, and make it grow. He added Church should sacrifice everything that is precious for Christ to be glorified and shown to all people and Church leaders should give up love of self and appearance of luxury so that they will show Christ for all who are in need.

Because of my background about the conflict between church leaders and Fr. Bolous, I asked him if this relationship is practiced today. He was very hesitant to talk, then he decided to say

that it was not because rituals and practices dominate over the relationship with Christ himself. He said there is no complete vision for Christ when they are careless about Christ as a person and concentrate on him as practices. He indicated there is carelessness of the Church to live like Christ because the Church currently only cares about rituals and making practices on timely bases but not giving up worldly things and carrying the cross and following Christ.

Later, I asked him what carrying the cross means, he said there is no resurrection without a cross. He explained every time people go through pain, they know how much Jesus has suffered for them and how much he has tolerated for them and this increases their love for him and appreciation for everything he has made for them. He said while Jesus is the God of glory, he accepted to give up this glory to come down to go through pain instead of them although he was in no need for pain to satisfy himself. Otherwise, Jesus would have liked suffering but he has shared with them everything even severe pain. Fr. Bolous explained although Jesus is God, he did not exempt himself from injustice, humiliation and pain. Jesus submitted to everything until he let Satan practice his authority on him without stopping him, but he won through resurrection as he accepted the temporary loss from Satan for the sake of a better purpose to give them eternal life and open the kingdom of God and that is the secret to the humbleness of Christ.

Fr. Bolous indicated the Church has lost its vision in attracting people who are away from Christ because it cares to make sure that people who already are in church, attend regularly and it is no longer about spreading the word of God. He stated Christians now who are in church cry out with Judas "why all this waste," why would they risk their lives and why put effort to tell others about Christ; they don't know that it is their mission. He said it is a disaster that a lot of Christians believe that other non-Christians who are good people will inherit eternal life and this is a clear proof of how Christianity has turned from reaching the father through his son and

believing in him into rituals and practices. He said every religion has rituals and commandments that followers practice so people might forget that God has loved the world so much that he has sacrificed his only son to save the world. He stated there will be the judgment day where everyone who has rejected that Jesus as the son of God who has died for him, will cry but after time has passed.

Fr. Bolous' answer reflects a conflict with the Church leaders and how the current Church is being guided. It is paradoxical how in theory Copts are allowed to choose their own religion; but once they choose this religion, there are rules set by institutions to put boundaries on this religion. A person might become a priest to serve God, but once he does, he becomes an employee of an institution that has its own rules. Fr. Bolous' struggle suggests that having rules might be important because it keeps order and consistency; however, it is important that the essence which is focusing on God should not get lost while maintaining these rules or rituals. In other words, often Copts speak about how the first Church by the apostles was led by the Holy Spirit while Christ was the focus and how they wish that the current Church would be a duplicate of it.

This chapter has presented the experience of the church clergy which is impacted by the historical trajectory of Coptic Christianity in relationship to the state and Church leadership. Conflicts have surfaced based on the evaluation of "authorized" teachings by the church leadership but claiming having spiritual gifts, authority and popularity which is a power shift added by globalization and neoliberalism as their teachings are broadcasted abroad capturing a large audience which is a shield. This impact has played an important part in the politics of the interaction between the clergy and the church leadership and it strengthens their status. The

clergy's conceptualization of religion directed their behavior where they only carried out their church duties or became involved in public life with politics and economics.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

While the Coptic Orthodox Church's aim is to remain traditional preserving and reminding its congregation of its historical trajectory of being persecuted which is reflected by the thorny interaction with the State, there is evidence of a transformation influenced by globalization and neoliberalism. Copts' religious discourses are impacted by political and economic global forces. The international prevailing ideological paradigm of neoliberalism is highlighted by the shift from governments into individuals through economic and political practices. For example, the organization is a microcosm reflecting global financial and political forces as well as members' religious beliefs as they relate to these global forces. The impact of neoliberalism is illustrated perhaps most clearly by redefining the charity organization to an NGO, This has made a power shift to face the hegemony of the State to maximize the benefits for the poor by acquiring the rights of the poor as citizens. It has widened the opportunities to attain funds from abroad which strengthens its economic and political status. This has impacted the members' conceptualization of religion that is reflected in their convention of sustainable development which they view connected to the bible and the global forces so accordingly they make economic and political decisions that illustrate it.

The historical trajectory of the Coptic Church's heritage is manifested in both laity and clergy, as the past and present are a continuation through collective memories and mnemonic practices.

The historical trajectory of remembrance of martyrs, persecution and the thorny interacting with the State has a high symbolic meaning for Copts which explains some aspects of their attitudes.

The question of minority status, persecution, and making meaning out of suffering and tribulation seems to be perhaps the most common underlying theme to Copts' discourses. For

example, the rich people in the organization need to condescend to “come down,” which they don’t need to do, to experience poverty, for the sake of people who are truly poor. It seems that sacrifice, suffering, and trials are the theme of everything from church services to historical narratives to forming the NGO to Copts’ understanding of politics.

The narratives of the church clergy show conflicts which have surfaced based on the evaluation of “authorized” teachings by the church leadership but claiming having spiritual gifts, authority and popularity became a shield. Globalization and neoliberalism have played an important part in the politics of the interaction between the clergy and the church leadership as exposure of their teachings has captured audience from abroad, strengthening their status. The clergy’s conceptualization of religion directed their behavior where they only carried out their church duties or became involved in public life with politics and economics.

Globalization has exposed Copts through satellite channels and the internet to other teachings and as a result Copts may make conscious choices about their religious discourses. This encourages them to question notions they might not agree with in the politics of Church and the interaction with the State which was not the case in the past. The impact of globalization and neoliberalism has connected Copts across the globe that strengthened their political and economic status in Egypt, putting some pressure on the state. Neoliberalism brings Copts’ attention that they are part of a globe where economic and politics orchestrate many aspects of life. The pride of the historic trajectory of the Coptic heritage is imprinted in their identity, is manifested by their attitudes and is an intrinsic attribute of their personalities. Taking an active and positive role to be integrated in society makes it possible to face conflicts and conquer challenges to continue celebrating the heritage of pride.

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