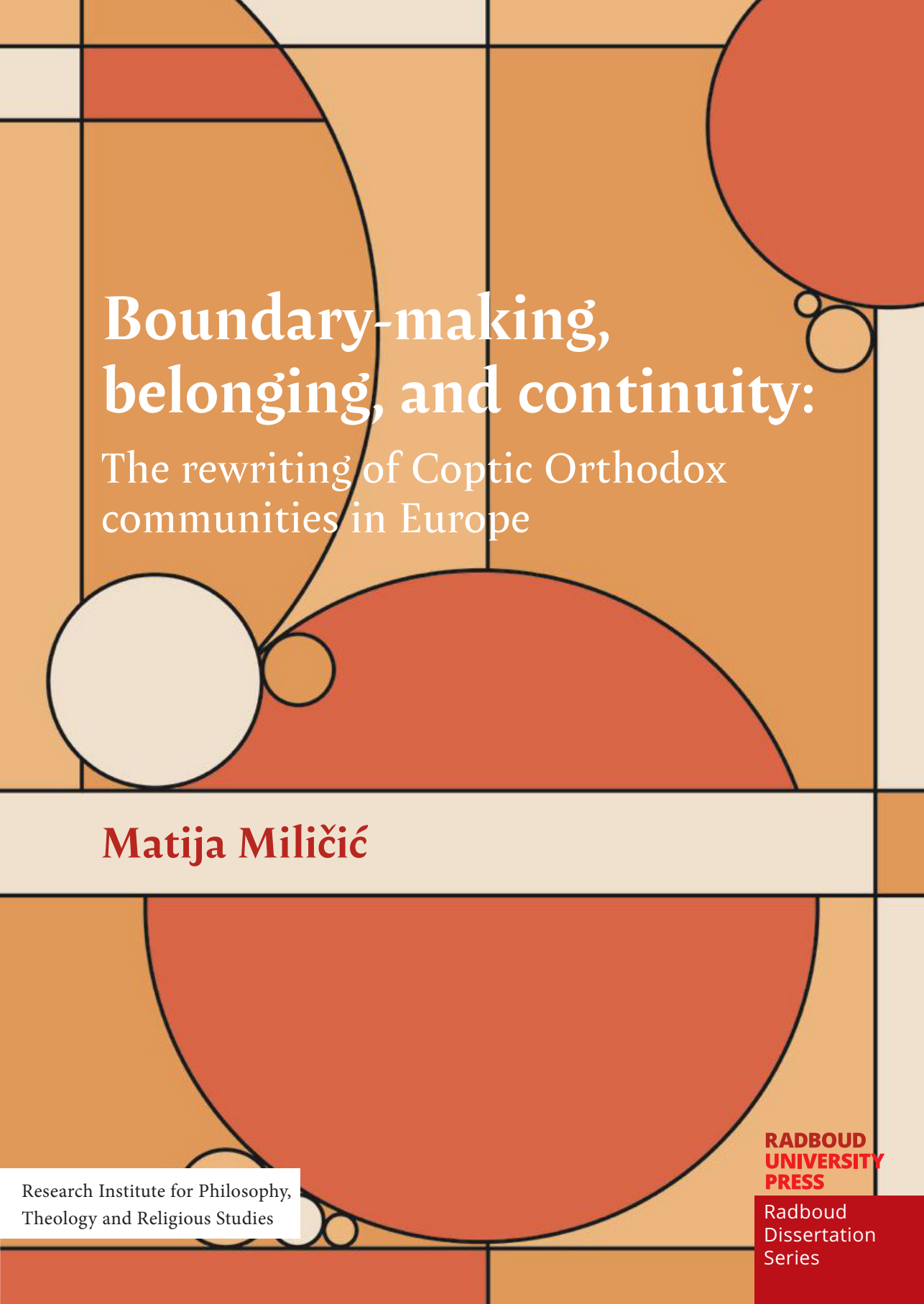




Boundary-making, belonging, and continuity:

The rewriting of Coptic Orthodox
communities in Europe

Matija Miličić

Research Institute for Philosophy,
Theology and Religious Studies

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Matija Miličić

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from Radboud University Nijmegen
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Notes on Transliteration

In this thesis, I have used the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* system for transliteration and transcription of Arabic text. This system has been chosen for its clarity and wide acceptance in academic writing and particularly in the field of Middle Eastern Studies. For toponyms and titles of publications, simplified transliteration (without diacritics) and common English spelling forms have been followed. Whenever possible, the preferred spelling of personal names in Arabic, as indicated by the individuals themselves, has been used. Otherwise, simplified transliteration has been followed.

Notes on Formatting Conventions

In this thesis, specific formatting conventions are employed to enhance readability and clarify meaning. These conventions are outlined as follows:

Italics are used to denote foreign terms not found in common English dictionaries, titles of publications, and significant emphasis on particular words or phrases.

Double Quotation Marks (") are used for direct quotations from primary and secondary sources, as well as for titles of journal and magazine articles and website sections.

Single Quotation Marks (') are utilized for quotations within quotations and for defining terms or indicating special usage of words or phrases (such as 'Coptic identity'), as well as for 'as if' words (for example, 'proper' upbringing of children).

Chapter 1.

Introduction

Introduction

In October 2021, during my visit to the Holy Mary and St. Verena church in Bussum, a small town not very far from Amsterdam, the local priest told me the story of the patron saint of the church, St. Verena. Like other Coptic churches, the church has several icons of its patron saint, in different styles, formats, and placed in different locations in the church building. One icon in particular caught my attention. The icon (shown on Image 1) was painted by the late Adel Nassief, a famous Egyptian Coptic icon painter, and was produced specifically for the Dutch Coptic community. Compared to standard and traditional icons of the saint, this icon contains various additional elements which were pointed to me by the priest. The first can be found in the background, which depicts a variety of stereotypical elements and tropes related to Egypt: the Nile, the pyramids, and palm trees. St. Verena is traditionally depicted with a comb and a jar of water, but in this icon, she also carries the *ankh*, or the Egyptian key, around her neck. Unlike most representations of her clothes (traditionally in white, brown, blue, and/or beige), the artist painted her robe in red, white, and blue: the colors of the Dutch flag. The priest in Bussum explained that the icon is a symbol of the Dutch Coptic community since it contains references to the three elements that constitute the identity of the community: Egyptian, Coptic, and Dutch.



Image 1. An icon of St. Verena, patron saint of the Coptic Orthodox church in Bussum.

The themes of (non)belonging, adaptation, change, and emplacement have emerged as some of the central themes of exploration of the practices and experiences of Coptic communities in Europe since the very beginning of this project. Such themes featured in numerous conversations during the initial stages of my fieldwork in different Coptic churches in Europe, during which I, as a non-member, intended to become more familiar with internal dynamics of these communities. The encounter and the story of the St. Verena icon described above helped to illuminate the interconnectedness of those themes and revealed that they lie at the very intersection of the ways members of different Coptic churches in Europe see themselves and their presence in their host societies.

The priest's account additionally pointed to the causal relationship between narratives of belonging and communal boundary-making, on the one hand, and the community's material heritage and textual production, on the other. It soon became clear to me that many stories, narratives, and viewpoints on belonging and communal identities are produced in the context of material culture, such as icons, emanating from particular ways of interpreting, seeing, or using such material objects. Therefore, although Coptic churches in Europe employ various methods to redefine and maintain their group boundaries and shape belonging among their members, my focus is on the active roles that texts play in these processes. I place these textual practices within the broader intra-communal dynamics and developments, in which they are linked to prominent church narratives that center on preserving 'homeland' traditions, albeit adapted to migration-related conditions, and geared towards securing the future of their communities.

This is a story about the formation of Coptic Orthodox communities in Europe. The Netherlands and Italy, home to some of the largest Coptic communities in Europe, serve as the focal points for this study. This work seeks to unpack and analyze the multilayered processes of formation, (re)definition, and expression of communal belonging in the Coptic Orthodox churches in these two countries between the 1970s and early 2020s.¹ It might seem at first sight that what is meant by 'diasporic community formation'² is a straightforward, definitive, or even self-evident development. This dissertation, however, aims to refute such assumptions and show that the formation of Coptic Orthodox communities in Europe, or as a matter of fact of all diasporic communities in the world, is a complex and dynamic process,

^{1.} Officially, the premise of the project takes 2020 as its ending point, but most project members, including myself, have paid attention to the developments several years after this threshold.

^{2.} The often contested term 'diaspora' is discussed later in the introduction, in the section on theoretical and conceptual framework.

highly contextualized and constantly negotiated. In this process, as many scholars have argued, diasporic communities often balance between ‘here’ and ‘there,’ and between the past and the future, thus accentuating the dynamism of spatial and temporal aspects of the diasporic condition. As communities established in lands essentially seen as not ‘native’ as a result of a recent migration and settled in largely pluralistic environments, Coptic churches outside of Egypt engage in a *continuous* rewriting of their religious and cultural traditions, group boundaries, and their communal markers. I argue that in this *rewriting*, with a clear reference to the textual practices and production, as well as to the dynamic and continuous aspect of this process, diasporic Coptic communities engage in *preserving*, *reinterpreting*, and *redefining* various aspects of the Coptic Church traditions and of communal parish life practices from Egypt, and root them in their new lands. As a result, I propose, the understanding and imagination of what is ‘home(land)’ is shifting and different layers of belonging are negotiated. This way, many migrant communities belong both ‘here’ and ‘there,’ and their communal practices exist simultaneously in the past, present, and future.

The establishment of Coptic Orthodox communities in the Netherlands and Italy commenced in the 1970s and 1980s, as is the case with many other Coptic churches in Europe. These communities, often less known than those in North America, have since considerably grown and have become more visible in their respective local societies. Their ritual, textual, and sociocultural practices continue to develop in a particular setting caused by migration and under the influence of local environments, their communal parish activities are expanding, and their communal boundaries continue to be reshaped and reckoned, particularly in relation to second- and third-generation church members and vis-à-vis the ‘outside world.’ Although scholars have recently paid more attention to Coptic communities in Europe in their works compared to earlier periods, little is still known about their histories, organized practices and activities, and current internal developments.

Introduction to the topic and situating the thesis

The Copts and the Coptic Orthodox Church

The Copts are an indigenous Christian group from Egypt and today represent the largest Christian community in the Middle East and North Africa. The English word ‘Copt’ (like Dutch *kopt* or French *copte*) came through Arabic *qibt* and its adjective form *qibtī*, which, in turn, derives from Greek *Aigyptios*,³ meaning ‘Egyptian,’ or *Aigyptos*,

³ Jacques van der Vliet, “The Copts: ‘Modern Sons of the Pharaohs’?,” in *Religious Origins of Nations?*, ed. Bas Ter Haar Romeny (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 280.

used by Greek speakers to denote both Egypt and the Nile.⁴ When the Arabs arrived in Egypt in the seventh century, they accepted and adapted the Greek exonym to denote local inhabitants, thus simply calling them ‘Egyptians’, i.e. ‘Copts’. Since the local population was largely Christian at the time, the terms Coptic and Christian became interchangeable and synonymous in the Arabic language when referring to the conquered people of Egypt. Therefore, contemporary use of the term ‘Copt’ primarily has a religious connotation and refers to Egyptian Christians. The term, being reserved for Egypt’s indigenous Christians, distinguishes them from both their Muslim compatriots and other Christians from non-Egyptian origin (e.g. Greeks, Maronites or Armenians).⁵

The Copts trace their Christian tradition back to the first century CE, to the arrival of St. Mark to Alexandria, who is considered to be the founder of the Coptic Church and its first patriarch. More than ninety percent of all Copts belong to the Coptic Orthodox Church,⁶ a non-Chalcedonian church belonging to the group of the so-called Oriental Orthodox churches.⁷ It is difficult to provide an accurate estimate of the number of Copts in Egypt and abroad, primarily due to the fact that recent national censuses in Egypt do not register religious difference, as well as due to a large gap between the numbers provided by the Egyptian government and the Coptic Orthodox Church. More broadly, estimates of the number of Copts in Egypt have been a contentious issue because of the political sensitivity surrounding their status as a minority and the implications for their political representation, or lack

⁴ Aziz Suryal Atiya, *A History of Eastern Christianity* (Millwood: Kraus Reprint, 1980), 16.

⁵ Christiaan van Nispen tot Sevenaer, “Changes in Relations between Copts and Muslims (1952–1994) in the Light of the Historical Experience,” in *Between Desert and City: The Coptic Orthodox Church Today*, eds. Nelly van Doorn-Harder and Kari Vogt (Oslo: Novus Forlag, 1997), 24.

⁶ J.D. Pennington, “The Copts in Modern Egypt,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 18, no. 2 (1982): 159. Besides the Orthodox majority, there are small communities of Protestant and Catholic Copts, as a result of conversions under the strong influence of Western (Catholic, Anglican, and American Presbyterian) missionaries in Egypt between the seventieth and early twentieth centuries. Besides these, Egypt today hosts several other smaller, but historically significant Christian groups, such as Armenians, Greek Orthodox, and Maronites, most of whose members were expelled from the country in the 1950s and 1960s during Gamal Abdel Nasser’s presidency. For the sake of style and concision, I will not make distinctions among ‘Copts’ or ‘Egyptian Christians’ further in the text, thus the term ‘Copts’ will be used to denote members of the Coptic Orthodox Church, who represent the main focus of this study.

⁷ Oriental Orthodox churches, comprising of the Coptic Orthodox, Syriac Orthodox, Ethiopian Orthodox Tawahedo, Eritrean Orthodox Tawahedo, Armenian Apostolic, and Malankara Syrian Orthodox churches, adhere to Miaphysite Christology and split from the rest of Orthodox churches (known as Eastern Orthodox) at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD, over Christological disagreements and disputes. For more on this split see Atiya, *A History of Eastern Christianity*, and Stephen Morris, *The Early Eastern Orthodox Church: a history, AD 60–1453* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2018).

thereof, in the country. Previous state censuses in Egypt and various research centers and non-governmental bodies have usually estimated the percentage of Copts in Egypt to be between five and nine percent since the second half of the twentieth century, amounting to about six to nine million Copts in the country today.⁸ Such estimations have often been met with dissatisfaction and criticism from within the Coptic community. Hence, numbers provided by the Coptic Orthodox Church traditionally tend to be much higher, ranging from ten up to twenty percent of Egypt's population. These high percentages are usually questioned or dismissed by most scholars and independent organizations, thus arguing that the official Egyptian state statistics should be considered reliable.⁹ As to the geographical distribution of Copts, estimates and projections are much clearer. Although Copts are present in all governorates of Egypt, they are a minority in each of those. Based on several earlier studies, Pennington argues that around 60 percent of Copts live in Upper Egypt, with the provinces of Minya and Assiut being their largest strongholds, while around 25 percent of them live in Cairo.¹⁰

Since the 1950s and 1960s, Copts have started to emigrate in larger numbers from Egypt to different parts of the world, mainly to North America, Australia, and Europe. In their host countries, these first groups of migrants, most of whom were highly educated professionals, began to gather into communities and established first Coptic church parishes outside of Egypt in order to be able to continue to practice their religion, as well as to connect with other Coptic immigrants in their regions or countries. The largest migrant Coptic communities can be found in North America, where there were 181 churches in the US and Canada in 2010.¹¹ Relatively large congregations are also found in several major cities in Australia, primarily in Sydney and Melbourne. In Europe, the establishment of Coptic communities began during the 1970s, being largely concentrated in the western part of the continent, with the largest communities located in the United Kingdom, France, and Italy.

⁸. See for example reports from the Pew Research Center (2011): <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2011/02/16/how-many-christians-are-there-in-egypt/> and Minority Rights Group (2017): <https://minorityrights.org/communities/copts/>. See also Yousra A. Mohamoud, Diego F. Cuadros, and Laith J. Abu-Raddad, "Characterizing the Copts in Egypt: Demographic, socioeconomic and health indicators," *QScience Connect* 22 (2013), 1-13.

⁹. See, for example, Saad Eddin Ibrahim et al., *The Copts of Egypt: Report* (London: Minority Rights Group International, 1996); Youssef Courbage and Philippe Fargues, *Christians and Jews under Islam* (Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 1998) and Cornelis Hulsman, *Discrepancies Between Coptic Statistics in the Egyptian Census and Estimates Provided by the Coptic Orthodox Church* (Cairo: Arab-West Report, 2012).

¹⁰. Pennington, "The Copts in Modern Egypt," 159.

¹¹. Saad Michael Saad, "The Contemporary Life of the Coptic Orthodox Church in the United States," *Studies in World Christianity* 16, no. 3 (2010): 209.

Van Doorn-Harder notes that Coptic communities are indeed dispersed all around the world, with more than 500 established churches in 2017.¹² Understandably, there is no accurate information on the number of Copts living outside of Egypt, partly due to the fact that most countries do not include religious denomination in their national censuses (thus, Copts would be categorized as ‘Egyptians’) and that many Egyptian Copts have acquired nationalities of their host countries after their migration. Therefore, most estimates come from within the individual dioceses and primarily concern the number of registered members of particular Coptic churches outside of Egypt. Consequently, most authors and organizations (Coptic and non-Coptic alike) refrain from attempting to provide even approximate estimates on the number of Copts in diaspora. This is further complicated by the fact that the Coptic Church outside of Egypt is continuously expanding and migration flows are constantly changing.

The “Rewriting Global Orthodoxy” project

This study is part of a larger project titled “Rewriting Global Orthodoxy: Oriental Christianity in Europe between 1970 and 2020,” funded by the European Research Council and hosted at Radboud University in Nijmegen.¹³ The project takes several Oriental Orthodox churches in Europe, specifically the Syriac Orthodox, Coptic Orthodox, Ethiopian and Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo, and the Armenian Apostolic churches and their textual practices in the last fifty years as its starting point and the main focus of research. By paying attention to hitherto largely overlooked publications produced by or found in various Oriental Orthodox churches across different European countries, one of the project’s principal aims was to obtain a better insight into recent (and ongoing) communal developments in the five churches and into broader or shared trends and experiences of (Oriental) Orthodox migrant communities in Western Europe *from within*. As part of a broader analysis of communal lives and expansive ritual and textual practices of different European Coptic, Syriac, Armenian, Ethiopian, and Eritrean Orthodox communities, the project members collected and analyzed a large variety of mostly popular,¹⁴ cheaply

^{12.} Nelly van Doorn-Harder, “Introduction: Creating and Maintaining Tradition in Modernity,” in *Copts in Context: Negotiating Identity, Tradition, and Modernity*, ed. van Doorn-Harder (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2017), 6.

^{13.} For more on the project, its members, and research aims see the project’s webpage on the official website of Radboud University, <https://www.ru.nl/en/research/research-projects/rewriting-global-orthodoxy>. The project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No. 834441 GlobalOrthodoxy).

^{14.} Used in the sense that such publications are most often geared towards wider and more general audiences with the communities, written in a simple style, and made to be appealing to a broad readership (including visually and materially).

produced, and self-published texts, most of which are written and geared towards the members of these communities. This has allowed the researchers to grasp how these church-based communities see their own groups, their traditions and teachings and their places in the new societies, what kind of debates and negotiations have taken place over the last fifty years as a direct consequence of migration and globalization, what kind of changes and adaptations occur within the communities and at what levels (theological, ecclesiastical, sociocultural, or material, among others), and how this has influenced the construction of multilayered narratives of belonging among church members.

Having introduced the topic and context of this dissertation, it is important to reflect on my own positionality and the origins of this research project. My background in philology and Middle Eastern studies laid the foundation for this dissertation, both academically and personally. My interest in literature, language, and cultural production began during my Bachelor's program in philology and Arabic studies at the University of Belgrade, where I developed skills in Arabic linguistics, literary studies, and translation. This academic base led to my interdisciplinary Master's degree in Middle Eastern Studies at Leiden University, where I explored the region's socio-political and cultural landscapes. My Master's thesis on contemporary Kuwaiti literature, focusing on how novels reflect and shape national identity and societal dynamics, further solidified my interest in the relationship between textual production and complex socio-cultural expressions.

Although not formally trained in religious studies, theology or anthropology/sociology of religion, studying religion and various types of religious texts (for example, the Quran) has been an integral part of my educational journey. As a student of Arabic and Middle Eastern studies, studying Islam through historical, political, and literary lenses represented (as expected) an indispensable and inseparable component of such programs. By contrast, in such programs often little attention is paid to other religions, including Christianity. The interest in researching the Copts and the Coptic Orthodox Church came partly from this reason – from the need to pay more attention to often overlooked Middle Eastern Christianity within Arabic and Middle Eastern studies. One of the starting points of this work is the belief that the Copts (as well as Maronites, Syriacs, Chaldeans, and other Arabic-speaking Christians) and their heritage and traditions should represent a fundamental part of research on the Arabic language, history, culture, politics, arts, and material heritage (such as architecture) of the so-called Arab world and the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region, and thus not be confined exclusively to the field of Coptic studies or Middle Eastern Christianity.

My enthusiasm for studying Coptic Orthodox communities stems from a broader interest and familiarity with Egypt. Personal trips to Egypt, a personal connection to the country, and fluency in Egyptian Arabic sparked a desire to explore its diverse cultural and social landscapes. Egypt's role as a central hub within the MENA region further solidified it as a key focus of my research, particularly its contemporary social, cultural, and religious realities, including emigration communities. This research emphasizes the significance of Copts in studies of both early and modern Egypt. My interdisciplinary background in philology, Arabic language and literature, and Middle Eastern studies, combined with my interest in culture, religion, language, texts, and migration, positions this dissertation at the intersection of Middle Eastern studies, Coptic studies, migration studies, religious studies, as well as culture and media studies and identity studies. Although the research spans various disciplines, its primary goal is to advance critical contemporary Coptic studies and contribute to the scholarship on Coptic and Egyptian migration.

Status quaestionis: sketching out the field and addressing the gaps

In order to adequately place my dissertation within the existing knowledge and scholarship on the Copts and the contemporary Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt and in diaspora, and within relevant currents in religious and migration studies more broadly, and before laying out the main arguments and questions of this study, I will briefly sketch out the state of the field and present an overview of the literature that informed, shaped, and inspired my own work and the scope of this study. Furthermore, I will address the lacuna in the relevant literature that this study seeks to fill as well as potential thematic, theoretical, and methodological contributions that the study offers.

The Coptic Orthodox Church, and Egyptian Christianity more broadly, and its long existence, rich literary, theological, and material traditions all led to a wide interest and an extensive literature on the Copts and their (Orthodox) Church, both in and outside of Egypt. A great interest in ancient and medieval Egyptian Christianity, early Coptic (and Copto-Arabic) literature, Egyptian monasticism, archeology, and early Coptic arts and material heritage (such as iconography, tapestry, or architecture), which arose already in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, set the foundation of an independent field of Coptic studies. Furthermore, literature on the contemporary Coptic Church and Coptic communities has significantly proliferated in the last several decades. These works belong to a wide variety of

disciplines and fields of study, including history, theology, anthropology, sociology, religious studies, international relations, and art history. For the sake of organization and categorization of sources according to the main scope of this study, I will divide relevant sources into several groups mainly based on themes and geographical focus.

Contemporary Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt (20th century – today)

Scholarship on the Copts and the Coptic Orthodox Church in the premodern and modern periods in Egypt emerged during the 1980s and 1990s. Febe Armanios' work on Coptic Christianity in Ottoman Egypt, although not necessarily covering Egypt's modern history, represents the first, and until today the only, comprehensive study of the Coptic Church in the Ottoman era. As such, it serves as an essential source for studying Coptic Christianity in premodern Egypt and for understanding the developments in Coptic religious life in the contemporary period.¹⁵ One of the earliest prominent and encyclopedic works on Christianity in Egypt is *Traditional Egyptian Christianity: a history of the Coptic Orthodox Church* (1996) by Theodore Hall Patrick.¹⁶ The significance of this work lies mainly in the fact that it comprises all the periods and phases of the Coptic history and Christianity in Egypt, representing an extensive and well-detailed outline of the history of the Coptic Church. Nelly van Doorn-Harder is one of the pioneers in the field of contemporary Coptic studies, who authored several comprehensive monographs and edited volumes on various aspects of the history and traditions of the Coptic Orthodox Church in and beyond Egypt, contributing to the proliferation of the field. Some of her works that established her as one of the leading figures in the field include *Contemporary Coptic Nuns* (1995), *Between desert and city: The Coptic Orthodox Church today* (1997, edited with Kari Vogt), *Copts in Context: Negotiating Identity, Tradition, and Modernity* (2017), and *Copts in Modernity* (2021).¹⁷

One of the most significant bodies of literature concerning contemporary Copts revolves around themes such as the representation of Copts in Egypt's politics and public sphere, Muslim-Christian relations, Church-state relations, and the issue of Copts' minority status. Vivian Ibrahim's *The Copts of Egypt: The Challenges of Modernisation and Identity* (2013) represents a monumental piece in this set of works. Using a body of hitherto undiscovered archives, Ibrahim studies the Coptic community at the end of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century

¹⁵. Febe Armanios, *Coptic Christianity in Ottoman Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

¹⁶. Theodore H. Patrick, *Traditional Egyptian Christianity: a history of the Coptic Orthodox Church* (Greensboro: Fisher Park Press, 1996).

¹⁷. Nelly van Doorn-Harder, *Contemporary Coptic Nuns* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1995); van Doorn-Harder and Vogt, eds., *Between Desert and City*; van Doorn-Harder, ed., *Copts in Context*; Lisa Agaiby, Mark N. Swanson, and Nelly van Doorn-Harder, eds., *Copts in Modernity* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2021).

through a dual lens, namely through the Church-state relations (at the intercommunal level) and from within (at the intracommunal level), eschewing to analyze and portray the Copts as a unidimensional community. Furthermore, the works of Mariz Tadros, Laure Guirguis, Sebastian Elsässer, and Elizabeth Iskander have all researched Church-state relations, Coptic political representation and activism, the question of equality, and sectarian violence in Egypt since the end of the twentieth century.¹⁸ These works highlight the complex layers of negotiations, contestations, and expressions of Coptic identity and the notions of citizenship which have been strongly contingent on Egypt's national politics, its modern authoritarian regimes, as well as legal and religious formations in the country.

Besides these works, studying Copts through the lens of sectarianism, sectarian violence, and Muslim-Christian relations has been done by Sana S. Hasan, Amy Fallas, and Angie Heo, among others.¹⁹ Anthropologist Angie Heo's book titled *The Political Lives of Saints: Christian-Muslim Mediation in Egypt* (2018) examines the ways saint veneration shapes majority-minority relations, sectarian violence, and Christian-Muslim relations in Egypt, being one of the few scholars who takes a religious practice and visual and material cultures as a means to examine the direct link between Coptic religious traditions, everyday experiences, and broader social and political orders.²⁰ A notable work that has brought considerable attention within and beyond Coptic studies is Saba Mahmood's *Religious Difference in Secular Age: A Minority Report* (2015), in which she argues that modern secular governance in Egypt has failed to secure equality for Copts, as a religious minority in a predominantly Muslim country, and has in fact contributed to the intensification of religious tensions, rather than to diminish them.²¹

^{18.} Mariz Tadros, "Vicissitudes in the Entente Between the Coptic Orthodox Church and the State in Egypt (1952–2007)," *IJMES* 41 (2009): 269–287; idem, *Copts at the Crossroad: The Challenge of Building Inclusive Democracy in Egypt* (Cairo: AUC Press, 2013); Guirguis, *Copts and the security state: violence, coercion, and sectarianism in contemporary Egypt* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016); Sebastian Elsässer, *The Coptic Question in the Mubarak Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); and Elizabeth Iskander, *Sectarian Conflict in Egypt: Coptic media, identity and representation* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

^{19.} Sana S. Hasan, *Christians versus Muslims in Modern Egypt: The Century-Long Struggle for Equality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); and Amy Fallas, "Sectarian Politics? Securitization, Urban Development, and Coptic Advocacy in Cairo," in *Cairo Securitized: Reconceiving Urban Justice and Social Resilience*, ed. Paul Amar (Cairo: AUC Press, 2024), 401–412.

^{20.} Angie Heo, *The Political Lives of Saints: Christian-Muslim Mediation in Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018).

^{21.} Saba Mahmood, *Religious Difference in Secular Age: A Minority Report* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

Besides the very prominent focus on politics, security, and intercommunal relations, a large part of the literature on contemporary Copts has centered around religious practices, various aspects of Church traditions, as well as around Coptic everyday life and social issues. The above mentioned studies on Coptic nuns by van Doorn-Harder (which is the first of its kind) and the political lives of saints by Heo certainly fit within this corpus of scholarly works. Many scholars have studied Coptic liturgy, among them Youhanna Nessim Youssef, Christine Chaillot, and Nicholas Ragheb.²² Closely related to this theme, some researchers have also paid particular attention to the diverse elements of both classical and contemporary Coptic musical heritage and singing. The works of Nicholas Ragheb, Carolyn Ramzy, and Séverine Gabry-Thienpont stand out in this field.²³

Contemporary Coptic religious life has also been researched through the lens of the roles of clergy and laity, (church) leadership, and clerical authority. Within this thematically and methodologically diverse group of works, it is worth mentioning Gaétan du Roy's research on the charismatic trend in the Coptic Church and the Coptic community of Zabbalin of Muqattam, Cairo, then Dina el-Khawaga's study on the role of laity in the Coptic clerical reform, Nelly van Doorn-Harder's research on Mother Irini, and Fiona McCallum's study on the political role of Middle Eastern patriarchs.²⁴ Sunday schools and church upbringing have attracted a considerable amount of attention by historians, anthropologists, and scholars of other disciplines. Wolfram Reiss' pivotal work on Sunday schools and the revival in the Coptic Church remains the most comprehensive study of the Coptic Sunday schools until today.²⁵ Other notable

^{22.} Youhanna Nessim Youssef, "Liturgy in the Coptic Church," in *Coptic Civilization: Two Thousand Years of Christianity in Egypt*, ed. Gawdat Gabra (Cairo: AUC Press, 2014), 55-65; Christine Chaillot, "The Life and Situation of the Coptic Orthodox Church Today," *Studies in World Christianity* 15, no. 3 (2009): 199-216; and Nicholas Ragheb, "Coptic Ethnoracial Identity and Liturgical Language Use," in *Contemporary Christian Culture: Messages, Missions, and Dilemmas*, eds. Omatayo O. Banjo and Kesha Morant Williams (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018), 147-162.

^{23.} See Nicholas Ragheb, "The Ideological Dimensions of Coptic Music Theory: Evolution of Musical Theorization as a Cultural Strategy," in *Copts in Modernity*, 390-415; Carolyn Ramzy, "Singing Heaven on Earth: Coptic Counterpublics and Popular Song at Egyptian Mülid Festivals," *IJMES* 49, no. 3 (2017): 375-394; and Séverine Gabry-Thienpont, "Transmitting Coptic Musical Heritage," in *Copts in Context*, 80-89.

^{24.} Gaétan du Roy, "Father Samaan and the Charismatic Trend within the Coptic Church," in *Copts in Context*, 66-79; idem, *Les zabbālin du Muqattam: Ethnohistoire d'une hétérotopie au Caire (979-2021)* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2022); Dina el-Khawaga, "The Laity at the Heart of the Coptic Clerical Reform," in *Between Desert and City*, 143-167; Nelly van Doorn-Harder, "Mother Irini's Visions of Leadership: Pachomian Rule and Teaching of the Fathers," in *Copts in Modernity*, 270-292; and Fiona McCallum, *Christian Religious Leadership in the Middle East: The Political Role of Patriarch* (Edwin Mellen Pr, 2010).

^{25.} Wolfram Reiss, *Erneuerung in der Koptisch-Orthodoxen Kirche. Die Geschichte der koptisch-orthodoxen Sonntagsschulbewegung und die Aufnahme ihrer Reformansätze in den Erneuerungsbewegungen der Koptisch-Orthodoxen Kirche der Gegenwart* (Hamburg, Germany: Lit Verlag, 1998);

studies on the Coptic Sunday schools include the works of Carolyn Ramzy, and more recently by Bishop Suriel and Michael Salib.²⁶ Although Sunday schools hold a central place in the contemporary Coptic Orthodox tradition, the scholarship on this subject and the transmission of Coptic traditions to Coptic youth remains insufficiently researched until today.

Another set of publications has particularly dealt with the questions of belonging and identity. Nora Stene has explored belonging in the Coptic Church through the analysis of how children are socialized into church life and the ways they “become Copts.”²⁷ Mina Ibrahim has offered a valuable contribution to the study of belonging and identity in the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt by exploring “Coptic misfits” and negated spaces and practices, shedding light on the various hitherto unexplored ways of Coptic belonging shaped by institutional marginalization and exclusion.²⁸ In general, numerous works have centered on the concept of ‘identity’ in their main thematic and analytical scopes and it is safe to say that ‘identity’ has been one of the most common thematic tools to explore the Copts and the Coptic community as a whole. Due to the large number of these works and the great variety in how scholars have used ‘identity’ in their analyses, it is an impossible task to provide an extensive overview of such a bulk of literature at this point due to the constraints of space. Scholars have explored and conceptualized ‘Coptic identity’ (in Egypt and in diaspora) through a variety of lenses, including the nexus of ethnicity and religion (the so-called ‘ethnoreligious identity’), through quests for equality, political activism, language, church (i.e. institutional) belonging, morality, and through various particular practices and elements of tradition that set Copts apart from other groups, such as the practice of tattooing (a common cross tattoo on the right wrist) or singing Coptic music and performing the liturgy.²⁹ However, the term ‘identity’ has been used quite vaguely and without much reflection, and remains a rather

^{26.} Carolyn Ramzy, “The Politics of (Dis)Engagement: Coptic Christian Revival and the Performative Politics of Song” (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2014); Bishop Suriel, *Habib Girgis: Coptic Orthodox Educator and a Light in the Darkness* (New York: SVS Press, 2017); and Michael Salib, “A Multidimensional Understanding of Sunday School in the Coptic Orthodox Tradition,” in *Copts in Modernity*, 257–269.

^{27.} Nora Stene, “Becoming a Copt: The Integration of Coptic Children into the Church Community,” in *Between Desert and City*, 191–212.

^{28.} Mina Ibrahim, *Identity, Marginalisation, Activism, and Victimhood in Egypt: Misfits in the Coptic Christian Community* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

^{29.} See, for example, Hiroko Miyokawa, “The Revival of the Coptic Language and the Formation of Coptic Ethnoreligious Identity in Modern Egypt,” in *Copts in Context*, 151–156; Randall P. Henderson, “The Egyptian Coptic Christians: the conflict between identity and equality,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 16, no. 2 (2005): 155–166; Yvonne Haddad and Joshua Donovan, “Good Copt, Bad Copt: Competing Narratives on Coptic Identity in Egypt and the United States,” *Studies in World Christianity* 19, no. 3 (2013): 208–232; Nebojsa Tumara, ““Sign of Martyrdom, Heresy and Pride”: The Christian Coptic Tattoo and the Construction of Coptic Identity,” in *Copts in Modernity*, 295–320.

weak analytical tool for capturing particularities of various Coptic expressions and experiences. Although it is clear that a '(Coptic) identity' can have multiple meanings and can be lived and experienced in many different ways, 'identity' has often been used very lightly and as a non-problematic term in much of the existing literature, consequently not helping us in understanding contextualized, complex layers of 'being a Copt.'

Few researchers have made use of different types of visual and material media, produced or used by church members, to study the social fabric and dynamics of the Coptic community 'from within.' Some examples include research on the mediating work of icons, religious images, and saints. Besides *The Political Lives of Saints* by Heo,³⁰ other notable examples include works by Ragnhild Bjerre Finnestad and Yosra El Gendi and Marco Pinfari. Both works explore the link between Coptic icons and the construction and meanings of 'Coptic identity.'³¹ Furthermore, Armanios and Amstutz have analyzed hagiographic video films to study clerical authority and perceptions of the status of women in the Coptic community, a still largely under researched topic in Egyptian/Coptic studies.³²

Moreover, besides the rich corpus of works by scholars of more 'classical' Coptic studies or more generally by those researching Coptic and the so-called Copto-Arabic literature of (Late) Antiquity and the Middle Ages (primarily concerned with the study of manuscripts), or scholars researching Coptic newspapers and print in the premodern and early modern periods, almost no scholars have paid attention to or analyzed the contemporary literary production of the Coptic Orthodox Church in their research. Although some scholars have acknowledged the important status and popularity of such materials (among them Hasan, see *Christians versus Muslims*), earlier scholars tend to ignore such texts to understand different intracommunal developments and dynamics. A couple of valuable exceptions include Armanios' analysis of clerical religious writings to study gender and the role of women in the community and Brigitte Voile's study of the publishing of popular hagiographies throughout the twentieth century as part of the larger Church revival movement.³³ Therefore, to this date, scholars have largely

^{30.} See also Angie Heo, "Examining the Role of Media in Coptic Studies," in *Copts in Context*, 52–65.

^{31.} Ragnhild Finnestad, "Images as Messengers of Coptic Identity: An Example from Contemporary Egypt," *Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis* 16 (1996): 91–110; and Yosra El Gendi and Marco Pinfari, "Icons of Contention: The Iconography of Martyrdom and the Construction of Coptic Identity in Postrevolutionary Egypt," *Media, War & Conflict* 13, no. 1 (2020): 50–69.

^{32.} Febe Armanios and Andrew Amstutz, "Emerging Christian Media in Egypt: Clerical Authority and the Visualization of Women in Coptic Video Films," *IJMES* 45 (2013): 513–533. See also Berit Thorbjørnsrud, "Controlling the Body to Liberate the Soul: Towards an Analysis of the Coptic Orthodox Concept of the Body," (PhD diss., Oslo University, 1989).

^{33.} Febe Armanios, "The 'Virtuous Woman': Images of Gender in Modern Coptic Society," *Middle Eastern Studies* 38, no. 1 (2002): 110–130; Brigitte Voile, *Les coptes d'Égypte sous Nasser: Sainteté, miracles, apparitions* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2004).

overlooked the abundant and diverse types of church publications authored by clerical figures (priests, bishops, popes, and monks) or influential lay church members, often seen as too popular or simplistic, as valuable sources for understanding various trends, concerns, and official (changing) pronouncements of church leaders, offering an insight into the dynamics that shape the religious community ‘from above.’ This dissertation, for that reason, seeks to fill this gap.

Coptic Orthodox churches outside of Egypt

The establishment of Coptic communities and churches outside Egypt in the second half of the twentieth century has led to the rise of scholarship on ‘Coptic diasporas’ or the so-called ‘Coptic *mahgar*’ (the terms are discussed in more detail in Chapter 2).

A considerable amount of Arabic sources on diasporic Copts has appeared in Egypt since the 1980s and 1990s. Some of these works, written by Copts and Muslim Egyptians alike, were published as a reaction to political activism and lobbying by Copts in the US and Canada which started in the 1970s as a way to draw attention from their local governments and other political organizations to the issues of persecution and inequality experienced by Christians in Egypt. Such activism caused unrest and largely negative reactions from the state, as well as in the Coptic Church, and thus gave the term ‘diaspora Copts’ a largely negative connotation with the Egyptian public. Some authors have tried to provide a more nuanced perspective of this phenomenon and instead focused on analyzing the ways emigrant Copts have organized themselves in their host countries. A prominent example is Muhammad Zayyan’s *Aqbat al-Mahjar: Suda’ fi Dimagh Misr* (2008), a comprehensive work providing insights into the history of Copts’ emigration (and immigration) patterns, accounts on the establishment of the first Coptic parishes abroad, as well as of Coptic secular, primarily political and cultural, associations and organizations.³⁴ A considerable number of these works dealt with the themes of Church-state relations, citizenship, the (disputable) minority status, and the national unity of Egypt’s population.³⁵ Others focused on the issues of identity, challenges of adaptation, and the role of

³⁴ Muhammad Zayyan, *Aqbat al-Mahjar: Suda’ fi Dimagh Misr!* (n.p., 2008). Note the intriguing and thought provoking subtitle of the book “suda’ fi dimagh Misr,” meaning “headache in Egypt’s brain,” referring to the problematic reputation of diaspora Copts (mainly those in North America) in Egypt related to political activism in the late twentieth century. For more details, see a short discussion in Chapter 3.

³⁵ See Father Boulous Basily, *al-Aqbat: Wataniyya wa Tarikh* (n.p., 1987); Magdi Khalil, *Aqbat al-Mahjar: Dirasa Maydaniyya hawl Humum al-Watan wal-Muwatana* (Cairo: Dar al-Khayal, 1999); Father Antonius al-Antoni, *Wataniyyat al-Kanisa al-Qibtiyya wa Tarikhuha al-Mu’asir: fi ‘Asr al-Ra’is Muhammad Hosni Mubarak wa-l-Baba Shenuda al-Thalith (al-Juz’ al-Rabi’)* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Mahabba, 2004); and Yusri al-Azbawi, *Aqbat al-Mahjar: Thulathiyyat al-Dawla wa-l-Kanisa al-Muwatana* (Cairo: Markaz al-Dirasat al-Siyasiyya wal-Istratijiyya, 2012).

the Church in Coptic immigrants' lives.³⁶ And certainly one of the most important referential sources for studying Coptic migration waves, the establishment of Coptic churches in the West and the ways the Church leadership has viewed and dealt with the expansion of the Coptic Church outside Egypt, is Ragab al-Banna's *al-Aqbat fi Misr wa-l-Mahjar: Hiwarat ma'a al-Baba Shenuda* ("The Copts in Egypt and Abroad: Conversations with Pope Shenouda") from 1998, in which he interviewed the late Pope Shenouda III on various topics, among them the Coptic communities abroad.³⁷

As the largest and oldest Coptic communities are those in English-speaking countries, specifically in the USA, Canada, and Australia, these communities have dominated the literature on migrant Coptic churches, particularly those in North America. Most of the scholars of these works are indeed located in those regions. One of the earliest works on migrant Coptic communities is Nora Stene's book chapter "Into the Lands of Immigration" from 1997.³⁸ When it comes to research on North American Coptic communities, the first works emerged in the early 2000s and significantly mushroomed during the 2010s. Saad Michael Saad, himself a Coptic immigrant to the USA, is one of the pioneering figures in this group, offering an insight into the religious life of American Copts and more broadly writing about diverse aspects of Coptic diasporic practices in North America.³⁹ Michael Akladios has written on 'ordinary Copts' in North American cities using oral histories and focusing on what he calls 'heteroglossia,' which has served as an idea to offer the readers multiple voices from the community.⁴⁰ In her research on immigrant Coptic churches, Ghada Botros has primarily written on Canadian and US Copts, paying particular attention to the questions of adaptation, the ways diaspora Copts narrate and reconstruct their history in line with their 'religious identity,' as well as the role of the Church as an institution in immigrant Copts' lives.⁴¹

³⁶. See Mina Samir, "al-Aqbat fi Duwal al-Mahjar bayn al-Madi wa-l-Hadir," in *al-Aqbat bayn al-Thawratayn*, ed. Sulaiman Shafiq (Cairo: Dar Amaly li-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzi', 2014), 183-192.

³⁷. Ragab al-Banna, *al-Aqbat fi Misr wa-l-Mahjar: Hiwarat ma'a al-Baba Shenuda* (Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif, 1998).

³⁸. Nora Stene, "Into the Lands of Immigration," in *Between Desert and City*, 255-265.

³⁹. Saad, "The Contemporary Life of the Coptic Orthodox Church in the United States;" idem, "Coptic Civilization in the Diaspora," in *Coptic Civilization*, 285-296; Donald A. Westbrook and Saad Michael Saad, "Religious Identity and Borderless Territoriality in the Coptic e-Diaspora," *Journal of International Migration and Integration* 18 (2017): 341-351.

⁴⁰. Michael Akladios, "Ordinary Copts: Ecumenism, Activism and Belonging in North American Cities, 1954-1992," (PhD diss., York University, 2020); idem, "Heteroglossia: Interpretation and the Experiences of Coptic Immigrants from Egypt in North America, 1955-1975," *Histoire sociale / Social History* 53 (2020): 627-650.

⁴¹. Ghada Botros, "Competing for the Future: Adaptation and the Accommodation of Difference in Coptic Immigrant Churches," (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2005); idem, "Religious Identity as an Historical Narrative: Coptic Orthodox Immigrant Churches and the Representation of History," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 19, no. 2 (2006): 174-201; and idem, "Coptic Migrant Churches: Transnationalism and the Negotiation of Different Roles," in *Copts in Context*, 107-123.

Candace Lukasik and Miray Philips have both contributed to the field by studying Copts through the lenses of martyrdom, persecution, memory, and transnational politics, drawing on ethnographic fieldwork between the Middle East and North America.⁴² Other scholars have researched North American diasporas through Coptic music, such as Carolyn Ramzy, who particularly focuses on the intersections of gender, music, and activism.⁴³ A particular interest of some scholars of Coptic Orthodox communities in the USA and Canada has been the exploration of the questions of political activity, minority status, assimilation, or preservation of traditions through the lens of ‘Coptic (diasporic) identity.’⁴⁴

Sources on Australian Copts are certainly fewer compared to those on the Coptic communities in the USA and Canada. Some of the most notable works come from Richard Rymarz and Marian de Souza, whose research has primarily focused on youth and their attitudes towards their religious identity and belonging.⁴⁵

Before moving on to the existing scholarship on the Copts in Europe, it is important to note that there have been several notable studies on migrant Coptic churches in other parts of the world. For instance, one set of works resulted from the interest in

⁴² Candace Lukasik, “Economy of Blood: The Persecuted Church and the Racialization of American Copts,” *American Anthropologist* 123, no. 3 (2021): 565-577; idem, “Migrating Minority: Persecution Politics in Transnational Perspective,” *IJMES* 54, no. 3 (2022): 541-546; Miray Philips, “‘We love martyrdom, but we also love life’: Coptic Cultural Trauma between Martyrdom and Rights,” *American Journal of Cultural Sociology* 11, no. 2 (2023): 220-247.

⁴³ Carolyn Ramzy, “Singing Strategic Multiculturalism: The Discursive Politics of Coptic-Canadian Protests,” in *Copts in Context*, 155-176; idem, “Coptic Orthodox Feminism: Popular Song and Gender Reformation in the Diaspora” in *Studies in Coptic Culture and Community: Ordinary Lives, Changing Times*, ed. Mariam Ayad (Cairo: AUC Press, 2020), 301-314; For more on North American Copts and music, see also Teresita D. Lozano, “‘It’s a Coptic Thing’: Music, Liturgy, and Religious Identity in an American Coptic Community,” *The World of Music* 4, no. 2 (2015): 37-56.

⁴⁴ Saad Michael Saad and Donald A. Westbrook, “Copts, Scripturalization, and Identity in the Diaspora,” in *Scripturalizing the Human: The Written as the Political*, ed. Vincent L. Wimbush (New York, London: Routledge, 2015), 221-240; Jennifer M. Brinkerhoff, “Assimilation and Heritage Identity: Lessons from the Coptic Diaspora,” *Journal of International Migration and Integration* 17 (2016): 467-485; Bosmat Yefet, “The Coptic diaspora and the status of the Coptic minority in Egypt,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 43, no. 7 (2017): 1205-1221.

⁴⁵ Richard Rymarz and Marian de Souza, “The Perceptions of some Australian Coptic Students of the Influences on their Religious Development,” *Studies in Religion and Education* 24 (2003): 67-74; idem, “The Transmission of a Religious Heritage to Younger Members of Small Ethnic Communities in a Pluralist Society: The Perceptions of Young Australian Copts,” *Australian Religious Studies Review* 17, no. 2 (2004): 57-72; and idem, “Born with Gold in Your Mouth: Maintaining Identity in Australian Coptic Orthodox Young Adults,” in *Cultural Education – Cultural Sustainability: Minority, Diaspora, Indigenous and Ethno-Religious Groups in Multicultural Societies*, ed. Zvi Bekerman and Ezra Kopelowitz (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2008), 165-180.

the growing Coptic Orthodox missionary activity in Africa, Asia, and South America. Examples of such studies include works by David A. Ogren on the Coptic Orthodox Church in South Africa, Jean Philippe-Belleau's study on the Coptic mission in Bolivia, and Hiroko Miyokawa's study on the Coptic mission in Kenya.⁴⁶ Since the second half of the twentieth century, Coptic communities have been established in other Arab countries, primarily in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. However, little has been published so far on these communities. One of the very few examples is Benjamin Daniel Crace's momentous study on the Coptic Orthodox church in Kuwait.⁴⁷

Coptic communities in Europe

Smaller in size and younger in existence, Coptic Orthodox communities across Europe have until today received limited attention from scholars of Coptic studies and other related disciplines. On the whole, little is known about their histories, organizations, and activities. This dissertation serves as an intervention in addressing and filling this gap and thus seeks to contribute to the scholarship on European Coptic Orthodox churches. It must be noted that although we often speak of "European Copts" or "Coptic communities in Europe" as a whole (possibly due to the smaller total number of available sources on these communities compared to those in North America and the geographical proximity and connections between individual countries), works on Coptic communities in particular countries should also be seen as separate units and case studies as they often reflect particularities of those countries and are sometimes written in local languages. A proper comparative and comprehensive study on what would make these different Coptic communities "European" is yet to appear, and this work will attempt to address this challenging question.

For the sake of clear organization, I will categorize the sources according to the country of their main focus. In general, reflecting dominant Coptic migration waves, almost all sources on Coptic communities in Europe focus on Western European countries. First, the only available source that covers Coptic communities in different European countries is Angela Bernardo's *Ricostruire una comunità: la Chiesa copta ortodossa in Europa* (2020). The book, exploring the concept of community, provides an overview of migration histories and the establishment of churches in five different

^{46.} David A. Ogren, "The Coptic Church in South Africa: The meeting of mission and migration," *HTS Theological Studies* 70, no. 1 (2014): 1-7; Jean Philippe-Belleau, "An Oriental Encounter: Interculturality, Awe, and Equivocal Compatibility at the Egyptian Coptic Mission of Santa Cruz de la Sierra," *Latin American Research Review* 50, no. 1 (2015): 54-75; and Hiroko Miyokawa, "The Coptic Orthodox Mission in Kenya: An African Search for Identity and the Coptic Encounter with Africa," *Sophia* 39 (2021): 69-86.

^{47.} Benjamin Daniel Crace, *Keeping the Faith in Exile: Kuwait-Coptic Orthodox Diasporic Spirituality* (Leiden: Brill, 2023).

countries, specifically in the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Switzerland, and Italy.⁴⁸ In Italy, several sociological studies in English have been conducted among the Copts in northern Italy in an edited volume by Laura Zanfrini.⁴⁹ Several studies have been conducted in the Coptic churches in the UK, which hosts one of the largest communities on the continent. Important interventions include works by Nora Stene, who found particular interest in studying Sunday schools and youth in London, and Fiona McCallum Guiney whose research on the Copts is part of the broader group of Middle Eastern Christians in the UK and Europe.⁵⁰

Little has been published about Coptic churches in France and Germany, despite the two countries hosting some of the largest Coptic populations in Europe. Copts living in the Francophone part of Europe (France, Belgium, and Switzerland) have been researched for example by Gaétan du Roy and Alessandra Fani, while German Coptic communities have been studied by Fouad and Barbara Ibrahim and Emily Jane Carter Hein. Carter Hein's study particularly focuses on language ideologies in the Coptic community in Berlin.⁵¹ When it comes to the Netherlands, there are only a few available studies, written in Dutch and English and published in the early 2000s. These are works by Puck de Wit, who has researched Copts through the lens

^{48.} Angela Bernardo, *Ricostruire una comunità: la Chiesa copta ortodossa in Europa* (Rome: Edizioni Quasar, 2020).

^{49.} Laura Zanfrini (ed.), *Migrants and Religion: Paths, Issues, and Lenses. A Multi-disciplinary and Multi-sited Study on the Role of Religious Belongings in Migratory and Integration Processes* (Leiden, Boston: Brill: 2020). See chapters by Beatrice Nicolini (p. 589-595), Cristina Giuliani and Camillo Regalia (p. 596-614), and Giovanni Giulio Valtolina and Paola Barachetti (p. 615-637).

^{50.} Nora Stene Preston, "Multiple Choice? Language-usage and the Transmission of Religious Tradition in the Coptic Orthodox Community in London," *British Journal of Religious Education* 20, no. 2 (1998): 90-101; idem, "The challenge of the diaspora as reflected in a Coptic Sunday School," *Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 54, no. 1-2 (2002): 77-90; idem, "Engler i platåsko: Religiøs sosialisering av koptisk-ortodokse barn i London," (PhD. diss., Oslo University, 2005); Fiona McCallum Guiney, "Middle Eastern Christian Identities in Europe," *Mashriq & Mahjar* 8, no. 1 (2020): 1-15; Alistair Hunter and Fiona McCallum Guiney, "The Quest for Equal Citizenship: Middle Eastern Christian Narratives of Migration and Inclusion in the United Kingdom," *Mashriq & Mahjar* 8, no. 1 (2020): 16-44; and Fiona McCallum Guiney, "Generational perspectives on homeland-oriented diasporic humanitarianism: Coptic, Assyrian and Iraqi Christian charities in the United Kingdom," *International Migration Review* 57, no. 2 (2023): 707-730.

^{51.} Gaétan du Roy, "Coptic Traditions' Digitization in Francophone Europe," in *Europe and the Migration of Christian Communities from the Middle East*, ed. Martin Tamcke (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2022), 91-98; Alessandra Fani, "Dinamiche nazionali dell'egitto contemporaneo (1952-2013): rappresentazioni storiografiche sui copti e strategie geopolitiche degli attori politici egiziani," (PhD diss., Université de Paris 8 - Saint Denis, 2015); Fouad Ibrahim and Barbara Ibrahim, "Kopten in Deutschland," in *Orthodoxie in Deutschland*, ed. Thomas Bremer (Münster: Aschendorff Verlag, 2016), 219-234; and Emily Jane Carter Hein, "The Semiotics of Diaspora: Language Ideologies and Coptic Orthodox Christianity in Berlin, Germany" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2013).

of motives for migration and paying special attention to Coptic asylum seekers in the Netherlands, as well as by Nelly van Doorn-Harder who has authored a short overview in Dutch of the organization and activities of the Coptic Orthodox churches in the Netherlands.⁵² Andreas Schmoller has researched the Coptic Orthodox Church in Austria, particularly through its intercommunal relations with the Syriac Orthodox Church.⁵³

Several smaller Coptic communities in Europe have also received some attention by local researchers, including in Denmark, researched by Lise Paulsen Galal, in Hungary, studied by Tamás Farbaký who has focused on the Coptic community in Budapest, and in Spain, primarily studied by Óscar Salguero, as part of a larger project on Orthodox churches in Spain.⁵⁴ Evidently, Coptic Orthodox communities in different parts of Europe are slowly becoming the focus of studies on broader Coptic diasporas, as part of local Middle Eastern Christian immigrant populations, or as part of (Oriental) Orthodox churches. Yet the scarcity of literature and information on Coptic churches in Europe (both in individual countries and as attempts to study them collectively) is evident, paving the way for my own comparative work which centers on Coptic Orthodox churches in two countries, in the Netherlands and Italy, as part of the larger Coptic Orthodox presence on the continent.

Rationale of the study, arguments, and research questions

As laid out on the previous pages, the starting point of this dissertation are the Coptic church communities in Europe and their communal textual practices. From this starting point, the available scholarship on contemporary Coptic Church in Egypt and diaspora and the initial insights into the dynamics and discussions *within* and

^{52.} Puck de Wit, "Egypte is te klein voor mijn gedachten. De migratiemotieven van kopten," *Sharqiyyat* 14, no. 1 (2002): 47-59; idem, "Coptic Asylum seekers in the Netherlands. Current policy and counterarguments," in *Coptic Studies on the threshold of a new millennium II. Proceedings of the Seventh International Congress of Coptic Studies*, ed. Mat Immerzeel and Jacques van der Vliet (Leuven: Peeters, 2004), 1001-1007; and Nelly van Doorn-Harder, *De Koptisch-Orthodoxe Kerk* (Utrecht: Kok, 2005).

^{53.} Andreas Schmoller, "The Syriac Orthodox and Coptic Orthodox Churches in Austria: Inter-Church Relations and State Recognition," *Mashriq & Mahjar* 8, no. 1 (2020): 76-102.

^{54.} Lise Paulsen Galal, "'If I want to travel, I just travel': Travels and Dwellings among Assyrians and Copts in Denmark," in *Middle Eastern Christians and Europe: Historical Legacies and Present Challenges*, ed. Andreas Schmoller (Vienna: LIT Verlag, 2018), 125-145; Tamás Farbaký, "Negotiating Identities: The Case of the Coptic Orthodox Diaspora in Budapest," (PhD diss., Central European University, 2020); Óscar Salguero, "Las Iglesias Orientales en España," in *Las Iglesias Ortodoxas en España: Retos y Perspectivas* (Madrid: Ediciones Clásicas, 2020), 271-294.

about different diasporic Coptic communities gained during the early stages of my fieldwork between Europe and Egypt have helped to find my own thematic focus and offered a more refined and concrete framework for the main objectives of this study.

This study delves into the complex process of the formation of Coptic Orthodox communities in Europe, focusing specifically on the communities in the Netherlands and Italy. The starting point of the study corresponds to the period of the establishment of many Coptic communities in Europe as a direct result of the increased emigration waves of Copts, and other Egyptians, from Egypt. Essentially, the dissertation explores the ways these particular communities are constructed *as communities* and seeks to explore what foundational elements lie at the basis of this process. Given the time frame of this study and the migratory origins of these church-based communities, the research primarily explores several key themes: how these communities *negotiate* continuity and adaptation, *construct* layered narratives of belonging, and *tackle* the challenges of sustaining the future of the Church.⁵⁵ In doing so, it pays special attention to the actors involved in the community formation, examining the roles different church members play, as well as the clergy-laity dynamics in this process. The study also investigates the preconditions for establishing parishes and communities as understood by church leaders, and the necessary steps or actions that the churches deem essential for creating and maintaining these communities. I argue that Coptic churches in diaspora do not take the maintenance and survival of their communities and traditions for granted; rather, their practices, including textual practices, activities, and narratives reflect a continuous and deliberate effort to ensure their persistence.

To investigate these themes, this research moves beyond simply acknowledging the existence of a unified, static 'Coptic identity' in the diaspora, and more specifically in Europe. Instead, it explores the dynamic processes through which a sense of shared belonging, a 'Coptic we-ness,' is actively constructed and negotiated within these communities. In this endeavor, the Coptic churches in the Netherlands and Italy continuously employ a set of strategies to construct or strengthen unity among its members, at the same time needing to navigate diversity, both at the larger, societal level and among migrant community members themselves. As discussed briefly earlier, by focusing on the active roles texts and broader church narratives play in redefining and maintaining group boundaries and shaping belonging among

⁵⁵ In this thesis, the term 'Church' with an uppercase 'C' refers to the institutional and collective body of priests, bishops, and clergy, often used synonymously with the Patriarchate or, more broadly, the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt, while the lowercase 'church' denotes a specific diocese, church, or parish.

members, we can better understand how Coptic churches outside Egypt continuously *rewrite* their communal markers, engaging in preserving, reinterpreting, and adapting various aspects of their traditions and parish life practices from Egypt. The thesis investigates the intersection of community formation, boundary making, and belonging through the following three key themes, explored in relation to and through the lens of communal textual practices and common church narratives.

Community formation and the construction of a collective ‘we-ness’

As referred to above, ‘identity’ has been a prominent concept in the literature on Coptic religious practices and lived experiences, both in and outside Egypt. Researchers of Coptic diasporas have used the concept to describe and denote internal communal links, group patterns, and shared senses of belonging. Moreover, during the initial phase of my ethnographic fieldwork, when seeking to become familiar with the Coptic churches in the Netherlands and Italy, my interlocutors, church members, often spoke about strong connections and bonds that exist among them, emphasizing that they indeed form a ‘community.’ This ‘community’ sometimes referred to members of a particular parish or more broadly to members of one national or regional diocese. Similarities and shared religious and ethnic heritage among these individuals were frequently mentioned during many conversations about their churches. Words such as ‘we,’ (when referring to shared ‘identity,’ values, and goals), ‘family,’ ‘community,’ and ‘our church’ were often mentioned during these informal conversations.

Despite shared religious beliefs and common ethnic heritage, these communities are far from homogenous. Members hail from diverse backgrounds (within Egypt and of other ethnicities, also regarding class, education, professions, migrant status, and country of birth), harboring unique experiences and aspirations. Yet, a powerful sense of collective ‘we-ness’ exists and persists, which the Coptic Orthodox Church actively reinforces. This research delves into the multifaceted strategies employed by the Church, as an institution, to construct and sustain this unifying sense of groupness, moving beyond a simplistic focus on shared ancestry and ‘mere’ religious belonging.

Understanding this collective ‘we’ necessitates examining the foundational elements that bind the community. These elements, such as shared ancestry, religious denomination, languages, and shared values, making the basis of commonality among group members, are occasionally explicitly declared and asserted, while in other cases they are rather implicit threads woven into the fabric of everyday life. Foundational elements that foster a sense of unity and ‘we-ness’ may already exist, but they are significantly enhanced by the Church to strengthen group belonging. While a sense of communal ‘we-ness’ might exist independently, I hypothesize that it is generally the

Church that serves as the most prominent and visible force in cultivating this ‘we-ness,’ effectively uniting individuals into a community. Expressions of ‘Copticness’ in the Netherlands and Italy are defined and shaped through communal religious practices, social activities, church education and upbringing, and through church textual publications. This research, thus, explores the defining characteristics, historical narratives, and circumstances that influence the strength and expressions of this ‘we-ness’ among Coptic communities in the Netherlands and Italy.

Therefore, the concept of ‘we’ is not static but constantly negotiated and redefined in response to (perceived) external pressures, such as an assumed (or real) need for integration with the host societies. The churches themselves acknowledge these complexities. While there might be overt pronouncements about ‘who we are’ as Copts, a deeper understanding often emerges from analyzing the ‘between the lines’ aspects of these pronouncements. How do Copts perceive themselves vis-à-vis other groups? How do they navigate the expectations of their communities, their heritage, and their new European identities? Examining these messages within the churches’ pronouncements and activities offers valuable insights into the ongoing process of constructing group unity among its members.

This research transcends the limitations of a singular term like ‘identity.’ Instead, it follows the call by Rogers Brubaker and Frederik Cooper to avoid the vague concept of ‘collective identities’ to analyze ethnic and religious communities and groups, and instead adopt the multifaceted categories of commonality, connectedness, and groupness (which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 2). Churches foster a sense of commonality by promoting shared group categories, for example, emphasizing a shared origin and shared religious beliefs. Connectedness is nurtured, for instance, through shared spaces of worship (by creating ‘Coptic spaces’) and social activities. Finally, groupness is strengthened through the construction of complex discursive frames within which community members can develop the sense of belonging together, to a bounded, solidary group. In the case of diasporic Coptic communities, this sense of groupness is often forged and maintained on different levels: local, national, and transnational (with both other Coptic diasporas and the communities in Egypt).

Beyond unity: negotiating boundaries and multiple belongings

While a sense of a ‘shared unity’ is vital for community cohesion, Coptic diasporas in Europe present an intriguing case study in navigating the complexities of multiple, sometimes conflicting, belongings. This research acknowledges the challenges of constructing a strongly bounded, unified group in the face of internal diversity and the complexities of navigating multiple belongings in a new geographical and cultural

context. Coptic individuals grapple with a sense of belonging not only to their religious community but also to their country of origin (Egypt) and their new national contexts. In addition, particularly in the context of migration, as religious communities facing strong secularization and globalization in their 'host societies' and in a multifaceted world, Copts also experience what it means to be 'Orthodox' and 'Christian,' more broadly. How does the Church deal with and negotiate this space of multiple belongings?

Moving beyond the idea of a singular, fixed 'identity,' this approach acknowledges the possibility of individuals holding and integrating various 'identities' simultaneously. While most scholars today will agree with such a (post-structuralist) position, here I am interested in investigating how churches and their leaders deal with a central challenge of fostering a sense of commonality, connectedness, and groupness within their communities (i.e., their dioceses) while acknowledging the existence of those often conflicting multifaceted belongings. For example, how do European Coptic churches contend with a potential tension between preserving what is understood as 'Coptic identity' (for example, church teachings, values, and traditions) and being Dutch, Italian, or European? Although many scholars of Coptic diasporas indeed acknowledge the existence of different layers of belonging (or 'identities,' as most would say) among diasporic Copts, very few of them have explored the interplay of such belongings and the ways these layers are constructed and how they interact with one another. Although this study does not delve into a deeper analysis of this particular issue, it seeks to illuminate the importance of paying attention to the question of 'multiple belongings.'

Generational differences further complicate the negotiation of boundaries. First-generation Coptic migrants who arrived from Egypt likely hold a different relationship with their Egyptian heritage compared to second- and third-generation Copts born and raised in Europe. The latter, accordingly, have a strong connection to their national identities (Dutch, Italian or Spanish), socially, culturally, or linguistically, compared to their parents and grandparents. To understand these complexities, the research delves into the contexts and circumstances that bring out these various layers of belonging, particularly among children and youth. Sunday school materials and youth programs become key areas of analysis. Do these materials present a one-dimensional view of what 'Coptic identity' should look like, or do they acknowledge the realities of growing up in a European context? Does the Church provide avenues for young Copts to explore their multifaceted belongings, or does it prioritize a singular vision of 'Coptiness?'

Additionally, in some cases, the notion of a unified or single national community becomes complex due to various practical reasons related to migration patterns and ecclesiastical organization, leading to significant differences among parishes within

one country. These parishes continue to develop in separate, distinct ways, highlighting the challenges in speaking of a unified community on a single national soil.

By examining these nuances, this research aims to move beyond a simplistic view of the churches' roles in constructing boundaries. Instead, it unveils a more dynamic process where church leaders negotiate boundaries while acknowledging the complexities of belonging in a globalized world. Ultimately, the research seeks to understand how the Church fosters a sense of community that is both cohesive and adaptable, allowing members to navigate their multiple belongings (Coptic, Egyptian, Dutch/Italian, or Christian) without jeopardizing the group's future.

Facing challenges: migration, adaptation, and change

Church leaders and community members deal with a multitude of anxieties and concerns that may represent obstacles to the performance of communal practices and to the maintenance of communal boundaries. This study seeks to understand exactly what types of issues and questions are deemed as *challenges* in the first place and what exactly represents 'concerns' for church leaders in their endeavors. Churches often view addressing and overcoming such challenges as a way to gauge the growth of their communities, reflecting their perception of progress and development. Furthermore, the fact that the transmission of faith and religious traditions from Egypt to 'the lands of immigration' cannot be taken for granted, the act of overcoming these challenges is sometimes used by church members to point to the persevering character of the Coptic Church, building on the common historical narratives of persecution and subordination of the Coptic Church throughout Egyptian history. These reinvented narratives have ultimately helped church leaders in the diaspora to strengthen a sense of pride in belonging to the Coptic Church among its members.

Uprooted from their familiar surroundings, church-going Copts in Europe face a multitude of challenges in adapting to their new environments, as conveyed to me by my interlocutors in various Coptic churches. These challenges, acknowledged and described as such by members of these communities, mirror those encountered by many migrant communities worldwide. Issues such as adapting to new social, cultural, religious, and legal environments, along with preserving various aspects of Coptic traditions and everyday religious life from Egypt—challenges exacerbated by migration—are central to the experiences of Coptic communities.⁵⁶ The issues of the preservation of various 'homeland' structures (social, cultural, or material), considered as necessary for the formation of the communities and the practice of their

⁵⁶ These issues have also been recurring themes in the research on Coptic diasporas. See above-cited works by Ghada Botros, Nora Stene, Jennifer M. Brinkerhoff, and Saad Michael Saad, among others.

religion, and the extent to which these can be successfully rooted in new lands upon migration, were frequently mentioned by my interlocutors in various Coptic churches in Europe, as well as in Egypt, mainly by members of the clergy, as some of their main daily preoccupations.

Additionally, among the most prominent issues is the perception of the existence and incompatibility of different 'cultures' (as expressed by many of my interlocutors), where church members feel the pressing need (even more so than in Egypt) to address various social and moral issues and thus actively shape moral values of their members, particularly of the second generation, born in 'host' countries. This study seeks to examine such narratives of 'overcoming adversities' among Coptic communities in Europe and explore what particular grievances and struggles exist among the communities in the Netherlands and Italy when it comes to the maintenance and practice of their traditions, ultimately shedding light on their possible differences and similarities. Such narratives and discussions can certainly be analyzed through and grasped from churches' publications.

Texts, community, and boundaries

Lastly, the three larger topics discussed above, creating a sense of a communal 'we-ness,' negotiating group boundaries, and overcoming challenges of migration, are placed within the discussion on the role of texts and textual practices in the formation of Coptic communities in Europe and their religious practices. More specifically, the study examines the potential of official church publications, written mostly by clerical community members and used in various types of rituals, practices, and activities performed in the church or at home, for understanding internal dynamics and developments of those communities, thus seeking to understand the studied communities *from within*. These texts function beyond mere information repositories, acting as powerful tools for shaping and maintaining a shared sense of belonging in a new social context.

The research delves into this connection by analyzing how churches utilize specific texts, like history books, communal magazines or Sunday school materials, produced both by the diasporic communities themselves and by those in Egypt, to *rewrite* (i.e. redefine and reinterpret) group boundaries and traditions. This *rewriting* is not a passive process, but rather a deliberate strategy employed by churches to navigate the challenges of maintaining a cohesive groupness in a constantly changing environment. As Stefan Berger aptly states, "[c]hoosing to narrate a history in support of a particular identity becomes an exercise in constructing that identity rather than presuming that this identity is rooted in the past and therefore essential,

unchangeable and continuous.”⁵⁷ Therefore, by authoring new texts and translating and republishing older ones, communities engage in continuous processes of revising, redefining, and supporting particular narratives and boundaries of their groups. The narratives expressed in these texts shape how members understand their faith, their church, and their place within the community.

The content of these materials, from the topics explored to the imagery employed, is (sometimes carefully) chosen to outline the characteristics and behaviors of a ‘good’ or ‘proper’ Coptic community member. At the same time, certain stories, narratives, and themes are retold and discussed in the diaspora because of their perceived high significance for community members, acting as reminders of what it means to be ‘Coptic’ and thus as elements that need to be preserved outside of Egypt. Therefore, the choice to rewrite and retell particular narratives can act both as a (deliberate) strategy and a reaction to uprootedness and dislocation. This study, therefore, goes further by acknowledging the role of (older) texts produced in Egypt. When used within particular European contexts, or more generally in the diaspora, these materials might acquire new meanings and interpretations. This re-contextualization demonstrates the dynamism of tradition and the ongoing process of reshaping religiosity within a new social landscape.

However, the role of textual practices in the Coptic Orthodox Church expands beyond providing the material carriers of the narrations and information that they include. For instance, Milad Hanna suggests that the publishing of religious texts by the Coptic Church in Egypt has served to increase the visibility of the community in the wider society and carve a public space in which the believers can connect with their Church. Hanna points out that such publications are only available at churches, monasteries and some specifically Christianity-oriented bookstores, vis-à-vis abundant Islamic books and sources that dominate the public market. Although only found in these exclusively Christian spaces, these often cheap and simple books and booklets on (Coptic) Christian faith represent a means of being visible in a ‘restricted’ public domain and one of the main ways for the Church to reach their audiences.⁵⁸ While some of these writings are intended for inner circles, others, like the newspaper *Watani*, target a broader audience, serving as a window into the Coptic community for the general public. The advent of satellite channels and the Internet has further blurred the boundaries, making content accessible to anyone, anywhere.

⁵⁷ Stefan Berger, *History and Identity: How Historical Theory Shapes Historical Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 15.

⁵⁸ Milad Hanna, *The Seven Pillars of the Egyptian Identity* (Cairo: General Egyptian Book Organization, 1994), 185.

Most of the Coptic churches in the Netherlands and Italy have church shops where different textual materials are sold, mirroring a common tradition from Coptic churches in Egypt. These textual practices reflect a variety of trends in the contemporary Coptic literary scene. These trends include the import and circulation of various textual materials from Egypt and other Coptic ‘diasporas,’ writing new texts in different genres, translating and publishing books and booklets in Dutch, and increasingly asserting an online presence.

Ultimately, this research underscores the multifaceted nature of texts within religious communities. They are not merely passive transmitters of information, but rather active participants in the construction and development of these communities. By analyzing both the content and acknowledging the materiality of these texts – how they are produced, used, and valued – we gain a deeper understanding of the inner dynamics and practices that bind members of a particular community together, as well as different Coptic communities at the transnational level.

Research questions

In combination with the special focus on texts and textual practices of several Coptic communities in Europe, these three broader themes, that is, the establishment of communities and a communal sense of ‘we-ness’, the construction of narratives of different layers of belonging among community members, and the conditions and challenges of maintaining and securing the future of the Church, translate into my main research question: What roles do texts and broader textual practices play in making, maintaining and reshaping group boundaries within Coptic Orthodox communities in Europe?

Two sub-questions follow from this, each focusing on different aspects of the boundary-making process:

- a) How do the clergy contribute to securing the future of the Coptic Orthodox Church and its communities in diaspora?
- b) In what ways are second- and third-generation Copts in Europe mobilized as both the main target and actors in this boundary-making?

Goals and contributions of the study

By exploring the main themes introduced above, the study aims to realize several broader goals and purposes. These were articulated from the combination of identified gaps in the literature on the contemporary Coptic Church and Coptic diasporas and from particular (personal) interests developed through the initial stages of ethnographic fieldwork and insights into diasporic textual materials.

First, this research aims to transcend the limitations of the overused term ‘identity.’ While the shared heritage of the Coptic Church provides a foundation for these communities, my goal is to delve deeper into the complexities that bind them. I achieve this by utilizing the more nuanced concepts of commonality, connectedness, and groupness. By analyzing how these elements function within the diaspora, I challenge the oversimplified assumption of a unified ‘Coptic identity.’ Furthermore, the study goes beyond a singular notion of Coptic identity by exploring the complex interplay of religious, ethnic, national, and local identities within the European context. This approach acknowledges the multifaceted nature of belonging within the diaspora and pays attention to how these dynamics manifest across different European localities. Going beyond Coptic studies, the study then offers a way to analyze and consider a more contextualized notion of ‘collective identities.’

Second, the study hopes to break new ground by utilizing a previously overlooked resource – contemporary publications produced and used by Coptic Orthodox communities in Europe. While scholarly examinations of the Coptic Church have often focused on manuscripts, ancient and medieval tracts, and to an extent newspapers, this research offers a window into the contemporary dynamics and developments within the Church by paying attention to popular, widely distributed, and often simply made textual materials. Through this approach, the research offers valuable insights into the ongoing evolution of the Coptic Orthodox Church in Europe, and more broadly in the diaspora. This focus on ‘popular,’ often overlooked communal publications of diaspora groups offers a valuable methodological tool for scholars in religious studies, migration studies, and even literary studies, providing a novel approach to understanding the internal dynamics of other (migrant) ethnic and religious communities across the globe.

Thirdly, the dissertation aims to significantly enrich the understudied field of Coptic communities in Europe. By employing a fresh perspective and a range of underutilized resources, the study delves deeper into the history of Coptic immigration across the continent. It offers a pioneering attempt to provide a more comprehensive overview

of how these communities have been established and thrived in various European nations. It does this by offering a comparative case study and encompassing the broader tapestry of Coptic experiences across Europe, rather than focusing on a single national diaspora.

Lastly, the concept of ‘diaspora’ is also critically examined and challenged. How can Coptic communities outside of Egypt be described and studied *as a diaspora*? Should Copts in Europe be considered as one unified diaspora or as a number of fairly independent diasporas? To what extent do they perceive themselves as such? By engaging with scholarly definitions and the lived experiences of community members, the thesis seeks to understand the specificities of Coptic experiences in several European contexts. This includes exploring how the Church itself positions the communities within the broader narrative of ‘(diasporic) Coptic identity’ and its relationship with Egypt, also paying attention to generational differences in these processes.

Methodology

Data collection for this study was primarily conducted through two modes of research. The first includes several ethnography-like methods, such as participant observation among the Coptic communities in the Netherlands and Italy and to a lesser extent in Spain and Egypt, and semi-structured interviews and informal conversations with the clergy and lay members of the communities. The other major mode of research is close reading of various textual and online materials published and used by the communities in the two countries.

The project rests on multi-sited fieldwork conducted between January 2020 and July 2023. The fieldwork was conducted in Coptic Orthodox churches in the Netherlands, Italy, Spain, and Egypt. The selection of the Netherlands as a primary case study was a natural choice, given the project's location at Radboud University in Nijmegen and the significant Coptic presence in the country. Italy was chosen as the second major study location due to its similarly large Coptic population (in fact, significantly larger than in the Netherlands), the linguistic accessibility provided by my proficiency in Italian, and the unique presence of two independent dioceses, which offered a distinct comparative context. Initially, the UK was considered; however, travel restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated a shift to Italy. Additionally, brief explorations into the Spanish Coptic communities during personal travel provided further context, enhancing the broader understanding of Coptic diasporas

in Europe. As the largest focus was placed on the communities in the Netherlands and Italy, the longest periods of fieldwork were conducted therein. In Italy, a more in-depth fieldwork was conducted in the northern part of the country, more specifically in Milan and surrounding towns, where the seat of one of the two Coptic Orthodox dioceses in Italy is located (this focus is particularly evident in Chapters 4 and 5). Shorter periods of fieldwork were conducted in several Coptic churches in the region of Catalonia, where the majority of the Spanish Coptic community members are based, during 2021 and 2022. While the Coptic communities of Spain do not constitute the main focus of this study, visits to some of their churches have served to provide an additional insight into the developments of a smaller and much younger Coptic community in Europe, vis-à-vis those in the Netherlands and Italy, and thus offer a potential point of comparison and broaden the knowledge and understanding of the diverse landscape of communal religious practices of different Coptic churches in Europe. Furthermore, I visited several Coptic Orthodox churches in Cairo during January and February of 2022. During these visits, I mainly spoke with priests serving in churches in various parts of Cairo with whom I engaged in conversations about the Coptic churches in the diaspora and their relations with the Church in Egypt, the challenges of preservation of Coptic religious practices and the communal church life from Egypt, as well as about youth and visions of the future developments in diasporic Coptic communities from the viewpoint of Coptic church leaders in Egypt.

The main target group of this study were ‘active’ members of Coptic churches in the selected countries, or so-called ‘church goers.’ These are the believers who are usually officially registered as members of the local diocese and who attend the Sunday liturgy ranging from once in several months to several times per week. Even though the study centers on and addresses “the Coptic communities in the Netherlands and Italy” (and in Spain to a lesser extent) as a whole in its main scope, it does not, however, encompass those who are not registered as ‘active’ members of any parish and who do not attend a local Coptic church. The author is aware that, on a much broader level, a ‘Coptic community’ in any place in reality consists of a wide array of individuals who identify as ‘Copts’ and who have divergent attitudes towards their religious and communal belonging and the Coptic Church as an institution. As the focus of this study are activities and practices of the Coptic communities in The Netherlands, Italy, and Spain organized under the Coptic Orthodox Church, it, therefore, does not seek to represent or encompass voices, attitudes, or activities of those outside the confines of institutional church life.

Before delving into a more detailed description and overview of activities and conversations I engaged in, and interviews I conducted with various members of

different Coptic communities, a brief reflection on the challenges of access and the researcher's own positionality during the fieldwork is due here. As a researcher who is an 'outsider,' or a non-member of the Coptic community and the Coptic Church, I initially encountered certain difficulties when it came to access to the members of the communities and information I needed for my research. It is important to note that I had not had any contacts or a developed network within the communities in any of the aforementioned places before starting my fieldwork and visits to different Coptic churches in the four countries. In most cases, I was able to find addresses of churches on the Internet, and in the Netherlands I most often went to the churches without any prior announcements or appointments. This was not the case in Italy, Spain, and Egypt. Due to a limited time I could spend in those countries and sometimes due to a lack of information on the opening times of churches therein, I needed to contact priests or other community members in advance, most often via telephone numbers I had found online, in order to announce myself and make sure that I would indeed be able to visit their churches.

My role as a non-Coptic researcher occasionally represented a source of suspicion or uncertainty among community members during some of my visits to different Coptic churches, primarily in Egypt, where the issue of security related to numerous previous terrorist attacks and the sectarian strife in the country is highly salient. In many situations, I found my interlocutors surprised that a non-Coptic researcher living in the Netherlands was interested in learning about the Coptic Orthodox diaspora communities and their activities. The occasional mistrust and the lack of connections within the communities understandably represented initial obstacles for gathering needed information and insights into various aspects of the communities' daily practices. However, over time, multiple visits to different Coptic churches and expanding my networks within the communities of the Netherlands and Italy opened doors for a better insight into the communal developments. This was partly aided by my knowledge of Egyptian Arabic and an assumed (Orthodox) Christian identity, which often came up in conversations with many priests and lay community members.

An additional challenge for conducting fieldwork and for obtaining necessary information and a better insight into different communal developments was the COVID-19 pandemic. As the peak of the pandemic occurred during most of 2020 and 2021, roughly corresponding to the first half of this project, the fieldwork, including visits to churches, meeting people in person, collecting textual materials, and organizing and conducting interviews, needed to be postponed and part of it canceled. During the periods of isolation, limited movement, and inability to travel abroad, the research focus shifted to other activities, such as extended literature

study, and to the online domain, including the analysis of official websites of various Coptic churches and dioceses in Europe and the study of their (limited) online collections of publications. Although the Covid-19 pandemic has greatly affected the possibility to adequately conduct the fieldwork (mainly in terms of desired duration and the time of conducting the fieldwork), thus affecting to a certain extent the course of the entire project as well, the author was able to carry out all planned activities with certain moderations and adaptations, which has ultimately allowed for the finalization of the project without any major alterations of the initial main premise.

Most of my visits to Coptic churches in the Netherlands, Italy, and Spain occurred on Sundays, when the main liturgical service of the week is usually celebrated and, therefore, when the largest number of parishioners are present in the church. In Egypt, where the main weekly liturgical service is usually on Fridays, my visits occurred on various days of the week. The visits on the busiest days of the week gave me an opportunity to meet and talk to parish priests and other parish members after the liturgy, when the church building is usually filled with people who stay in the church to socialize with their co-parishioners. In addition, I made occasional visits to different parishes on other days of the week, depending on the schedules of particular churches as well as on the type of church activity and a special occasion or event that was celebrated in the church. Some examples include ‘smaller’ liturgical services and vesper prayers during the week, Friday evening youth meetings, and Saturday morning Sunday school classes. Particularly during the initial phases of my fieldwork I attended multiple liturgical services, mainly in churches in the Netherlands and northern Italy, in order to become familiar with some of the principal practices in the Coptic churches in those two communities. Attending and observing (and one might say ‘passively participating’ in) some of the main weekly church activities, such as the liturgy and Sunday school classes, and engaging in (often informal) conversations in churches’ lounges, hallways, and cafeterias with parish members of different generations have formed the basis of my fieldwork in the Netherlands and Italy. Conversations with community members were largely held in English and Egyptian Arabic, and to a lesser extent in local languages, namely in Dutch, Italian, or Spanish. Knowledge of these languages, both of Egyptian Arabic as the first language of most first-generation community members and of the local languages, which are often the primary languages of communication among the second and third generations, has helped to immerse myself in particular church-based social and cultural settings of the Coptic communities in the Netherlands and Italy, allowing me to observe and follow a wide range of practices, interactions, and narratives produced and followed by Coptic church-goers. Additionally, it has allowed me to pay special attention to particularities and differences between parishes and their own developments

and dynamics, largely caused by disparate social compositions and structures of those parishes.

Although I have visited more than twenty Coptic churches and monasteries in the Netherlands, Italy, Spain, and Egypt over the course of three and a half years, a more thorough and in-depth fieldwork was conducted in three parishes, namely in the Mari Guirguis and St. Demiana parish in Utrecht, in the Holy Virgin Mary parish in Amsterdam, the seat of the Coptic diocese of the Netherlands, and the St. Mark parish in central Milan, the largest parish of the Diocese of Milan. Besides numerous informal, unrecorded conversations that occurred during my usual visits to churches, nine semi-structured interviews were conducted with clergy and lay community members from several churches in the dioceses of the Netherlands and Milan. The particular focus on clergy and Sunday school teachers as interviewees stems from their pivotal roles in authoring official church publications, reflecting the institutional-level study of Coptic communities centered around the church. These individuals, therefore, play crucial roles in forming and disseminating the discourses, narratives, and teachings that at the same time represent the values of their communities and bind their members, thus highlighting the top-down structure of church influence.

The interviews were conducted in English, Egyptian Arabic, and Italian, both inside and outside church premises, as well as online, and most of them have been recorded.⁵⁹ Some interviews were conducted for particular purposes and related to specific topics, for example the Sunday school education, youth, and the upbringing of children in churches. Others, on the other hand, did not revolve around a particular topic or question and thus covered a wider range of topics, including emigration of Copts from Egypt, establishing and acquiring new churches, challenges the churches (or dioceses as a whole) have faced throughout years, the issue of adaptation to a new environment, church activities and practices, to name a few. Although the questions and the contents of the interviews do not necessarily contain any sensitive (for instance, personal or security-related) information, names of all interviewees, as well as exact ranks of the interviewed clergy members, have been pseudonymized for privacy reasons.⁶⁰

^{59.} The recordings and transcripts of the interviews are safely secured in the Radboud University storage and in accordance with the Research Management Plan designed at the beginning of the project.

^{60.} It must be noted that some members of different Coptic communities in the Netherlands, Italy, and Spain expressed discomfort about participating in interviews, primarily because of the idea of the conversation being recorded and somehow structured. Most of them, however, were eager to answer my questions during rather informal conversations, which I subsequently noted down.

The analysis and study of various textual materials published, reproduced and used in the Coptic churches in the Netherlands and Milan, and to a lesser extent among other Italian Coptic communities and those located in Spain, served as another principal method of data collection and, along with the fieldwork, grounded the study's epistemology. The use of a mixed methods framework that integrates historical and philological methods allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics within these diasporic communities. The studied publications comprise a variety of formats, from published printed books (usually with ISBN), across self-published booklets and magazines, to different types of online texts (for example, shared on churches' official websites or social media accounts). The corpus is predominantly written in four languages, namely in Arabic (Modern Standard Arabic), Italian, Dutch, and English. The materials were collected and accessed in several ways. A large portion of the studied publications was collected in various church gift-/bookstores during my visits to Coptic churches in the Netherlands, Italy, and Spain. The materials were occasionally purchased (either for a fixed price or a symbolic amount) and other times they were gifted to me by priests or lay community members working in the bookstores. Other materials were accessed online; these included various types of digitized books and booklets, texts published on church websites, and PDF documents and PowerPoint presentations created internally by church members which are not accessible to the public and were thus shared with me privately.

Although I have collected and consulted a wide range of publications of various formats, encompassing different genres and topics and geared towards different generations, a stronger focus and a special attention was paid primarily to two types of materials, namely periodicals and publications with educational purposes. The first type includes two periodicals (or magazines), published by the Coptic Orthodox diocese of the Netherlands and by the Coptic Orthodox diocese of Milan. Regarding the educational materials, it must be noted that these are not essentially part of a well-defined set of publications and rather represent an almost inexhaustible corpus of texts which may fit in this category. The author has looked at various materials principally produced for and used in Sunday school education and the broader church upbringing of children in the two aforementioned Coptic dioceses. These include Sunday school curricula, along with publications used as sources in the curricula, PowerPoint presentations containing Sunday school lessons, as well as other additional materials that are not formally part of the official curricula, but were mentioned by some Sunday school teachers as useful sources for teaching in their churches.

Besides these two main groups of materials, I have also considered an array of other publications published and/or used by the Coptic communities in the Netherlands and Milan (and more broadly, in Italy), which might inform the reader about various aspects of Coptic religious practices, about history and teachings of the Coptic Church, or about the Coptic churches in the two countries, as well as those publications that were explicitly mentioned by community members during our conversations and deemed as ‘useful’ or ‘important’ for those wishing to become more familiar with the Coptic Orthodox Church. Some of these include numerous publications of the late Pope Shenouda III, various history books, reports and booklets about local Coptic churches in the Netherlands and Italy, online texts which provide an insight into how these communities present their Church and its traditions to wider audiences, to name a few. Although it proved to be difficult to know whether and to what extent these materials are actually used in the church, and for what purposes exactly, the fact that they were published (and some of them translated), found and sold in the churches, suggests that they are deemed as ‘important’ sources for learning about their Church and its traditions.

Outline of the dissertation

As indicated above, the main question of this dissertation asks which roles texts and textual practices play in the making and maintenance of group boundaries within Coptic Orthodox communities in Europe. The first subquestion focuses specifically on the role of the clergy in securing the future of Coptic communities and the Coptic Church in diaspora, while the second subquestion asks how second- and third-generation Copts in Europe are mobilized in this boundary-making both as its main target and as actors in the process.

The dissertation is divided into seven chapters. After the introductory chapter (Chapter 1), Chapter 2 provides the theoretical and conceptual framework within which I understand and analyze community formation, boundary-making, and the roles of textual practices. Chapter 3 offers a comprehensive historical account of emigration of Copts from Egypt, an overview of the creation of ‘Coptic diasporas,’ and a detailed account of the establishment of Coptic Orthodox churches in Europe. In Chapter 4, the focus shifts to the Coptic communities in the Netherlands and Italy. The chapter delves into the complex processes of building and making of these communities and the exploration of how commonality and connectedness are achieved among church members, addressing specifically the first subquestion. It proceeds to explore how the Copts in the Netherlands and Italy materially emplace themselves in

their new environments and how church life and communal activities are developed. Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 represent the main case studies of this dissertation as they delve deeper into the analysis of communal textual practices and how these relate to processes of fostering groupness, analyzing the roles of the clergy and youth in these processes (thus relating to both subquestions). Chapter 5 focuses specifically on two periodical publications in the dioceses of the Netherlands and Milan. The chapter seeks to explore magazines as sources of self-images of the studied communities and how the contents of the magazines, style of writing, and their topics offer an insight into the concerns, goals, and aspirations of these communities. In this way, communal magazines act both as mirrors of intracommunal dynamics and as tools for guiding their communities. The main focus of Chapter 6 are Sunday schools and church upbringing programs and activities. The chapter explores the questions of securing the future and continuity of the communities through a 'proper' education and upbringing of the younger generations. Furthermore, it pays particular attention to how church leaders negotiate the need to create and maintain (strict) group boundaries and the existence of multiple belongings among its youngest members. Finally, Chapter 7 offers concluding notes and a broader context within which the main findings of the dissertation can be placed.

Chapter 2.

Theoretical and conceptual framework

Introduction

This chapter lays out the theoretical and conceptual framework essential for understanding the formation and boundary making within Coptic communities in the Netherlands and Italy. I delve into three critical groups of concepts and theories: group/community formation and group boundaries, diaspora and homeland, and the roles and meanings of religious texts and literary genres. Each of these thematic areas is instrumental in explicating how these communities are created and maintained as *communities*, what layers of belonging are created in these processes, and what roles communal texts and broader church narratives play in creating communal bonds. Positioning my dissertation within these scholarly discussions, I aim to contribute to and expand upon the existing academic dialogue surrounding these themes.

Group boundaries, community, and minority

The research on groups, (group) boundaries, and boundary making have occupied scholarship across various social sciences since the second half of the last century. Fredrik Barth's introductory essay to *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (1969) represents one of the (if not *the*) earliest works on ethnicity, (ethnic) group boundaries, and processes of boundary making and boundary maintenance, and remains influential until today. In this seminal work, Barth examines ethnicity and the nature of interaction between ethnic groups through boundaries, exploring the conditions of emergence, maintenance, and blurring of such boundaries and their importance for groups' (self)identification. More broadly, Barth's theorization of group boundaries has helped lay the foundation for studying cultural difference, group belonging, and notions of inclusion and exclusion.

Boundary maintenance, as one of the most regularly attributed characteristics of diasporas, according to Rogers Brubaker, serves to preserve a (minority) group's distinctiveness vis-à-vis the host society and it is in fact what allows us to speak of a diaspora as a "distinctive community."⁶¹ But first, it is worth asking, what is the nature of (inter)group boundaries?; how are they deployed and for what?; and what do they result in? Barth challenges culturalist forms of objectivism when it comes to understanding the existence and persistence of (ethnic) groups and their boundaries. He argues that ethnic boundaries are not objectively determined by shared characteristics or a common culture, and thus should not be seen as a group's

^{61.} Rogers Brubaker, *Grounds for Difference* (Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 2015), 124.

definitional or primary features. Instead, they act as an implication or result of complex social processes in which group members deem certain traits as (more) significant, while ignoring others.⁶² In a similar vein, Talal Asad has shown that “each group has constituted itself as a group through its own narratives. These narratives, and the practices they authorize, help to define what is essential to each group.”⁶³ Thus, such sets of shared values, beliefs or cultural differences (ascribed to and by a certain group) which act as intergroup boundaries are constructed, constantly negotiated, and learnt, rather than inherently present (for example, with birth) and transmitted from one generation to another.

Indeed, Andreas Wimmer points to the recent hegemony of constructivism in scholarship of ethnicity, group identities, and group boundary making, with a strong emphasis on ‘fluid,’ ‘constructed,’ and ‘contingent’ character of ethnicity, culture and related social identity markers.⁶⁴ Although I recognize the contributions of constructivist views of ‘identities,’ thus avoiding to take them for granted and see them as given, I follow Cornell and Hartmann’s call to acknowledge key insights of both primordialism and circumstantialism.⁶⁵ A combination of such approaches indeed allows us to see groups and group unity as constructed and changeable, while at the same time recognizing agency of group members in constructing such discourses of unity (which circumstantialism overlooks), as well as recognizing the insistence on the ideas of inherited and durable ‘identities’ among certain communities, which constructivism fails to perceive as ‘real.’ All these different strands in the study of ‘identities’ point to and warn about the very limitations of using the concept as a stable and effective analytical tool.

Scholars assert that ‘identity’, belonging and identification, be it individual or collective, are highly relational and for the most part rest upon and implicate the premise of difference. According to Cornell and Hartmann, ‘identities’ are constituted at the convergence of assertion – who or what we claim to be – and assignment –

^{62.} Fredrik Barth, “Introduction,” in *Ethnic groups and boundaries: the social organization of culture difference*, ed. Fredrik Barth (Bergen: Universitetsforlaget; London: Allen & Unwin, 1969), 11–14.

^{63.} Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Islam, Christianity, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 175.

^{64.} Andreas Wimmer, *Ethnic Boundary Making: Institutions, Power, and Networks* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 9.

^{65.} According to Cornell and Hartmann, the main shortcomings of circumstantialist views on identity is the strong emphasis on external contingency and the primacy of external factors in constituting the ways we see ourselves, individually or as part of a group. Stephen Cornell and Douglas Hartmann, *Ethnicity and race: making identities in a changing world* (Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press, 1998), 72.

what others say we are.⁶⁶ Richard Jenkins stresses that ‘collective identities’ are indeed constructed and shaped by the interplay of both internal and external definitions. Internally, people need to distinguish themselves from others by drawing on criteria of membership to a community and on a feeling of shared belonging within their particular subgroup. Conversely, for a tangible collective identity to emerge, outsiders must acknowledge this internal identification process.⁶⁷

Moreover, various scholars have argued that the very process of assertion entails relation to ‘the other.’ Elliott writes that for an individual to develop a sense of ‘identity,’ there needs to be a variety of thoughts, assumptions, and beliefs about their self-perception and how they relate to others (individuals or groups) and the broader world.⁶⁸ Coining the concept of *différance*, Jacques Derrida suggests that meaning can thus only be attributed to something within a wider context of meanings in the plural, underlining the importance of environment, plurality, and contextualization in the making of individual or communal identities.⁶⁹ Although even some of the more ‘foundational’ criteria of group membership such as common ancestry, language, or religious belonging may be seen as essential or universal group markers, they become meaningful constitutive features only in a particular, pluralist context and in contact with other social groups. Accordingly, precise definitions and meanings of ‘self’ and ‘other’ certainly change over time and across different social conditions. Moreover, Barth asserts that (ethnic) groups and their shared group identities persist as significant units only if they imply or claim a marked difference in behavior, that is persisting cultural differences, which might include language, sets of values and beliefs, or particular social organization. It is precisely in the context of continuous social relations and mutual contact, and not as a result of isolation, that the contrasting and differential ‘identities’ of various ethnic or ethnoreligious groups are created, (re-)defined, and maintained.⁷⁰

Danielle Juteau offers a sophisticated conceptualization of (group) boundaries which is useful to apply to the study of the formation of Coptic, as well as other diasporic communities. Juteau makes a distinction between external and internal dimensions of the formation of social boundaries. The external dimension of the boundary is formed in the context of social relations such as in colonization or migration, which

^{66.} Ibid., 72.

^{67.} Richard Jenkins, *Social Identity* (London, New York: Routledge, 2004), 42-43.

^{68.} Anthony Elliott, “The rise of identity studies: An outline of some theoretical accounts,” in *Routledge Handbook of Identity Studies*, ed. Anthony Elliott (London: Routledge, 2020), 14.

^{69.} Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), cited in Berger, *History and Identity*, 24.

^{70.} Barth, “Introduction,” 9-16.

result in the production of politically, culturally, and ideologically defined forms of group formations, and results in the definition of ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders.’ Migration is then a condition in which common qualities and common circumstances become the basis for what Juteau calls *communalization* (borrowing from Weber).⁷¹ In this context, as new kinds of social relations and circumstances emerge, many minority and ‘non-native’ populations are then defined (both by themselves and by others) in terms of already existing markers, such as religion, language, and cultural values.⁷² Often, ‘differences’ are generated as part of boundary work and boundary maintenance processes in ‘majority-minority’ relations, whether externally, such as apartheid practices, or internally, such as efforts to resist assimilation.

Elements like histories, material and non-material culture, or collective memories and myths, which are contained within the internal layer of the boundary and existed prior to migration or other types of ‘new’ social circumstances, are those mobilized in the process of *communalization*. Juteau shows that categories and practices that set groups apart often acquire new meanings in such contexts and thus become more than “empty signifiers.” For example, she illustrates how the struggle for the French language in Quebec does not involve language merely as a symbol, but represents a means for acquiring political, economic, and cultural power in the society.⁷³ Similarly, we can assume that, for instance, writing and teaching about Egypt and its history to second-generation Copts in the diaspora does not have the same meaning and role as it would have in Egypt itself. At the internal level of the boundary formation process, the ‘us’ is constructed within each member of the collectivity through the process of socialization. According to the author, socialization “contains elements of materiality and ideality, it produces materiality and ideality, activities, representations, subjectivities and identities.”⁷⁴

Juteau argues that while ethnic groups entail “a life in common,” which enables communalization, this does not in fact signify a community. So, when does a *vie en commun* go beyond claims, beliefs, and imaginations to form the basis of a ‘proper’ community? When do Anderson’s ‘imagined communities’ become ‘proper’ communities and under which circumstances?

⁷¹ See Max Weber, *Economy and society: an outline of interpretive sociology*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

⁷² Danielle Juteau, “Theorising ethnicity and ethnic communalisations at the margins: from Quebec to the world system,” *Nations and Nationalism* 2, no. 1 (1996): 53.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 54.

Brubaker's classification and recognition of dimensions of variation for determining the nature and 'firmness' of certain group categories such as ethnicity and nation is useful to follow here in order to further conceptualize and define the meanings of a 'community.' More specifically, it also allows us to better understand the basis of the construction of 'we-ness' in the community formation process and to identify what is mobilized to create a sense of shared belonging among Coptic church-goers in Europe. Some of the dimensions and criteria offered by Brubaker include: criteria of membership (importance of ancestry, language, or way of life as defining traits of membership), external categorization versus internal self-identification, transmission and socialization (how do people *become* members of the group?), groupness and salience (to what degree members constitute a bounded, self-conscious group?, and to what degree are social life and group activities structured based on belonging to this category?), institutional separation (existence of separate institutional networks), nature and reproduction of group boundaries (to what extent are group boundaries clear or blurred?, and what mechanisms are deployed to maintain and reproduce group boundaries?).⁷⁵

Thus, as stipulated earlier in the introduction and as briefly shown here in this section, the concepts of 'identity' and 'collective identities' do not offer a strong analytical potential for studying groups and boundary making, and for capturing nuanced and contextualized notions of shared senses of belonging among members. In my conceptualization of 'community,' I follow Brubaker's and Cooper's call to go beyond the vague terms of 'identity' and 'collective identities' and use three interconnected alternatives which offer a more differentiated analytical language. These are commonality, connectedness, and groupness. According to Brubaker and Cooper, *commonality* refers to the sharing of a common attribute (a fundamental category such as country of origin or language). *Connectedness* denotes the relational ties that link individuals. This is similar to what Cornell and Hartmann call "thickness of identity"; besides meeting the more general criteria of membership, a comprehensive or "thick (group) identity" is one that organizes a significant portion of social life, as well as both individual and collective action.⁷⁶ Lastly, *groupness* refers to "the sense of belonging to a distinctive, bounded, solidary group."⁷⁷ As the authors argue, neither commonality nor connectedness alone are sufficient to engender groupness. In general, categorical commonality and relational connectedness are accompanied by a feeling of belonging together, what Max Weber called a *Zusammengehörigkeitsgefühl*.

⁷⁵. Rogers Brubaker, "Ethnicity, Race, and Nationalism," *Annual Review of Sociology* 35 (2009): 26-27.

⁷⁶. Cornell and Hartmann, *Ethnicity and race*, 73.

⁷⁷. Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, "Beyond 'Identity'," *Theory and Society* 29, no. 1 (2000): 20.

This feeling of belonging together may be developed through different degrees and forms of commonality and connectedness, as well as it may depend on various prevailing (public) narratives and discourses.

Brubaker and Cooper suggest that using these three concepts for exploring the ways individuals group themselves into communities and how they construct a strong 'we-ness' among themselves allows to develop an analytical tool that is sensitive to various degrees and forms of internal group connections and to the ways actors attach meanings and significance to them. Therefore, a strong bounded sense of groupness will be built on different degrees and forms of commonality and connectedness among different types of small- or large-scale collectivities. For example, a powerful sense of groupness among 'nations' is understood to be built on categorical commonality and an associated *Zusammengehörigkeitsgefühl*, without necessarily having any level of 'real' relational connectedness among its members.⁷⁸ Such analytically sensitive concepts can thus help us in differentiating between different degrees of senses of belonging together among individuals.

As mentioned earlier, an important dimension of 'solid' group categories is institutional separation, or, more precisely, the presence of separate (sometimes independent) institutional networks which cater to and are built on such categories. For many Coptic believers, both in Egypt and in the diaspora, their sense of belonging has a strong institutional foundation. Indeed, many scholars have noted that the Coptic Church, as an institution, 'provides' and shapes the 'identities' of its members. In that line, Angela Bernardo notes that for Copts, the concept of 'community' coincides to a great extent with that of 'Church,' both universally and locally (i.e., 'the Church' and particular 'churches').⁷⁹ Similarly, Fiona McCallum writes that the Church is likely to be a principal actor in maintaining and shaping "communal identity" for many Christian populations in the Middle East, including for Copts in Egypt. However, she adds that this role becomes even more contested in the diaspora than in Egypt, as it is even more challenging for the Church to establish itself as a main social or communal actor for members in 'host countries'.⁸⁰ While this is certainly true, especially regarding hierarchy and the role of clergy as argued by

⁷⁸. Ibid., 20.

⁷⁹. Bernardo, *Ricostruire una comunità*, 76. While Bernardo's remark certainly has a strong basis, the author does not explicate amply in her work how this link plays out among Coptic communities outside Egypt, as her conceptualization and use of the term 'community' remains rather ambiguous.

⁸⁰. Fiona McCallum, "Middle Eastern Christian Immigrant Communities as Diasporas," in *Border Terrains: World Diasporas in the 21st Century*, ed. Allyson Eamer (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2020): 68.

McCallum, religious institutions (here, the Church) often remain (equally) significant as they may acquire new roles in the context of migration. Amitai Etzioni reminds us that precisely because institutions hold significance for ‘communities’ beyond the services they offer (in their narrowest sense, for example liturgical services in the case of churches), “[c]ommunities congeal around such institutions.”⁸¹

Ghada Botros’ conceptualization and interpretation of the essential roles of the Coptic Church (and particular local churches) outside of Egypt is useful to evoke here in order to comprehend how churches and their (clerical) leaders forge and maintain communities and a sense of groupness built around an institution. According to Botros, ‘the migrant church’ has three particular functions in the lives of migrant believers, namely to “help” Coptic immigrants (for example, in the settlement process), to “console” the members of the community (i.e., to provide them with a ‘piece of home’ in the new society, primarily meaning the first generation), and to “compete” for the Church’s own future and that of its adherents, particularly through the second generation.⁸² In this manner, individual churches, together with support from the Church in Egypt, strive to maintain, or indeed establish themselves as central figures in orchestrating the social lives of their members and fostering a robust, self-conscious sense of community. To these, we can add a more fundamental role of the church in its believers’ lives, both in Egypt and in diaspora, that is the performance and administration of sacraments and other services, such as the liturgy, baptism, weddings, and funerals.

The historical self-perception of the Copts and the Coptic Church in Egypt as a distinct group that needs to maintain its boundaries is partly rooted in the issue of their minority status.⁸³ This ‘protective’ stance and awareness was accentuated during colonial and nationalist periods when Copts were identified both as a group needing protection and as distinct within the broader national discourse. The emphasis on maintaining clear communal boundaries was crucial for navigating the challenges of national unity and the Copts’ distinct religious belonging, particularly in response to

^{81.} Amitai Etzioni, *The Spirit of Community: Rights, Responsibilities, and the Communitarian Agenda* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1993), 135.

^{82.} Botros, “Coptic Migrant Churches,” 112.

^{83.} A further exploration and analysis of this contentious term falls beyond the purview of this study. For more on the meanings and definitions of the term ‘minority’ and its applications for communities in the Middle East, see Benjamin Thomas White, *The Emergence of Minorities in the Middle East: the Politics of Community in French Mandate Syria* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011); Mahmood, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age*; Heleen Murre-van den Berg, “Searching for Common Ground: Jews and Christians in the Modern Middle East,” in *Modernity, Minority, and the Public Sphere: Jews and Christians in the Middle East*, eds. S.R. Goldstein-Sabbah and H.L. Murre-van den Berg (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2016), 3–38; Elsässer, *The Coptic Question in the Mubarak Era*; and Heather Sharkey, *A History of Muslims, Christians, and Jews* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

the challenges of discrimination and sectarian tension. The role of the Coptic Church in reinforcing these boundaries has been key to fostering a cohesive community, ensuring it remains oriented towards its internal dynamics. In response to such a social and political climate in Egypt in the twentieth century, the Coptic Church has adopted an all-encompassing role, emerging as the primary social, political, and religious representative of the Coptic community. This consolidation has further solidified its influence and the unity of the community under its guidance. In aligning with Brubaker and Cooper's framework, the Church (both in and outside of Egypt) actively cultivates groupness by emphasizing commonality, such as common descent and ethnicity, and fostering connectedness through communal practices and activities, while also enhancing the sense of belonging by embedding individuals within shared narratives and discourses, even when actual relational connections might be weak (for example among church members belonging to different parishes or even living in different countries).

Diaspora and home(land)

Researching migrant communities, group boundaries, and belonging almost naturally calls for revisiting the much-used, but highly contested term *diaspora*. While I recognize the contentious and fluid nature of the term, I employ it to describe expatriate migrant Coptic communities primarily for practical reasons—given its prevalence in scholarly discourse—though I remain mindful of its complexities. It is worth noting that while I acknowledge the relevance of the term given the theoretical and thematic scope of my study, I do not intend to theorize it in detail nor analyze European Coptic communities and their practices primarily through this lens. In my analysis of boundary making and narratives of belonging among European Coptic communities, I aim to challenge some of the entrenched perspectives on ‘diaspora,’ focusing on the practical and discursive implications of how these communities are perceived and self-identify as ‘diasporas.’

Since the 1980s and 1990s, the concept has received much scholarly attention and has been widely theorized in light of discussions on migration, transnationalism, and globalization, contributing to the rise of numerous, often conflicting definitions.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ A more detailed discussion on the term falls out of the main scope of this study. For views and definitions of ‘diaspora,’ see Waltraud Kokot, Khachig Tölölyan, and Carolin Alfonso, “Introduction,” in *Diaspora, identity and religion: new directions in theory and research*, eds. W. Kokot, K. Tölölyan, and C. Alfonso (London: Routledge, 2004), 1–8; Rainer Bauböck and Thomas Faist, eds., *Diaspora and Transnationalism: Concepts, Theories and Methods* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010); Stéphane Dufoix, “Diaspora before it became a concept,” in *Routledge Handbook of Diaspora Studies*, eds. Robin Cohen and Carolin Fischer (London: Routledge, 2018), 13–21; and Brubaker, *Grounds for Difference*.

What further complicates the existence of these various definitions is the fact that not every community or group that might meet the criteria of being defined as a diaspora (by scholars or ‘outsiders’) sees and identifies itself as such, since, as William Safran rightly points out, diaspora membership is not only a matter of status but also of “identity,” which is a relational, contextual, and time-bound category.⁸⁵ Therefore, the ways in which migrant communities perceive themselves in relation to the term ‘diaspora,’ as well as how the Church in the “original center” (to use Safran’s words) views and interprets this designation, reveal insights into their self-understanding within host countries, the nature of relationships between the ‘homeland’ and ‘host lands,’ and the types of connections that migrant churches should cultivate with the clerical center.

The term ‘diaspora,’ which is widely applied to many migrant communities, including the Copts, underscores the dynamic negotiations of belonging that occur as these communities adapt to new sociocultural landscapes while maintaining connections with their historical homelands. Indeed, even though scholars have defined and used the term in distinct ways, the themes of *home*, *homeland*, and *belonging* seem to hold a central place in many of those definitions.⁸⁶ Safran notes that a ‘homeland’ orientation is widely regarded as *the* major criterion that distinguishes diasporas from other migrant expatriate communities.⁸⁷ Before asking the question whether every community that might be described as a diaspora indeed shapes its ‘diasporic experience’ through the idea of a return to ‘home,’ we must first problematize and complicate the often static and essentialist use of ‘home’ and ‘homeland.’

Tsypylma Darieva shows that for many Armenians around the world, ‘homeland’ might consist of more than one particular territory or a nation-state.⁸⁸ This is also true for many diasporic Syriac Orthodox communities, whose members have origins in parts of today’s Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, or Iraq and can therefore shape their imaginations of what is ‘home’ in distinct ways. Also, memories of earlier migrations (e.g., from Turkey to Lebanon) add another layer to the complex notion of homeland. Central to understanding the term diaspora according to many definitions is an often problematic relationship with the ‘homeland,’ incorporating elements such as

^{85.} William Safran, “Deconstructing and comparing diasporas,” in *Diaspora, identity and religion*, 12.

^{86.} For instance, Kenneth Minogue defines diasporas in relation to nationalism, describing them as dispersed members of an ethnic group seeking to return to their ancestral or claimed homeland. Kenneth Minogue, *Nationalism* (London, Batsford, 1967), 13, 106, cited in Dufoix, “Diaspora before it became a concept,” 20.

^{87.} Safran, “Deconstructing and comparing diasporas,” 16.

^{88.} Tsypylma Darieva, *Making a Homeland: Roots and Routes of Transnational Armenian Engagement* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2023), 46.

expulsion, discrimination, and oppression. Some scholars have underlined that we should not underestimate the centrality of violence and persecution in diasporic experiences of many communities.⁸⁹ Indeed, as highlighted earlier, contentious and challenging relationships with the 'original home' characterize experiences of these communities, whereby the desire to return might coexist with the difficulties or impossibilities of such a return. Despite the diverse conceptualizations of 'homeland' across different diasporas, the prevailing scholarly view often still subscribes to a somewhat static and uniform idea of 'homeland.' In his study on the Coptic diasporas in the USA, Yefet challenges this conventional perspective, advocating for a recognition that diasporas' relationships with 'the homeland' are not unchanging and monolithic.⁹⁰

Moreover, scholars have usually overlooked the transgenerational element in the construction of ideas of a 'homeland' among diasporic communities. Do first- and second-generation community members have the same ideas, sentiments, and imaginations of what is (the) 'homeland?' This also applies to the often unchallenged use of the concepts of 'hostland' and 'host society' in scholarship on diasporas and migrant communities. For example, the Netherlands is certainly the host society, a 'new land,' for the first-generation immigrant Dutch Copts, but for their grandchildren who were born in the country, the Netherlands is their birthplace and for many it is their 'home.' Therefore, I propose to complicate and reconsider the utility of the often static binary homeland – hostland axis in order to better understand the contextualized nuances and negotiations of what is constructed as 'home(land),' in what ways, and under which circumstances, and how these constructions and understandings shape people's actions and modes of belonging.

According to Avtar Brah, one of the pioneers of diaspora studies, 'home' for diasporic communities is often both a "mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination" and "the lived experience of locality," reminding us that not all diasporas "inscribe homing desire through a wish to return to a place of 'origin'."⁹¹ Indeed, as Brah suggests, diasporas are often conceptualized as long-term or even permanent community formations, arising out of the creation of material and immaterial ties to a new land that is not seen as 'native'. Therefore, although diasporic experiences entail and are partly shaped by the maintenance of memories and imaginations of a 'home

^{89.} See William Safran, "Diasporas in modern societies: myths of homeland and return," *Diaspora* 1, no. 1 (1991): 83–99; and Mihran Dabag and Kristin Platt, eds., *Identität in der Fremde* (Bochum: Brockmeyer, 1993).

^{90.} Yefet, "The Coptic diaspora and the status of the Coptic minority in Egypt," 1207.

^{91.} Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of diaspora: contesting identities* (London, New York: Routledge, 1996), 188–189.

somewhere there,' be it a specific place or not, they also demand a need for a home 'here.' For a religious diasporic community, inscribing elements of one's religious traditions and enabling the practice of those traditions in a new environment (i.e., upon migration) as a group both signifies the need and helps to create a 'new home.'

The global expansion of the Coptic Church necessitated a reassessment of the connections between migrant churches and their homeland. First, such reassessment came from the clerical hierarchy in Egypt, i.e. the Patriarchate, who needed to reexamine how these newly established churches relate to their clerical 'center' in Egypt. Additionally, this examination has extended to include both Coptic and non-Coptic scholars in Egypt who study Egyptian emigration and expatriate Coptic communities, leading to varied interpretations of the 'diaspora' designation and its implications for self-definition and group affiliation within the Church.

The application of *diaspora* both as a scholarly designation and as a self-identifying marker in the Coptic Church has varied over time and has at times been a contentious issue. In the recent English- and French-language literature on Coptic communities outside of Egypt, many scholars, Copts and non-Copts alike, have regularly used expressions such as 'the Coptic diaspora' or 'Coptic churches in the diaspora.'⁹² A prominent example is provided by a study on 'Egyptian diasporas' by Delphine Pagès-El Karoui, who suggests that the Copts outside of Egypt can be considered a diaspora, applying the following criteria to confirm her argument: dispersion, strong ties with the country of origin, awareness of group identity, collective memory, and powerful organization system.⁹³ However, the leadership of the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt has found the term, both in Arabic and English, rather problematic (to say the least) when it comes to its application to the Copts settled outside of Egypt.

Pope Shenouda III (d. 2012), the former leader of the Coptic Orthodox Church during whose patriarchate the Church began expanding virtually to every part of the world, opposed using the term *diaspora* to define and describe the status and experiences of the Coptic communities outside of Egypt, primarily due to its negative connotation with the original Jewish diaspora, and later the Palestinian diaspora, and the ideas of exile, (forced) expulsion, or banishment.⁹⁴ This is especially true for the Arabic term

^{92.} This also applies to many of the cited works in Chapter 1.

^{93.} The author demonstrates that it is rather difficult to speak of an 'Egyptian diaspora' as a whole, combining both Egyptian Muslims and Copts as a group with 'diasporic' characteristics, lacking primarily an awareness of group unity and a strong organization system. See Delphine Pagès-El Karoui, "Égyptiens d'outre-Nil: des diasporas égyptiennes," *Tracés. Revue de Sciences humaines* 23 (2012): 10-11.

^{94.} See Lise Paulsen Galal, "Guardians of Contested Borders: Transnational Strategies for Coptic Survival," *Kvinder, Køn og Forskning* 2-3 (2007): 63-74, and Stene, "Into the Lands of Immigration."

shatāt, the closest equivalent of the English term *diaspora*, which is primarily used to denote the 'original Diaspora' and has not undergone such a semantic expansion as the term in English or many other European languages. Due to his notable political role in Egyptian society as the 'mediator' between the Egyptian state and the Coptic community (amid interreligious tensions and the increased role of political Islam in Egypt in the 1970s), Pope Shenouda refrained from portraying emigrant Copts as possible victims of the Egyptian regime who were forced to leave Egypt due to discrimination or persecution. Given the contentious nature of 'diaspora,' often linked to the idea that the 'homeland' is unsafe for emigrants facing discrimination, it is not surprising that the official discourse of clerical authorities in Egypt avoids using the term for expatriate Copts, reflecting the close relationship between the state and the Church. Furthermore, the official website of the Coptic Orthodox Church center in the UK states the following in the section "The Church today": 'It is worth mentioning at this point that we do not consider our communities living abroad as a diaspora, as 90 percent of Coptic Christians still live in their native Egypt.'⁹⁵ Here, we again see a negative connotation of the term, whose rejection is based on the understanding of *diaspora* as a population (almost) entirely dislocated from its original land and not being able to return.

A prominent and common alternative to the heavily charged *shatāt* in Arabic is *mahgar*. *Mahgar*, the Egyptian Arabic form of the Modern Standard Arabic *mahjar*, often translates to a place or land(s) of immigration and has been used extensively both in Arabic and English, in its transliterated form. The Arabic term *Aqbāt al-mahgar* (Copts in the mahgar/the lands of immigration) came into use in the 1970s in Egypt and initially acquired a largely negative meaning due to its use to refer to the upper class Coptic lobbyists and political activists living in the US who strived to draw attention of their local governments and political actors to the persecution of Christians in Egypt.⁹⁶ However, the term has since acquired a more neutral and encompassing meaning and has also been used in the Coptic Church, including by Pope Shenouda.⁹⁷ Other Arabic terms and expressions used by Egyptian (including Coptic) scholars and media to denote the Copts outside of Egypt include *Aqbāt mughtaribūn* ('expatriate' Copts), *Aqbāt muhāgīrūn* ('migrant' Copts), and *al-Aqbāt bi-l-*

⁹⁵ The Coptic Orthodox Church Centre UK, "The Church today," accessed February 4, 2024, <http://www.copticcentre.com/the-coptic-orthodox-church/the-church-today/>.

⁹⁶ Samir, "al-Aqbat fi Duwal al-Mahjar bayn al-Madi wa-l-Hadir," 184.

⁹⁷ For example, the pope widely used the term in his conversations with the Egyptian author Ragab Al-Banna, which were published in the afore-mentioned book *al-Aqbat fi Misr wa-l-Mahjar* in 1998.

khārig ('Copts living abroad'),⁹⁸ as well as the emotionally charged term *arḍ al-ghurba* as an alternative to *mahgar*, to describe the experience of Copts (and Egyptians more broadly) living in an estranged place, away from one's own people and outside of one's homeland. In English, as mentioned earlier, the term *diaspora* is widely used both by Coptic and non-Coptic scholars and members of the Church, as the term has become almost interchangeable with "expatriate communities" and has entered daily language. However, due to the ambiguity and Pope Shenouda's stances towards the term, many still turn to the more euphemistic lands of immigration.

The discussions on the legitimacy of the use of *diaspora* and similar terms to describe Coptic communities outside of Egypt continued with the current Coptic pope, Pope Tawadros II. In an interview with an Egyptian TV station conducted in 2016, Pope Tawadros was asked to comment on the term 'Aqbāṭ al-mahgar,' to which he adamantly replied with: "It is not acceptable of course." (*Mish ma' būl tab'an*). The pope explained that the Copts living abroad should not be seen as a separate entity from Copts living in Egypt since Copts, like other Egyptians, regularly migrate from and back to Egypt. Besides avoiding to see Egyptian Copts and Muslims as two separate groups, the pope refuses to see Coptic communities outside of Egypt as permanent, established communities, arguing in the interview that Copts (like other Egyptians) usually migrate at the time of significant crises in the "homeland," and when the situation stabilizes, they are again present in the country.⁹⁹ Such discourses do not only relativize emigration of Egyptian Copts, but also firmly position Egypt as *the* "original center" (to borrow Safran's term) and *the* homeland to which many (or most) Copts supposedly aspire to return to, which might not be the case for the majority of Copts in *mahgar*.

Texts, genres, and textual practices

For religious communities, books, and texts more broadly, hold immense significance, serving as cornerstones of their faith, practice, and self-understanding. These texts, some of them considered sacred, are revered as sources of divine inspiration, offering guidance on ethical conduct, rituals, and the community's core beliefs. In addition, they may act as a constant reminder of the community's history, values, and traditions, fostering a sense of shared heritage and purpose.

^{98.} The terms are written in Modern Standard Arabic, but are transliterated according to the Egyptian Arabic pronunciation.

^{99.} TeN TV, interview with Pope Tawadros II, "Shahid Ta'liq al-Baba Tawadros al-Thani 'ala Mustalah 'Aqbat al-Mahjar," accessed February 4, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iYcBX6lwW4I>.

Through the careful preservation and reinterpretation of some of these texts and the (re)production of new ones, religious communities are able to maintain a connection to their collective heritage and pass down important teachings and values to future generations. In many religious communities, certain physical books, like the Bible, Quran, or various prayer books hold great importance as they are seen as sacred objects that connect individuals to their faith and traditions and are often used in different rituals and practices (like in the liturgy), and thus represent important elements of the community's collective material religious heritage as well as they might hold great importance in believers' daily lives. As such, different types of texts and publications produced and used by a certain religious community do not only serve as sources for learning about the community's beliefs and teachings, but also for grasping their aspirations, concerns, and visions for their future and their strategies for achieving it.¹⁰⁰

It is often the case that 'religious texts' are mentioned when speaking of various religious communities (the term 'religious communities' itself is ambiguous) and repertoires of texts they use to perform an array of (collective) rituals (such as liturgical services or sacraments) within their religious institutions, as well as to sustain their faith and learn or expand their knowledge of their religious traditions. Although they are often categorized as a genre on their own, 'religious texts' remains a very broad term, encompassing an array of texts which may or may not share a set of (formal) characteristics and which perform divergent functions. Pleizier, Huijgen, and te Velde argue that 'religious texts' as a whole help the readers (or 'users') to perform religion. More specifically, religious texts instruct practitioners how to pray, act, believe, and celebrate, reflecting the principal functions of religion, as recognized by sociologists.¹⁰¹ In fact, the authors argue, religious texts invite their users to engage in a religious practice, and in order to perform this function, they "need to both *express* and *guide* these practices."¹⁰² This, therefore, highlights the dual role religious texts play in shaping and maintaining religious life. In other words, religious texts articulate and explain sets of core beliefs and values and present (religious) worldviews to their believers, whereas at the same time they offer instructions and directions for performing certain religious practices. By including details about rituals, ethical codes, and guidelines for practicing one's faith, they often (re)produce discourses on 'proper religious conduct.' This way religious texts are not

^{100.} See Thomas Lindlof, "Interpretive Community: An Approach to Media and Religion," *Journal of Media and Religion* 1, no. 1 (2002): 61-74.

^{101.} Theo Pleizier, Arnold Huijgen, and Dolf te Velde, "On the Construction of Religious Texts: The Case of Writing a Catechism," *NTT Journal for Theology and the Study of Religion* 74, no. 4 (2020): 359-360.

^{102.} *Ibid.*, 368. Emphasis added.

simply sources of information (e.g., on certain aspects of religious traditions), but actively participate in and shape the way people practice and embody their religion. They provide the framework for rituals, ceremonies, as well as everyday (religious) activities. Essentially, religious texts act as both a mirror and a map for religious communities, having the dual (and inseparable) roles crucial for the ongoing practice and preservation of religious life.

It must be noted here that communities produce and use a wide range of informative and instructive textual materials, used in (or for) various religious practices and meant to sustain and bolster (communal) religious life, that may or may not be described as 'strictly religious.' Therefore, the very category of 'religious texts' is often slippery and imprecise since the semantic and practical scope and potential of 'religion' and 'religious' literary genre are in themselves ambiguous and difficult to demarcate, as noted by Murre-van den Berg. As one of the main premises of the "Rewriting Global Orthodoxy" project, texts and publications used for the analysis and included in the project database fit into the wider genre of 'religious texts' and do not necessarily take 'religion' or religious practices as their central topics, but are all produced by authors (or organizations) who are either members of or are affiliated to a particular church.¹⁰³ For example, biographies, history books and publications on arts and culture or for teaching languages might not have 'religion' as their main topics compared to liturgical or theological books, where the 'religious' component might be more evident, however, all of them should be studied within the wider genre repertoire of a religious community (or a church) and thus might be classified as 'religious' since they are produced by or for that particular church and meant to be used by its members.

While genre categorization may seem like a simple or straightforward exercise in classifying and organizing publications, it is certainly not so. First, the very meaning of 'genre' is rather ambiguous and changeable and the term has been defined and used by (literary) scholars and authors in divergent ways. What some might classify within a particular genre, someone else might not (or might see it belonging to multiple genres). Second, categorization of texts according to genres certainly holds much deeper significance and its purpose goes beyond mere classification. Therefore, although 'genre' is an ambiguous category, writing in a particular genre or a classification of texts according to particular genres (whether by authors themselves or by external actors) bears significance.

¹⁰³. Personal communication with Murre-van den Berg, March 13, 2024.

Bawarshi and Reiff suggest that the concept of genre more broadly plays a crucial role in how we understand texts and publications.¹⁰⁴ Furthermore, David Duff argues that although the concept of ‘genre’ is highly unstable, it is still possible to talk about “the ideological functions of genre, [and] about the conditions of possibility for the existence of particular genres,...”¹⁰⁵ Genre is usually understood as a combination of form and substance (content), but to this formal and rather simplistic understanding we can add a couple of other significant qualities of texts such as their intended use (and how they are actually used) and who they are intended for (‘target groups’). Following Carolyn Miller’s conceptualization of genre as a “social action” allows us to see ‘genre’ beyond its formal characteristics, specifically its form and substance, and to focus on the action it is supposed to perform and accomplish. Miller notes that genre has been theorized as symbolic social action, but reminds us that such action is materialized through various practices, resulting in empirical consequences.¹⁰⁶ For the purposes of this study, I propose to look at genre as tools for understanding what texts aim to achieve, their intended meanings, and how they connect to both individual intentions and broader social realities. This highlights the way genres, while existing as conceptual categories, also have real-world consequences through their materialization in social practices, as suggested by Miller. Since genre “makes recurrent patterns significant,”¹⁰⁷ it also characterizes communities, helping us understand genres as reflections of communities’ experiences — their visions, goals, and struggles.

This brings us to the concept of wider textual practices of a particular (religious) group or community. Textual practices, as laid down by the main premise of the “Rewriting Global Orthodoxy” project, encompasses a complex network of an array of activities and practices revolving around and related to texts. Diasporic community’s textual practices include writing brand new texts, translating and (re)publishing new editions of already existing ones, importing, preserving, and selling various types of publications from the ‘homeland,’ replicating literary and publishing trends from that ‘homeland’ and (re)inventing new ones, ‘genre repertoires’ in which this writing and publishing occurs (i.e., networks of authors, publishers, and readers (or ‘consumers’) of such publications, as well as the motivations for publishing those texts and the ways they are (supposed to be) used. Such an approach helps us see

^{104.} See Anis S. Bawarshi and Mary Jo Reiff, *Genre: An Introduction to History, Theory, Research, and Pedagogy* (Anderson: Parlor Press, 2010).

^{105.} David Duff, *Modern Genre Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 18.

^{106.} See Carolyn Miller, “Genre as Social Action,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 70 (1984): 151–176., and idem, “Genre as Social Action (1984), Revisited 30 Years Later (2014),” *Letras & Letras* 31 (2015): 56–72.

^{107.} Miller, “Genre as Social Action (1984),” 69.

a community's textual practices more than just a sum of their publications and highlight the importance (or even primacy) of context over mere texts in isolation, reflecting Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts of heteroglossia. Bakhtin also reminds us of the importance of intertextuality, shedding light on the mutual connectedness of texts published and used by a community, where a text is certainly not produced in a vacuum and becomes meaningful only in relation to other texts that engage with it (directly or indirectly).¹⁰⁸ It is this relation and the context that we need to pay special attention to when examining the meanings and implications of certain texts within and for a particular community, which ultimately points to the fact that presumed, separate (sub)genres actually act as larger 'genre repertoires,' where such subcategories (like history, theology, or teaching materials) are rather blurred and often function in interaction with each other.

Building on this theoretical foundation, I argue that we should not understand periodicals and educational materials, as well as other church publications more broadly, as publications corresponding to separate and well-defined genres with clearly distinct domains and modes of use. Periodicals and educational materials, publications that form the basis of my analysis, are in fact amalgams of different types of texts and publications which deal with a large variety of topics and themes, produced by different authors, and which incorporate elements of various genres, such as history, theology, or spirituality (although these are certainly not fixed and well-defined categories either, as discussed earlier). What sets them apart, from each other and from other materials, are mainly the format (magazines often have a distinguishable format compared to other types of publications) and their intended principal purposes (for example, Sunday school education materials are all essentially and primarily intended to be used for religious teaching).

Periodicals and educational materials were chosen as the main sources for analysis for several principal reasons; first, official diocesan magazines and materials used in church education and upbringing programs are often indicative of the criteria of group membership. Therefore, they are often able to inform the reader about who is a member of the Coptic Orthodox Church and/or of the local Coptic community and based on what criteria. Hence, the work of membership definition automatically delineates communal boundaries, revealing who is 'in' and who is 'out,' based on, for instance, ethnicity and country of origin, belonging to a particular church denomination, sharing a common language or set of values, among others. This brings us to the second reason, which is connected to the fact that communal

¹⁰⁸. Tzvetan Todorov, *Mikhail Bakhtin: the Dialogical Principle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 60-74, cited in Berger, *History and Identity*, 22.

magazines and educational materials exhibit narratives of self-image and self-presentation. In other words, they may showcase how the Coptic churches in the Netherlands and Milan see their own Church and their local communities, their histories, and their traditions. This is often expressed and shaped in the wider context of seeing oneself and one's own place in a wider society and vis-à-vis others, which is true for every type of identity or self-image formation, but it might be even more salient for minority groups.

Thirdly, both magazines and educational and teaching materials have a descriptive as well as a prescriptive nature. Such materials, thus, reflect (i.e. *describe*) various aspects of communal developments (for instance, the growth of the communities and how this is reported), the churches' priorities and goals, and where the communities 'stood' at a certain point in time. They might also define or *prescribe* communal values, behaviors, and norms, which is especially explicitly seen through the clear pedagogical aspect and component of educational materials used in the studied Coptic churches. Both types of materials help to provide possible answers to the following question: what kinds of knowledge, values, and teachings are understood as *necessary* or *important* for the members of the Coptic churches in the Netherlands and Milan to possess and adopt in order to express and fulfill their communal belonging? To put it differently, communal magazines and teaching materials can be understood as indicative of what church leaders (or more specifically, producers of those materials) deem as important, or even interesting, for their members (in this case, readers or Sunday school students) based on their group membership, both in the Coptic Orthodox Church more broadly and the local diasporic community in particular. Moreover, both the descriptive and prescriptive aspects of the studied magazines and educational materials reveal a particular temporal aspect of the maintenance of communal identities – a conscious and active attention to the future. Hence, with their specific forms and intended purposes, as well as their prescriptive roles (even if only symbolic), communal magazines and educational texts frequently disclose communities' outlook on the future – where 'we' *should* go and what kind of community 'we' *should* be.

Lastly, the two magazines of the Coptic communities in the Netherlands and Milan and the materials they use in their church education and upbringing were chosen as the main materials for analysis because of their focus (at least partially, in the case of the Dutch Coptic magazine) on children and youth. Publications produced and geared towards children and youth, as well as those focusing on these two groups in their contents, mainly geared towards parents or Sunday school teachers as they often explore topics such as ('correct') upbringing, family or intergenerational

relations, can serve as crucial sources for investigating some of the central questions and themes of this study related to the processes of community formation and the maintenance of communal identities. For example, community growth is often seen by church leaders through the passing on of church and homeland traditions to children, the communities' outlooks on the future are realized through a special focus on children and young people as the 'future leaders of the communities' who ought to be socialized into 'correct' church teachings, or seeing second- and third-generation Copts at the center of emplacement and rooting strategies, as community members who were born in host countries.

In addition to analyzing the content (for example, detecting the most important topics and themes featuring in texts and prominent discourses) and the language and style of writing (choice of the language, of words and expressions, and to what group of readers the text is directed) of the collected materials, particular attention has been given to the context of production and use of such materials within particular communities. Furthermore, placing individual publications and materials within the broader context of textual practices sheds light on the interconnectivity of its elements (i.e. books, booklets, media...), both at the communal and the transnational (or 'trans-border') levels. Many publications share parts of the same content, some are produced as collections of multiple materials, and materials from other Coptic communities are used for different practices and activities in the church. Since such publications are certainly not produced or used in a vacuum, I argue that it is crucial to pay attention to the importance of the environment and the contextualization. Here, it is important to acknowledge the concept of intertextuality of Mikhail Bakhtin. Bakhtin suggests that if one wants to understand a certain text, one needs to turn to and read other texts that engage with it. In Bakhtin's view, the world is a dynamic conversation, or a dialogic exchange, and not a fixed entity. Texts are like voices in this ongoing dialogue, influencing and responding to each other. This "dialogic contact" brings texts to life, sparking meaning through interaction with other texts or contexts, whether within a reader's mind, a formal commentary, or even with symbolic words like those attributed to God.¹⁰⁹

Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has set a robust theoretical and conceptual foundation for my dissertation by critically engaging with discussions on group formation, group boundaries, and the nuances of belonging among diaspora communities. It has also

¹⁰⁹. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Speech genres and other late essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986).

emphasized the significant role of texts and genres in shaping community formation. By closely following the theories of Fredrik Barth and Rogers Brubaker and Cooper, I have been able to navigate away from the often ambiguous and over-simplified term 'identity' and instead, have applied a more precise analytical lens to explore group dynamics and boundary-making within Coptic communities in Europe.

Furthermore, this analysis does not extensively theorize 'diaspora' but seeks to provide a more nuanced understanding of the term, especially challenging the static binary of 'homeland-hostland' which often oversimplifies the complex diasporic experiences. The exploration of texts and literary genres, guided by the insights of scholars like Carolyn Miller and Mikhail Bakhtin, enriches our understanding of communal publications. This deeper comprehension highlights how texts contribute to forming communities, facilitating communication both internally and externally, and defining essential communal categories and their boundaries. Such a focus offers a more nuanced and complex perspective on the roles that texts and publications play in revealing and shaping the internal dynamics within communities.

Chapter 3.

Creating the Coptic Mahgar: The Coptic Orthodox Church in Europe

Introduction

This chapter explores the establishment and growth of the Coptic Orthodox Church in Europe, examining the factors that fostered its development and the unique histories of these communities. However, studying Coptic migration to Europe presents some challenges, especially in distinguishing between Muslim and Christian emigration waves in Egyptian data, because censuses rarely record religious affiliation. Existing figures often lack reliable estimates of the Coptic population. While Coptic authors often emphasize persecution as a key driver of migration, state sources and non-Coptic Egyptian scholars downplay the influence of religious tensions. This chapter argues for a nuanced approach, acknowledging the potential impact of religious factors while recognizing the broader context of Egyptian emigration.

The chapter offers an extensive historical account of Coptic (and Egyptian) emigration from Egypt, together with the analysis of social, economic, and political factors that motivated people to leave, as well as the first comprehensive overview of Coptic immigration to Europe and the establishment of Coptic churches therein. Drawing on historical records, church publications, interviews, and a number of scholarly secondary sources, the chapter explores the formation of Coptic parishes outside of Egypt, the clergy's role in establishing diasporic religious life, the challenges faced by early migrants, as well as immigration patterns and the geographical distribution of Coptic communities across Europe.

Coptic emigration - Reasons, motivations, and possibilities

The first noteworthy waves of migration of Copts, and more broadly Egyptians, in contemporary Egyptian history occurred in the nineteenth century. Increasingly since the eighteenth century, and notably under the Muhammad Ali dynasty during the nineteenth century, Egypt had been exposed to Western political powers, such as France, Great Britain, and the United States, their sociocultural influences, and notably their technological and educational developments. The presence of Western missionary movements, which had been active in Egypt for several centuries (some longer than others), together with their educational projects, familiarized many Egyptians with 'the West.' Gabriel Abdelsayed notes that the Copts' attraction to the United States emerged with the American Presbyterian missionaries and

the establishment of American schools across the country, such as the American University in Cairo, founded in 1919 by the American Mission in Egypt.¹¹⁰

As a result of the more direct contact with different European countries during the reign of Muhammad Ali's successors, smaller cultural expeditions of students traveled to Europe already in the nineteenth century. During the rise of Egyptian nationalism, smaller temporary migration flows to and from Egypt took place at the turn of the centuries.¹¹¹ Under British rule (1882-1956), Egyptians became more familiar with migration to Europe, particularly to the United Kingdom. In the early decades of the twentieth century, many Egyptian students earned opportunities to pursue their higher education in British universities before returning to Egypt. Copts capitalized on these opportunities and advanced in their academic and professional careers across the UK, securing positions particularly in the medical profession. This encouraged some of them to seek permanent residence and to eventually settle in the United Kingdom, thus leading to the establishment of the first organized wave of Coptic (and Egyptian more generally) emigration in the contemporary period, characterized by a rather small group of highly educated and professional individuals, which would expand towards the end of the century.¹¹²

Although the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw the first waves of migration from Egypt, these waves were predominantly small scaled, temporary, and sporadic. The outset of larger and more organized Coptic emigration flows from Egypt occurred during the early stages of Gamal Abdel Nasser's presidency (1954-1970). Therefore, the 1950s marked a new phase of Egyptian migration, with an increasing number of Egypt's population seeking to emigrate due to various sociopolitical, economic, and religious circumstances of the time. Most of the scholarship on the phenomenon of Coptic, and more broadly Egyptian, emigration from Egypt and the establishment of Coptic/Egyptian 'diaspora' takes the 1950s as its starting point. Although one might indeed speak of the establishment of an 'Egyptian diaspora' and Egyptian migration waves as a whole, here I will focus on the emigration of Copts. Many of them had additional motivations to leave their homeland besides more universal and common reasons shared by their non-Christian compatriots.

^{110.} Gabriel Abdelsayed, "Migration, Coptic: United States of America," in *The Coptic Encyclopedia* (Vol. 5), ed. Aziz S. Atiya (New York: Macmillan, 1991), 2.

There were certainly more Western missionary schools in Egypt before 1919. For more see Heather Sharkey, *American Evangelicals in Egypt: Missionary Encounters in an Age of Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008) and Paul Sedra, *From Mission to Modernity: Evangelicals, Reformers, and Education in Nineteenth Century Egypt* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2011).

^{111.} Ayman Zohry, *Contemporary Egyptian Migration 2003* (no place, IOM, 2003), 20.

^{112.} Fuad Megally, "Migration, Coptic: Great Britain," in *The Coptic Encyclopedia*, 8.

A momentous shift in contemporary history of Egypt, which at the same time spurred the outset of the first larger migration wave from Egypt, was the 1952 Revolution. The revolution against King Farouk and the British occupiers initiated a process of social, political, and economic changes. One of the most consequential changes brought about by the Nasserist regime after the overthrow of the monarchy was the launching of a program of nationalization (*ta'mīm*) in 1956. Among other things, the reform included extending state control over the financial sector and various other industries, such as transport, heavy industry, construction, public works, hospitality sector (e.g. hotels), department stores, cinemas and theaters, newspapers and publishing houses. During the 1950s and 1960s, the Nasserist regime seized large portions of property from wealthy Egyptians and placed it under the control of the state. Much of this property was subsequently nationalized or distributed to peasants and small farmers.¹¹³

Targeting the wealthiest, land-owning citizens and the private sector, Nasser's socialist regime and its *ta'mīm* laws disproportionately affected Coptic families, many of whom dominated in the sectors now taken over by the state and controlled by Muslim-dominated agencies. Besides losing large portions of their profits, new policies led to the sense of injustice among some Copts. In the words of one of the first Coptic immigrants to the Netherlands (immigrated in 1970), Copts were "pushed in[to] the corner."¹¹⁴ Although Nasser's crackdown on political and religious radicalism (e.g. ban of the Muslim Brotherhood) contributed to a relatively peaceful period when it comes interreligious tensions, his policies greatly affected the structure and organization of the Coptic community as a whole. Many Coptic lay elites lost their power and influence both in public sphere and in the Church. Sebastian Elsässer observes that the newly created Egyptian elite lacked significant Coptic presence, a remarkably different situation compared to the previous decades. In addition, no Copt rose to a prominent political position during Nasser. To illustrate, in 1957 no Copt was elected in the first post-Revolution parliament. Moreover, the Community Council (*al-Majlis al-Milli*), run by powerful upper class Coptic archons, who had acquired an influential position within the Coptic community and challenged the Coptic clerical authorities, was shut down in 1962. The shutting down of the Council practically erased the influential laity's relevance in the community and thus meant a higher power and autonomy given back to the clergy, headed by Pope Kyrillos VI.¹¹⁵

^{113.} Angela Joya, *The Roots of Revolt: A Political Economy of Egypt from Nasser to Mubarak* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 38–59.

There are scholars who claim many Copts were discriminated against in the process of land redistribution, particularly in regions where the main landowning families were Copts. Elsässer, *The Coptic Question in the Mubarak Era*, 75. See Edward Wakin, *A Lonely Minority: the Modern Story of Egypt's Copts* (Bloomington: iUniverse, 2000) and Samira Bahr, *al-Aqbat fi al-Haya al-Siyasiyya al-Misriyya* (no publisher, 1979), 135–150.

^{114.} Personal communication with a first-generation Copt in the Netherlands, July 24, 2023.

^{115.} Elsässer, *The Coptic Question in the Mubarak Era*, 74–75.

Even though many Egyptian, including Coptic, elite families remained wealthy after the agrarian and nationalization reforms had come into force, much of the cosmopolitan elite left the country during Nasser's presidency. Losing their land and much of their profits, as well as influential positions in the Coptic community, and motivated by the newly created economic crisis after the 1967 war, a growing number of Copts wished to migrate to North America, Australia, and western Europe where they could find better financial and professional opportunities. However, as Father Tadros Malaty explains, president Nasser's policy significantly hampered emigration, "almost closing the door" to those who wished to leave the country by imposing exit visas and toughening the process of acquiring necessary approvals to emigrate.¹¹⁶ In addition, immigration laws in many Western countries, including the US, Australia and several European countries, such as Germany, were still predominantly strict at the time, limiting permanent residence and placing various restrictions on new immigration.¹¹⁷ Emigration waves of the 1950s and 1960s were, therefore, still relatively low-scaled and limited primarily to upper class and highly educated Egyptians, and consisted significantly of young people who moved out of Egypt to continue their education.¹¹⁸ An approximate number of Copts who left Egypt during Nasser is difficult to obtain, although some authors, such as Brigitte Voile, have claimed that around 100,000 Copts settled in the US during Nasser. However, according to the US Office of Immigration Statistics, "only" 7,577 Egyptians acquired legal permanent resident status between 1950 and 1969, significantly downplaying Voile's estimation.¹¹⁹

Subsequent decades witnessed significantly higher rates of emigration waves from Egypt. After assuming the presidential position in 1970, Anwar al-Sadat steered Egypt in a different direction from his predecessor. Nasser's socialism, secularism,

^{116.} Zayyan, *Aqbat al-Mahjar*, 19.

^{117.} For example, Australia had an immigration act known as "White Australia policy," established in 1901 and lasted until the 1950s, in which the commonwealth legislation sought to restrict all non-European immigration, partly by imposing a language knowledge test in any European language to those who wished to immigrate. The policy became less strict starting from the 1950s and significantly changed during the 1970s.

See Roger White and Bedassa Tadesse, "Immigration Policy, Cultural Pluralism and Trade: Evidence from the White Australia Policy," *Pacific Economic Review* 12, no. 4 (2007): 489-509.

^{118.} For a story of a Coptic family who immigrated to the US in the 1960s, see Hany Takla, "Egypt in the 1960s, Migration Fever, and Homemaking in Los Angeles," (Egypt Migrations), April 29, 2022, <https://egyptmigrations.com/2022/04/29/egypt-in-the-1960s-migration-fever-and-homemaking-in-los-angeles/>. For more on oral family accounts of migration to North America, see Akladios, "Ordinary Copts."

^{119.} Although Elsässer did not underline that the report shows the number of legal *permanent* residents and not those holding legal resident status in general, thus showing a lower number than the overall number of Egyptian immigrants to the US, the estimate of 100,000 Copts (only) certainly seems exaggerated. See 2006 *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics* (Springfield, VA: Office of Immigration Statistics, 2007).

pan-Arabism and economic nationalization were gradually replaced by Sadat's capitalism, Islamism, Egyptian nationalism, and economic liberalism. The two most consequential aspects of Sadat's policy that led to an increased migration among Egyptians, and particularly Copts, in the 1970s were the "open door" economic policy (*infitāḥ*, lit. openness, opening) and Islamization of the state and the return of Islamist movements in Egypt's political and public life.

As a response to the economic crisis in the late 1960s and to the regional shift to free market, Sadat, contrary to Nasser, "opened" the door for foreign investors and for a bigger role of the private sector in the Egyptian economy. Sadat's regime removed exit visas in 1974, believing that allowing workers more mobility would result in them channeling the money they earned from working abroad back into the Egyptian economy. This led to many Egyptian workers migrating particularly to the Gulf states. Although the regime was able to motivate a growing number of Egyptians to migrate for labor to the Gulf towards the end of the 1970s, *infitāḥ* policy was not successful in producing new employment opportunities for those who remained in Egypt.¹²⁰ Many Egyptians were, consequently, motivated to seek professional opportunities and financial stability elsewhere, and the removal of exit visas significantly facilitated this quest.

The sociopolitical climate of the period had a profound impact on the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt and the position of the Coptic community as a whole, deepening and generating new debates on the Copts' status as a minority, the question of their full citizenship and national belonging, and their political representation before the state. Many scholars describe Sadat's presidency as marked by an intensified sectarianism, along with and, in fact, partially affected by the return of political Islam in Egypt's public sphere.¹²¹ While it is commonly believed that political sectarianism in Egypt began in the 1970s, some scholars suggest it was already present under the Nasser regime. Despite Nasser's promises of equality and democracy, his authoritarian rule and reliance on patron-client dynamics limited true meritocratic advancement, often influenced by sectarian bias. This resulted in notably few Copts in public and professional sectors, including the military, academia, certain medical fields, and political leadership, with no Christians elected in the 1976 People's Assembly elections.¹²²

^{120.} Joya, *The Roots of Revolt*, 52-57.

^{121.} See for example, Kirk J Beattie, *Egypt during the Sadat Years* (New York: Palgrave, 2000); Jeffrey T. Kenney, *Muslim Rebels: Kharijites and the Politics of Extremism in Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); and Aaron Rock-Singer, *Practicing Islam in Egypt: print media and Islamic revival* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

^{122.} See "The Copts" (The American Coptic Association, New Jersey), vol. 4, no. 1 (January 1977): 3.

Supporting the claim that sectarianism has been an apparent characteristic of the Republican regime since Nasser is the fact that the regime has resorted to dealing with its citizens based on their group identities, rather than individually. In this system, which Nazih N. Ayubi describes as corporatism, the state and different social groups interact through a mediator, which was, in the case of Copts, the Coptic Orthodox Church. As shown earlier, Nasser curtailed the power of Coptic influential laity and handed it over, almost completely, to the patriarch, consequently making the Church the main social and political “spokesperson” of the Coptic community, which has remained the case ever since. Thus, Nasser was able to “confessionalize” the Coptic identity, almost reproducing the Ottoman millet system, in which the state dealt with its non-Muslim citizens based on their socioreligious, denominational belonging and through their (religious) leaders as the groups’ main representatives.¹²³ Besides indications of the sectarian allocation of public offices, the government seems to have preferred to treat the Copts as a separate sectarian group, rather than as regular citizens.¹²⁴

In order to move away from Nasser’s secular ideology and to combat leftist groups, Sadat facilitated the return and a more active presence of Islamist movements. In general, Sadat was seen as the president who carried out the Islamization of the Egyptian state and society. After losing the Six-Day war in 1967, many middle- and low-class Egyptians, who represented the majority of the population, felt they needed an alternative to the failed Nasserite ideology of socialism and liberal nationalism. Eventually, many Egyptians believed Islam to be the major relevant cultural and national element binding most of the country’s citizens. After becoming the president, Sadat began adopting Islamist ideology in this official policy, becoming closer to different Islamist movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, and allowing for an evident Islamization of the media and of the university life, which resulted in numerous clashes between Muslim and Christian students.¹²⁵ Furthermore, president Sadat supported the idea of Islam becoming the official state religion and sharia law as the main source of legislation, including for personal and family law for every citizen, including Christians. This led to a strong opposition by the Church and its leader Pope Shenouda III (in office since 1971), who feared living in an ‘Islamic state’ in which they would be considered as second-class citizens (like dhimmis in the millet system).¹²⁶

^{123.} See Saba Mahmood, “Religious Freedom, the Minority Question, and Geopolitics in the Middle East,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 54, no. 2 (2012): 418–446.

^{124.} Elsässer, *The Coptic Question in the Mubarak Era*, 80.

^{125.} The Coptic Association in New Jersey reported multiple cases and accounts of the harassment of Christian students at universities across Egypt. See “The Copts,” vol. 4, no. 1 (January 1977).

^{126.} Hasan, *Christians versus Muslims*, 105–106.

In light of Sadat's Islamization of the state and the intensified sectarianism, Copts came to be seen as a single group, represented by their Church, where their main identity marker became their religious affiliation, not their citizenship.¹²⁷ Moreover, sectarian violence became more frequent amidst strong public Islamist propaganda whereas during Sadat's final years the relationship between the state and the Church tightened, culminating in Pope Shenouda's house arrest in 1981.¹²⁸ What further worsened the relationship between the state and the Church, and put more pressure on the regime regarding the rising sectarian strife and the overall status of the Copts in Egypt, was the political lobbying and activism of different groups of diaspora Copts, mainly based in the US, who began to draw attention to the worsening position of the Coptic community in Egypt (as well as of Christians in the Middle East more broadly), framing their status as a "persecuted minority."¹²⁹ Mina Samir suggests that Sadat's regime socially and politically marginalized the Copts, who were often overtly "threatened" by the Islamist political organizations, which, along with economic and financial aspirations, motivated a growing number of Copts to seek a better life outside of Egypt.¹³⁰ Besides the sectarianism and discrimination that affected many members of the Coptic community, the overall political situation in the country marked by a widespread dissatisfaction over the peace treaty with Israel and the subsequent exacerbation of the radical Islamists' activity contributed to the worsening of the general social climate in the country, driving both Christians and Muslims to emigrate.¹³¹ Facilitated by the *infitāḥ* policies, Copts (and Egyptians) of different classes were able to emigrate, unlike in the past decades.

Soon after his accession to the presidential position in 1981 (after Sadat's assassination by radical Islamists the same year), Hosni Mubarak vowed to combat Islamic

^{127.} Tadros, "Vicissitudes in the Entente between the Coptic Orthodox Church and the State in Egypt (1952-2007)," 271.

^{128.} For more on the state-Church crisis and the political role of Pope Shenouda III in the 1970s, see Tadros "Vicissitudes in the Entente between the Coptic Orthodox Church and the State in Egypt (1952-2007)"; Hasan, *Christians versus Muslims*; and Elsässer, *The Coptic Question in the Mubarak Era*, Chapter 3.

^{129.} Such pronouncements and activism were published in the journal titled *The Copts*, published by the American Coptic Association located in New Jersey since 1974.

^{130.} Samir, "al-Aqbat fi Duwal al-Mahjar bayn al-Madi wa-l-Hadir," 184.

^{131.} There is a tendency, usually among Coptic authors, to disregard the fact that the fundamentalist Islam was unwanted (to say the least) not only by Christians, but by many Muslim and secular Egyptians as well. Although Islamist politics were unambiguously disadvantageous to the Copts, their status as equal citizens and their freedom to openly practice their religion, many of Egypt's non-Christian population also did not welcome Islamist movements which greatly contributed to an unstable sociopolitical climate in the country. See for example Sigrid Faath and Hanspeter Mattes, "Political conflicts and migration in the MENA states," in *Migration from the Middle East and North Africa to Europe*, eds. Michael Bommers, Heinz Fassmann and Wiebke Sievers (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014), 159-190.

fundamentalism (particularly the Muslim Brotherhood) and soon amended the state's relationship with the leadership of the Coptic Church. One can argue that since 1985, when Pope Shenouda was released from his "house arrest" by Mubarak and could continue his role as the leader of the Coptic Church, the regime and the Church have had a rather stable relationship based on a mutual recognition and dependence until today (with the exception of the short-lived rule of Mohamed Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood between 2012 and 2013). However, making an important distinction is due here. Stable official relations between the state and Church leadership have not necessarily always translated to peaceful inter-communal relations among common people and stable state-Church relations certainly did not lead to an absence of sectarian violence, which persisted throughout the 1980s.

Arguably, one of the pressing issues that contributed to continued sectarian tensions and Islamist attacks on churches, and to the more general sentiments of social inequality and discrimination against the Coptic community, is the renovation and building of new churches across the country. A decree from 1937, which continued to be applied throughout the twentieth century, included multiple regulations and requirements for building a new church (including statements from Muslims neighbors and their attitudes towards a potential new church in the neighborhood), which overburdened the Church and the entire process to a great extent. In many cases, requests for the renovation or establishment of new churches were declined. However, as was the case with broader evasion of building and construction laws during Mubarak's presidency, there have been reports suggesting many churches and mosques were in fact built without legal permissions since the 1950s.¹³² Claims over illegally built churches have consequently led to numerous quarrels and violent attacks on those churches by Muslims, particularly in Upper Egypt, throughout the entire period of Mubarak's presidency.

Besides the struggles and hardships brought by the issue of building churches, Coptic presence in Egypt's political and public administration positions remained low. The Coptic Associations of the U.S. and Canada, vocal in their overseas activism about the unfavorable status of Christians in Egypt, argued that the discrimination against Copts in high profile state and educational positions continued during Mubarak. For instance, several of the associations' reports point to the fact that no Christians were among newly appointed or promoted police officers, judges, professors, and doctoral students in various police departments, administration councils, and universities in 1984.¹³³

^{132.} Elsässer, *The Coptic Question in the Mubarak Era*, 93-94.

^{133.} See *The Copts* vol. 2, no. 1 & 2 (June 1984).

During this period, Pope Shenouda III secured his role as the sociopolitical representative of the Coptic community, by developing a less confrontational and a more cautious attitude towards the president and his regime.¹³⁴ The period of Mubarak's presidency and Shenouda's patriarchy, lasting about three decades, was marked by a powerful public discourse of national unity (*waḥda waṭaniyya*), which became more prominent in the 1980s and 1990s, and has remained present until today.¹³⁵ In this period, the regime, together with the leadership of the Church, emphasized equality and sameness among all Egyptians and ignored the religious difference and its significance in politics and society. In this way, they have managed to avoid addressing questions of citizenship, social equality, Copts' status as a minority, and sectarian violence which was often relativized and ignored for the sake of creating an apparent sense of stability. Subsequently, Copts continued to face discrimination and the amicable Church-state relations certainly did not curtail emigration.

Another important factor that contributed to increased and shifting migration dynamics within and from Egypt during this period, is the rapid population growth. Egypt's population of 19 million in 1947 doubled in nearly thirty years. The population continued to grow at a similar rate in the following decades, and by 2006, it had reached a total of 76 million Egyptians. This rapid population growth put additional pressure on Egypt's scarce arable land and contributed to a higher level of unemployment.¹³⁶

During the 1970s and 1980s, many Egyptians migrated to the oil-rich Arab Gulf countries for labor, primarily to Saudi Arabia and Iraq. Zohry notes that more than 90 percent of these labor migrants were men.¹³⁷ For many of them, migration to the Arab Gulf was intended to be temporary. Even during Nasser's presidency, some young educated Egyptians were sent to work as school teachers in Arab neighboring countries.¹³⁸ Between 1970 and 1974, an estimated 300,000 Egyptians migrated to the Gulf and the overall number of Egyptian emigrants increased to about two million by 1980. Emigration became such an important socioeconomic and political

^{134.} Pope Shenouda's outspoken role as the representative of the Coptic community to the state and his confrontations with President Sadat led to a well-known conflict with Matta El Meskeen, the head of St. Macarius monastery and a key figure in the modern Coptic revival. For more on the conflict between the two, see Hasan, *Christian versus Muslims*.

^{135.} The national unity discourse was adopted and followed by both Muslims and Christians, and was further "transported" to diaspora communities.

^{136.} Ayman Zohry, "Migration and development in Egypt," in *Migration from the Middle East and North Africa to Europe*, 76-77.

^{137.} Ibid., 84.

^{138.} Stene, "Into the Lands of Immigration," 254-255.

phenomenon in Egypt during this time and therefore needed to be systematically monitored and organized by the state, which led to the foundation of the Ministry of Emigration and Egyptian Expatriates' Affairs in 1981. In the subsequent years, the number of Egyptian workers in the Gulf decreased due to the economic effects of the Iraq-Iran war (1980 – 1988) and then the Gulf war (1990 – 1991). Upon the outset of the latter, around one million Egyptians were forced to return to Egypt.¹³⁹ While a large proportion of Egyptian workers in the Gulf returned and settled back in their home country, many of them decided to permanently migrate to western Europe, North America, and Australia in search for better job opportunities and financial and social stability.

As indicated earlier, it is often difficult to follow particularly Coptic emigration movements within the broader Egyptian emigration. Some scholars have tried to point to divergent emigration patterns between Copts and Muslims when it comes to their preferred destinations. So, can we speak of a specifically “Coptic” emigration? Delhaye points to shared reasons and motivations for emigration among Muslims and Copts, highlighting economic factors, thus arguing it is almost futile to speak of a specifically Coptic emigration from Egypt. However, he claims that the choice of the country of immigration varies significantly based on the migrant’s religion. Delhaye writes, therefore, that Coptic immigration patterns have been different from those of Egyptian Muslims, who, for example, preferred to migrate to the Arab Gulf states, while, drawing from the information provided by diasporic Coptic churches, Copts have largely migrated to “the West.”¹⁴⁰ Even if one assumes that some Copts decided not to emigrate (even temporarily) to the Gulf due to the major religion of the host country (for example, with regards to the status of Islam in those countries and the virtual absence of Christians there) and considering today’s geographic distribution of Coptic churches primarily in “the West,” this does not tell us much about differences in immigration patterns between Egyptian Muslims and Copts. Some studies have pointed to a Coptic presence in some Arab Gulf countries, such as Kuwait.¹⁴¹ Besides political and economic reasons for leaving the Gulf states, the strict and exclusionary residency and naturalization laws of these countries also prompted many Egyptians to leave (or not to migrate there at all) and seek permanent residence in more economically stable and prosperous countries, such as the US, Canada,

^{139.} Zohry, “Migration and development in Egypt,” 78-79.

^{140.} Grégoire Delhaye, “Les racines du dynamisme de la diaspora copte,” *EchoGéo* (2008): 4. <https://journals.openedition.org/echogeo/6963>.

^{141.} See Philips, ““We love martyrdom, but we also love life” and Benjamin Daniel Crace, “Pneumatic piety: a sociotheological study of the Coptic orthodox diaspora in Kuwait,” (PhD diss., University of Birmingham, 2018).

Australia, and many western European countries.¹⁴² This has led some scholars to characterize Egyptian migration to other Arab countries as “temporary migration,” while emigration to North America, Europe, and Australia has been often referred to as “permanent migration.”¹⁴³ In addition, Delhaye’s remark that the presence of numerous Coptic churches in ‘Western countries’ points to the Copts’ preference for immigrating to those countries (vis-à-vis Egyptian Muslims’ preferences) does not necessarily exclude potentially equally extensive migration waves of Egyptian Muslims to ‘the West,’ who often happen to be ‘communally (institutionally) invisible’ in their host countries compared to the Copts.

Besides various personal reasons for choosing certain regions and countries over others as their immigration destinations (for instance, as part of the so-called ‘chain migration’ waves), it is safe to assume that the choices of Copts (and of many other Egyptians) of their migration destinations were primarily shaped by various practical and legal reasons. For example, for many people who wished to emigrate, a preference for certain countries was determined by a prior knowledge or familiarity with the culture of a particular country, often marked by the knowledge of the country’s language.¹⁴⁴ Another significant criterion were particular immigration laws and policies of those particular countries. Therefore, not only did those who wished to migrate choose their destination based on its overall potential to meet their needs (which constituted the very motivation to emigrate in the first place), they also needed to account for how difficult their migration journey to certain areas or countries would be. Hence, first-generation migrants who pioneered migration waves to ‘new’ countries (i.e. countries to which the Copts had not immigrated before) were often faced with the difficult task of choosing their migration destination and initiating their journey alone or with their families. Whereas this might not have been the case for those who acquired opportunities to continue their education abroad (and who were more financially ‘well-off’) and migrated prior to the 1970s, it was certainly the case for the majority of emigrants in the 1980s and 1990s, and onwards. It is important to note that many Copts who decided to emigrate in fact did not know whether they would permanently settle in their host countries, perhaps especially those who moved out to study.

^{142.} Philips, ““We love martyrdom, but we also love life”,” 229.

^{143.} Ayman Zohry, “Egyptian Youth and the European Eldorado: Journeys of Hope and Despair,” Danish Institute for International Studies Working Paper no. 2006/18 (2006): 3.

^{144.} This might explain to an extent why many Copts have chosen the US, UK, France, and Italy as their immigration destinations since the earliest stages of Egyptian emigration waves, due to the strong presence of those countries in Egypt between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries.

So, where have the Copts (among other Egyptians) immigrated to since the 1970s and what do we know about their choices of migration destinations? What were the conditions and circumstances of their emigration journeys in relation to the host countries' immigration laws and policies? If we focus on the permanent emigration of the Copts to 'the West,' and particularly to Europe, we see some common developments and challenges when it comes to practical and legal aspects of immigration to such countries which determined the demographics of Coptic emigration waves. As Nora Stene notes, visa requirements (be they for tourist or work visas) in most countries in North America and Europe, as well as in Australia, favored resourceful and educated migrants, particularly those with proficiency in a foreign language (most often English and/or French). If they could not migrate based on their professional and educational skills and resources, some were able to 'benefit' from their familial ties to those who had already migrated before them.¹⁴⁵ For example, this was the case with some Copts whose family members were able to emigrate prior to the "open door" policies and to secure high profile jobs in their host countries, primarily in medicine, engineering, and commerce. Here, it is important to underline the fact that not every migration to 'the West' ended up in a permanent settlement. As one member of the Coptic Orthodox clergy in the Netherlands has shared, in the 1970s, some university students traveled to the Netherlands for seasonal summer jobs, of whom some returned to Egypt and some were able to stay permanently.¹⁴⁶ With regards to the so-called chain migration and family reunification in host countries, it is important to mention a very common pattern that has persisted until today. In many situations, the male member of the family would emigrate alone, and after settling and finding a job, he would be followed by his female partner and/or children. Therefore, in many cases, early stages of emigration and the demographic composition of newly established expatriate Coptic communities were more male-dominated. More generally, migration to 'the West' has been described as having a strong family character, compared to Egyptian migration to Arab states.¹⁴⁷

If we focus on the economic and sociopolitical factors as push factors for emigration, emigrants were then mainly concerned with choosing their destinations in search for economic and political prosperity and stability. Although it is hard to track down and understand separate migration waves to various individual countries and to obtain somewhat reliable estimates on the number of Egyptians, and of Copts in particular, in different countries across decades, I will attempt to provide an overview of the

^{145.} Stene, "Into the Lands of Immigration," 255.

^{146.} Personal communication with a member of the Coptic clergy in the Netherlands, December 2020.

^{147.} Zohry, "Migration and development in Egypt," 84.

countries the Copts have often chosen as their primary immigration destinations over the decades, focusing primarily on Europe. Various sources, ranging from reports, scholarly articles, to information provided by the Coptic churches outside of Egypt, have noted that since the 1970s Copts have largely emigrated to the USA, Canada, several western European countries, notably the UK, France, Italy, Germany, Austria, and Greece.

Economic and political distress together with Mubarak's authoritarian rule persisted well into the twenty-first century. Further population growth, unemployment, corruption, poverty, and political tensions all contributed to the continued emigration from Egypt at the turn of the century, although emigration waves reportedly dropped compared to previous years due to various political developments in the region (e.g. US occupation of Iraq) and tightening of visa requirements in the European Union. Both temporary and permanent migration to the Gulf states, primarily Saudi Arabia, Libya, and later the United Arab Emirates, dominated emigration patterns among Egyptians throughout the 2000s. Despite stricter visa and residence regulations, European countries remained one of the most important immigration destinations for all Egyptians. Zohry asserts that the Egyptian emigration to Europe significantly increased at the beginning of the twenty-first century partly due to reduction (or even stagnation in some cases) of migration flows to the Arab Gulf compared to previous years, because of competition with cheap labor from South and Southeast Asia.¹⁴⁸ In addition, high rates of unemployment among Egyptian youth provided further incentives for leaving Egypt. The 2001 report by CAPMAS (Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics) shows that there were 326,000 Egyptians in Europe in 2000, with Italy hosting the largest proportion of all European Egyptian immigrants, specifically 27.6 percent.¹⁴⁹ Studies have shown that Egyptian migration to Europe increased over the years and peaked in 2010, where about 30,000 new residence permits were issued, of which more than two thirds were in Italy.¹⁵⁰ Because of increasingly strict European visa regimes many of these recent migrants resorted to irregular migration, either by 'breaking' their Schengen visas or arriving illegally in Italy or Greece on boats via the Mediterranean Sea.¹⁵¹

Besides economic motivations for emigration among all Egyptians, discrimination, sectarian conflicts, and attacks on Christians and churches across Egypt have

^{148.} Ayman Zohry, *The Migratory Patterns of Egyptians in Italy and France: CARIM Research Reports 2009/17*, Robert Schuman Center for Advanced Studies (San Domenico di Fiesole: European University Institute, 2009), 6.

^{149.} Zohry, "Egyptian Youth and the European Eldorado," 5.

^{150.} Francoise De Bel-Air, *Migration Profile: Egypt, Policy Briefs 2016/01* (Migration Policy Centre, EUI), 1.

^{151.} Zohry, "Egyptian Youth and the European Eldorado," 5-6.

contributed to an increased social instability in the country and the sense of inequality and discrimination. Akladios reminds us that Egypt's Christians faced significant discrimination and inequalities in educational and employment positions ever since the 1940s, which was a major reason for many Copts to move to the US and Canada starting in the 1950s.¹⁵² Tadros reports that sectarian conflicts drastically increased in the period between 2008 and 2011.¹⁵³ What caused further concerns among many Copts was the inaction and the absence of an appropriate response from both the state and the Church. The regime was willing to tolerate public social disharmony as long as it was able to retain the political status quo and contain complaints and requests from the Coptic Church.¹⁵⁴ Pope Shenouda and the rest of the Church leadership adopted a more peaceful role (than before) of a mediator between the state and its community, curbing and avoiding potential escalations with regard to sectarian-related issues. Elsässer argues that the Church adopted such a stance towards Mubarak's regime primarily because it feared an Islamist alternative to it.¹⁵⁵ Although it is difficult to identify to what extent these (and other) conflicts and attacks on Copts affected and stimulated their emigration from Egypt, scholarly reports do indicate a direct effect of such discrimination on their motivation to migrate. For instance, in a study on the Coptic communities in Italy, some members of the Coptic church in that country have claimed that discrimination due to their religious belonging represented the main reason for their emigration.¹⁵⁶

The 25 January Revolution in 2011, which saw the overthrow of Mubarak's authoritarian regime, prompted the third significant migration wave of Copts. Scholars have noted that Islamist emigration ceased in 2011, which had been on the rise during the last years of Mubarak's presidency due to strong political repression, with the return of the Muslim Brotherhood to the political scene and their subsequent win at the 2011 – 2012 parliamentary elections and Mohamed Morsi's win at the presidential elections in 2012. On the other hand, it was reported that many Copts (as well as other Egyptians who were against the Islamist regime) emigrated soon after the Revolution. According to an Egyptian NGO, about 93,000 Copts left Egypt mainly to North America, Europe, and Australia between March and September of 2011. The United States and Canada were the primary immigration destinations, which according to some estimates hosted up

¹⁵². Akladios, "Ordinary Copts," 113.

¹⁵³. See Tadros, *Copts at the Crossroads*.

¹⁵⁴. For example, Christmas according to the Julian calendar celebrated by Egyptian Copts on January 7 was made a national holiday in 2003, which was largely seen as a symbolic move in recognizing the Coptic community and its presence in Egypt.

¹⁵⁵. Elsässer, *The Coptic Question in the Mubarak Era*, 87.

¹⁵⁶. See Nicolini "The Copts in Italy."

to 100,000 Copts in the post-2011 period.¹⁵⁷ Although there are disagreements over the exact numbers of Coptic emigrants during that period, different sources agree that the Islamist rule had significant consequences for the emigration of Egypt's Christians.¹⁵⁸ Faath and Mattes also point to the strong connection between the Islamist political rule in Egypt and an increased emigration of Copts.¹⁵⁹

The Post-Revolution period had profound effects on Egypt's socio-economic situation and subsequently for the shifting demographics due to the growing number of emigrants. Besides Christian population's fear over the Islamist rule and its expected negative effects on the community, the wider Egyptian population experienced a set of economic, political, and social issues after the 25 January Revolution which pushed many Egyptians, primarily young people, to move out. The most significant factors in the decision to migrate include unemployment, security concerns, low wages, and corruption. In a survey conducted in 2013, unemployment and over qualification were one of the driving factors for the continued emigration from Egypt.¹⁶⁰

Those who could not obtain visas to study or work as highly skilled migrants in the EU often engaged in irregular migration. It has been reported that legal flows of immigrants to Europe have decreased since 2010 primarily as a result of a significant decrease in the issuance of initial work permits to Egyptian citizens for paid work following the 2008 economic crisis. Addressing irregular migration, both by land and particularly by sea, has become a significant issue for Egyptian authorities, driven by pressure from European neighboring countries. According to IOM (International Organization for Migration), 4,000 Egyptians were received in Italy by sea in 2015, of which a significant number are minor boys aged between ten and nineteen who traveled alone. Irregular migration during the past two decades has shifted the wider demographic picture of Egyptian immigration to Europe, reflecting divergent trends of immigration to the continent. For instance, Italy hosts a large number of young Egyptian men with lower levels of education, as well as many families with smaller children. On the other hand, the demographic picture of Egyptian migrants in the UK, as well as in most other northwestern European countries and North America, demonstrates an older immigrant community, with higher levels of education and a more balanced gender structure.¹⁶¹

^{157.} Hunter and McCallum Guiney, "The Quest for Equal Citizenship," 22.

^{158.} Emad Khalil, "NGO report: 93,000 Copts left Egypt since March" (Egypt Independent), accessed March 13, 2022, <https://www.egyptindependent.com/ngo-report-93000-copts-left-egypt-march/>.

^{159.} See Faath and Mattes, "Political conflicts and migration in the MENA states."

^{160.} De Bel-Air, "Migration Profile: Egypt," 1.

^{161.} *Ibid.*, 1-6. For more on the demographic profile of Egyptian migrants see Zohry, "Egyptian Youth and the European Eldorado" and Idem, "Contemporary Egyptian Migration."

As discussed earlier, it is very challenging or even impossible to obtain somewhat accurate estimates on the number of Copts living outside of Egypt, as both Egyptian authorities and receiving countries and their data do not distinguish Copts (as a specific religious subgroup) from other Egyptians. Various sources demonstrate discrepancies even on the number of Egyptian expatriates as a whole. Approximate estimates are usually provided by Coptic churches outside of Egypt or scholars with a Coptic background who are often linked to the Coptic Church. In addition, by looking at available data on the numbers of Egyptians living in different regions or countries in the world, we can logically assume that a certain proportion of those migrants are Copts. Although difficult to obtain reliable data, one source mentions that Copts might be overrepresented in Europe, where they comprise around 30 percent of the total Egyptian population on the continent.¹⁶²

Another challenge of obtaining somewhat realistic numbers of Copts (or even Egyptians) outside of Egypt is related to the fact that many of them acquire foreign nationalities and are thus officially seen as nationals of their host countries. Additionally, second- and third-generation Copts are most often citizens of the countries in which they were born and are institutionally and legally invisible as “Copts” or “Egyptians.” Ultimately, available data on the number of Copts in diaspora provided by the Coptic Church often corresponds to the number of members of various Coptic churches outside of Egypt, thus excluding those who identify as Copts but are not active or registered members of any diasporic Coptic church.

The estimates on the number of Copts living outside of Egypt vary immensely and are thus not reliable. A 2012 report made by The Pew Research Center mentions a number of 533,000 Copts living outside of Egypt.¹⁶³ The World Council of Churches estimates that the number of Copts in North America, Europe, and Australia to be as high as one million.¹⁶⁴ Among few scholars who have provided approximate estimates is Nora Stene, who also mentions the number of one million in the late 1990s, while some Coptic authors mention even higher numbers, among them Mina Samir, who states that the number of Copts outside of Egypt might reach five million.¹⁶⁵

^{162.} Jennifer M. Brinkerhoff and Liesl Riddle, *General Findings: Coptic Diaspora Survey* (Washington, DC: George Washington University, the Elliott School of International Affairs, 2012), 5.

^{163.} Pew Research Center, “Faith on the Move – The Religious Affiliation of International Migrants,” accessed March 12, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2012/03/08/religious-migration-exec/>.

^{164.} World Council of Churches, “Coptic Orthodox Church,” accessed March 12, 2024, <https://www.oikoumene.org/member-churches/coptic-orthodox-church>.

^{165.} Stene, “Into the Lands of Immigration,” 255. Samir, “al-Aqbat fi Duwal al-Mahjar bayn al-Madi wa-l-Hadir,” 190.

A transnational church – establishment of Coptic churches outside of Egypt

According to the author Elham Khalil, a first-generation member of the Coptic community in the Netherlands, a need for a church upon migration was a “natural reaction.”¹⁶⁶ Similarly, Pope Shenouda described the need of diaspora Copts for establishing their own churches as “natural.” The pope explains that it was “natural that they [migrant Copts] thought about establishing their own church so they could preserve their Orthodox faith...”¹⁶⁷ Although the decision to establish a community and gather around a religious institution in host countries may seem “natural,” there are certainly different motivations, conditions, and reasons that influence and shape such choices, which also differ among immigrant groups. In the past couple of decades, there has been an interest in exploring the motivations of immigrants for establishing religion-based communities and the role religious institutions and communal activities play in immigrants’ daily lives and how they shape immigrants’ place within wider society. Raymond B. Williams argues that immigrants are more religious than they were before they migrated and that a commitment to one’s religious affiliation serves to affirm both “self-identity” and acquire communal acceptance.¹⁶⁸ Will Herberg proposes that religion serves many migrants to adapt and place themselves in their new societies.¹⁶⁹ Although we need to take into account a combination of various reasons and motivations for creating church parishes, where lay Copts have showed a significant degree of agency (as it will be shown in the following pages), it must be noted that in most cases initiatives for establishing churches outside of Egypt came directly from the ‘above’ (i.e. from the Patriarchate in Egypt).

The cornerstone of the Coptic Orthodox churches outside of Egypt was laid by Bishop Samuel (1920–1981), born as Saad Aziz Ibrahim. Initially rising to prominence during the 1940s and 1950s through the Sunday school movement and the institutionalization of social and pastoral work in the church, Bishop Samuel became a central figure in the establishment of Coptic churches in North America, Europe, and Australia. With his outlook and his educational background, Bishop Samuel was highly invested in promoting the ecumenical movement in Egypt, which brought him, his followers,

^{166.} Personal communication with Elham Khalil, on April 12, 2022, in Hilversum.

^{167.} Al-Banna, *al-Aqbat fi Misr wa-l-Mahjar*, 161. Translated from Arabic by the author.

^{168.} Raymond Brady Williams, *Religions of Immigrants from India and Pakistan: New Threads in the American Tapestry* (Cambridge England ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 174-175.

^{169.} See Will Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983).

and the Coptic Church closer to Western Christian churches, i.e. the Protestants and Catholics.¹⁷⁰

Hasan notes that Bishop Samuel and his pastoral and ecumenical endeavors “took the Coptic Church out of the quarantine to which it had been confined since the fifth century.”¹⁷¹ Helping to introduce the Coptic Church into the World Council of Churches (WCC), Bishop Samuel played a vital role in introducing the Coptic Church into various international associations and brought it under the international spotlight at numerous religious conferences across the globe.¹⁷² Saed and van Doorn-Harder observe that Bishop Samuel’s commitment to ecumenical movement and his active involvement in the WCC since the 1950s helped him to find a platform through which he created connections for bringing together members of the first emigration waves of elite Copts who had emigrated during Nasser and for establishing the first Coptic churches in the diaspora. In 1954, Bishop Samuel was elected as a permanent representative of the Coptic Orthodox Church in the WCC and was a member of the first official Coptic delegation at the Second Assembly of the Council held in Evanston, Illinois.¹⁷³ On the way to the US, the delegation led by Bishop Samuel (then not yet holding this title) stopped in London to perform the first ever Coptic liturgy in the UK, and in Europe more generally. The liturgy was held in August of 1954 and was attended by a small group of Coptic immigrants to the UK and by representatives of the Coptic Church delegation, including Bishop Gregorios, who had been sent by the Clerical College of Cairo to work on his PhD in London.¹⁷⁴

As the number of Coptic immigrants to the Western countries grew, Pope Kyrillos considered it crucial that the Church, i.e. the Patriarchate, dedicate itself to *serving* its expatriate flock. The concept of church *service* (in Arabic *khidma*) warrants further explanation to understand its implications and meanings fully. Service or *khidma* is a term widely used by clergy and lay members of the Coptic Church in both Arabic and English, employed in various contexts and carrying multiple, interrelated meanings. Here, I recognize three distinct, but interconnected meanings and usages of the

^{170.} For more on Bishop Samuel’s life, see Cherubim Saed and Nelly van Doorn-Harder, “Bishop Samuel’s Ministry of Teaching and Serving: The Formative Years,” in *Copts in Modernity*.

^{171.} Hasan, *Christian versus Muslims in Modern Egypt*, 98.

^{172.} *Ibid.*, 98.

^{173.} Saed and van Doorn-Harder, “Bishop Samuel’s Ministry of Teaching and Serving,” 200.

^{174.} Eva Romany, “The man who helped people help themselves,” Watani, accessed October 20, 2023, <https://en.watanimet.com/news-2/occasions/october-war/the-man-who-helped-people-help-themselves/30675/>. There is an ambiguity over the exact date of the first Coptic liturgy in London; Romany mentions August 15th, while the official website of the Coptic Church in the UK mentions August 10th. See “The Coptic Church in the UK,” The Coptic Orthodox Church Centre UK, <http://www.copticcentre.com/the-coptic-orthodox-church/the-coptic-church-in-the-uk/>.

term. First, *khidma* denotes social and voluntary work in the Church. In this sense, under the initiative of Bishop Samuel, the Church developed a system and network of activities that focuses on helping the poor and educating Copts in underdeveloped areas. This aspect also includes charitable activities, collecting donations, and visiting and aiding the sick. The second aspect of *khidma* is closely related to the first - being primarily related to the Sunday schools and broader church upbringing system, focused primarily on 'proper' education and upbringing of Coptic children and their socialization into Church life (this aspect will be covered in more detail in Chapter 6). The third and last meaning of church *khidma* is a broader one and is closely related to the establishment of churches and their practices. In its broader sense, *khidma* signifies pastoral care and providing sacraments and different types of *services* to the believers, including the Holy Communion during liturgies, baptism, weddings, funerals, and spiritual care and advice (from the clergy). Therefore, church *khidma* conveys the meaning of *serving* people and providing them with their spiritual needs. In the context of migration, this extends to the act of establishing new parishes and sending and ordaining priests in host countries in order to enable the performance of sacraments and for believers to practice their faith. In Arabic, a person who serves and is active in a type of church *khidma* is called a *khādīm* (male) or *khādima* (female), literally translating to "servant." They are generally regarded as servants to their own community, the broader Church, and to God. This dissertation explores primarily the second and third aspects of church *khidma* within European Coptic churches in relation to community formation and boundary-making. In this respect, it pays close attention to how various church members use this term, both in speech and in writing.

An already distinguished church servant who dedicated his life to pastoral care and ecumenical dialogue, Saad Aziz was 'the right choice' for this mission. He was ordained by the pope as the first General Bishop for Public, Ecumenical, and Social Services in 1962, which also included overseeing the Coptic immigrant communities in North America, Europe, and Australia.¹⁷⁵ The pope thus entrusted Bishop Samuel with the responsibility over diaspora Copts and their spiritual and social needs in their host countries, and instructed him to help immigrant Copts to gather and perform for them the Holy liturgy. In the summer of 1963, Bishop Samuel embarked on a pastoral trip (*riḥla ra'wiyya*) to the countries hosting the largest Coptic communities outside of Egypt. The Church organized meetings during which the bishop listened to the believers' needs, which he would later communicate to the pope. At this stage,

¹⁷⁵. Michael Akladios and Candace Lukasik, "Debating Christmas Day: Copts, Calendars, and the Immigrants' Church," Public Orthodoxy, accessed October 20, 2023, <https://publicorthodoxy.org/2020/02/20/copts-debating-christmas/>.

those who gathered to pray together used local Protestant or Catholic churches and did not have a Coptic (or an Oriental Orthodox) priest to perform a service for them. Therefore, during the meetings with Bishop Samuel, migrant Copts eagerly expressed their needs for celebrating the Coptic liturgy in their own (Coptic) church.¹⁷⁶ During his early visits to diaspora Copts, Bishop Samuel often performed the Liturgy in believers' homes, making use of portable altars.¹⁷⁷

Saad Michael Saad notes that Bishop Samuel's frequent visits to the Copts living outside of Egypt, primarily to the US and Canada, was crucial for establishing and formalizing the presence of local Coptic communities. A central aspect of his mission involved conducting Eucharistic ceremonies, baptisms, and weddings. Before they established their own church, the first migrants to the US, like elsewhere, rented local church buildings and often celebrated the Liturgy and commemorated other important occasions at believers' homes.¹⁷⁸ Other priests were also sent to different areas of the US and Canada to serve the early Coptic emigrants, mainly to the East and West Coasts, where the largest numbers of Copts settled. Akladios notes that in many cases priests who went to serve the growing Coptic communities in North America did not settle there permanently and often moved from one city to another. For example, Father Tadros Malaty, a priest serving in the Coptic church in Sporting, Alexandria and today an influential figure within the transnational Coptic community, was sent to serve in the first rented church in New York City, located in Queens, and served as well in New Jersey and Los Angeles (sometimes simultaneously).¹⁷⁹ During these early stages of the establishment of Coptic communities abroad, Pope Kyrillos also sent deacons and trained chanters to accompany priests in their service. One of the most prominent deacons was Youssef Mansour who was instructed by the pope to record the prayer of offering the incense of the vespers and matins for the Holy liturgy, praise prayers for the whole year (*tasbiḥa*), and hymns (*alḥān*) for the month of Kiyahk.¹⁸⁰ Besides this, Pope Kyrillos sent various spiritual and educational books and comprehensive explanations of the Liturgy to immigrant Coptic communities, as Zayyan argues, in order for them to remain connected with their homeland heritage.¹⁸¹

^{176.} Zayyan, *Aqbat al-Mahjar*, 19.

^{177.} Romany, "The man who helped people help themselves," Watani, accessed October 20, 2023, <https://en.wataninet.com/news-2/occasions/october-war/the-man-who-helped-people-help-themselves/30675/>.

^{178.} Saad, "The Contemporary Life of the Coptic Orthodox Church in the United States," 208.

^{179.} Zayyan, *Aqbat al-Mahjar*, 19. Akladios, "Ordinary Copts," 257-258.

^{180.} Also spelled as Kiahk or Koiak. It is the fourth month of the Coptic calendar, during which the Copts celebrate the Nativity (corresponds to 29 Kiyahk).

^{181.} Zayyan, *Aqbat al-Mahjar*, 20.

The first Coptic church outside of Egypt was established in New Jersey City in the US in 1964 and that same year, Father Marcos A. Marcos was ordained as the first Coptic Orthodox priest for the whole of North America.¹⁸² As the number of Coptic immigrants to North America grew over the years and Church leadership and local congregations acquired the necessary means to establish and expand their networks in their cities, regions or beyond, Coptic communities continued to grow and more churches were established under the leadership and guidance of the Coptic Church in Egypt, together with a group of adept and highly educated Coptic professionals. The 1970s saw the foundation of numerous Coptic parishes and acquisition of new church buildings across major cities in North America, including in New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, Toronto, and Montreal. In the US, the most numerous groups of Coptic immigrants largely settled on the country's east coast, as well as in southern California. However, in the following decades, many Copts also moved to southern and southeastern states, such as Texas, Florida, or Tennessee. In Canada, reflecting the country's population geography, most Copts settled in and around the Greater Toronto and Montreal areas.¹⁸³

In the beginning, all churches across North America were under the jurisdiction of the Archdiocese of North America, which was established in 1991 and was under the direct responsibility and care of the Patriarchate in Cairo. Subsequently, with the expansion of the Coptic communities in North America and the need to adequately cater to the needs of the believers, ecclesiastical organization of Coptic churches in the US and Canada changed. This has led to the establishment of seven dioceses. Canadian Coptic churches are organized under two dioceses, established in 2013 and 2019. The Archdiocese of North America still oversees regions and territories that do not fall under the care of any of the established dioceses, primarily due to a lower number of Coptic communities in those areas. The Archdiocese is thus under the direct supervision by Pope Tawadros, who is aided by several general bishops. Today, North American Coptic communities are the largest Coptic communities outside of Egypt.

The late 1960s and early 1970s marked the establishment of the Coptic Orthodox Church on the Australian continent. The Copts started immigrating to Australia in the 1960s and settled mainly in Sydney and Melbourne, where they were able to find employment. Towards the end of the 1960s, there were around sixty Coptic families in

^{182.} Al-Banna, *al-Aqbat fi Misr wa-l-Mahjar*, 161-162.

See also Michael Akladios, "In Memory of Father Marcos A. Marcos (1929 – 2020)," accessed October 24, 2023, <https://egyptmigrations.com/2020/12/10/in-memory-of-father-marcos/>.

^{183.} See Al-Banna, *al-Aqbat fi Misr wa-l-Mahjar*.

both Sydney and Melbourne. Members of the growing Sydney community expressed their need for a stable church *khidma*, with a designated place for worship and a permanent priest, in a letter to Pope Kyrillos VI. Their request was addressed and in 1969, Father Mina Labib Nematalla, the pope's nephew, was sent to be the first priest to serve the Australian Coptic community. In 1971, the Coptic community of Melbourne obtained their own church, served by Father Victor Raphael.¹⁸⁴ Before they acquired their own church, the first Coptic immigrants in Australia used rented churches as well as different types of spaces to gather and celebrate the Liturgy. The local Sydney newspaper Sydney Telegraph published an article on January 26, 1969 reporting on the still unknown Coptic community in Sydney, writing that a prayer in the Ancient Egyptian language will be heard in the military hospital on Cleveland Street, in Redfern, Sydney, which the community wishes to transform into a Coptic church.¹⁸⁵ By 1996, there were twenty three Coptic churches across the largest cities in Australia, including Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Canberra, and Perth. Besides churches, the Coptic Church has established two monasteries and several educational institutions since its inception on the Australian continent.¹⁸⁶ Today, the Coptic Church in Australia is organized under two dioceses, with seats in Melbourne and Sydney. According to Agaiby et al., different figures suggest the presence of around 100.000 Copts in Australia today.¹⁸⁷

Before we move to the formation of Coptic communities in Europe, it is necessary to mention that Coptic Orthodox churches have not been established only in North America, Australia, and Europe. Smaller groups of migrant Copts have over the years established their churches in several countries in the Middle East, South America, and in some parts of Asia. Mainly as a result of their missionary and charitable activities, the Coptic Church has also expanded to other countries in Africa, primarily in South Africa and Kenya.¹⁸⁸ Many of these communities are yet to be sufficiently researched. With regard to the Coptic presence in South American countries, the story of the establishment of Coptic communities on this continent dates back to the 1990s. In 1991, the first churches were founded in Argentina and Brazil, where São Paulo was chosen as the center for the Coptic community in that country.¹⁸⁹ After

^{184.} Agaiby, Swanson, and van Doorn-Harder, "Introduction," in *Copts in Modernity*, 2-3.

^{185.} Zayyan, *Aqbat al-Mahjar*, 20.

^{186.} Al-Banna, *al-Aqbat fi Misr wa-l-Mahjar*, 165-166.

^{187.} Agaiby, Swanson, and van Doorn-Harder, "Introduction," in *Copts in Modernity*, 3.

It is not clear, however, if the suggested number primarily refers to the number of members of Coptic churches in Australia.

^{188.} See Ogren, "The Coptic Church in South Africa" and Miyokawa, "The Coptic Orthodox Mission in Kenya."

^{189.} Al-Banna, *al-Aqbat fi Misr wa-l-Mahjar*, 164.

that, Pope Shenouda decided to further expand the Coptic Church in South America and in the late 1990s, he sent Father Youssef Anba Paula to Bolivia to serve one Coptic Orthodox family living there. The first church was built in 2002, and another one in 2004. In 2006, Fr. Youssef was ordained as Bishop of Bolivia and Fr. Aghathon became Bishop of Brazil.¹⁹⁰ The Coptic church in Bolivia continues to grow, with an expansion of its activities to encompass various social, educational, and charitable initiatives that involve a growing number of local Bolivian population, of whom some became members of the Coptic Church.¹⁹¹

Coptic churches have also been established in other Arab countries, notably in the Gulf. Although many Copts were part of temporary migration to the region, a considerable number of Coptic families settled in Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, and Qatar since the second half of the twentieth century. In Kuwait, for instance, a Coptic community numbered around 5000 members in the early 1960s. Although the Coptic, and more generally Egyptian, presence in the Gulf has been prominent since the mid-twentieth century, political tensions, economic crises, and increasingly difficult conditions for foreigners in many Gulf countries have impacted the establishment of Coptic communities and their organized religious practice therein.¹⁹² An online Coptic database containing information about the worldwide presence of Coptic churches mentions that there are five churches in the UAE, and one each in Kuwait and Qatar.¹⁹³

Coptic Orthodox churches in Europe

The formal organization of the first Coptic communities in Europe occurred at a slightly later stage than those in North America and Australia. This is primarily due to a lower rate of immigration to European countries compared to the US and Canada, reflected in a lower absolute number of Coptic immigrants to Europe and a relatively later onset of their permanent settlement on the continent. Certainly, as we will see, Coptic communities in various European countries were established at different times, and new ones are being established even today. Therefore, although there are commonalities and points of connection between some European Coptic

^{190.} Bishop Anba Youssef, *Ten Years In Bolivia* (Santa Cruz: St. Mary and St. Mark the Apostle Cathedral, 2010), 17-28.

^{191.} For example, the Coptic church in Bolivia opened a daycare facility for children in Santa Cruz de la Sierra under the name *Guardería San Anba Abraham Copta Ortodoxa*, open for all children in the city and where local Bolivians are also employed.

^{192.} Grace, *Keeping the Faith in Exile: Kuwait-Coptic Orthodox Diasporic Spirituality*, 51-55.

^{193.} "Nihov's Worldwide Coptic Directory," accessed March 12, 2024, <https://directory.nihov.org/>.

communities and when and how they were established, it also must be noted that often communities in different countries formed and developed somewhat independently.

The very beginnings of the establishment of Coptic Orthodox communities in Europe are associated with the foundation of Coptic churches in western and northwestern Europe. As mentioned earlier, England represents the birthplace of the Coptic Church in Europe. Even before the onset of larger immigration waves to that country in the 1970s, the UK hosted a group of highly educated Copts, mainly individuals, who had traveled there to continue their education, often in medicine. The influx of these highly educated and skilled Coptic individuals increased during the 1950s, which explains why Bishop Samuel's delegation visited England and held the first Coptic liturgy there in 1954. At the end of the 1960s and in the early 1970s, the number of Copts in London significantly increased. Among them were some Copts who had served as deacons in their churches in Egypt and it was this group of Coptic men who first expressed the need for establishing a church parish in England. First, in 1970, they started organizing Bible study groups and in the following year a priest was chosen to serve the Coptic community in London.¹⁹⁴

In general, the establishment of new Coptic churches outside of Egypt meant ordination and preparation of new priests to serve newly organized communities in the diaspora. According to Pope Shenouda, the Church in Egypt made great efforts to prepare and choose adequate priests for this important task. As he explained in an interview with author Ragab al-Banna, not every priest is suitable for ministry (service) abroad ("laysa kull kahin yaşluḥ li-l-*khidma* fi al-mahjar"), as diasporic Copts live under cultures, traditions, and social and political climates that are completely different from those in Egypt.¹⁹⁵ According to the former pope, one of the most important criteria for choosing an appropriate priest is the knowledge of foreign languages, since many Copts living outside of Egypt eventually lose the ability to fully function (in speech or reading) in the Arabic language. This is specifically the case with the second and third generations (which would become a particular challenge at a later stage of the community formation), but this is also more generally related to the fact that migrants who settle in their new countries often engage in an array of activities and establish new connections and relations with people around them in the languages of their new societies. Taking these points into consideration when ordaining a priest for his service outside of Egypt, the Patriarchate in Cairo has therefore paid particular attention to the ability of priests to communicate in a foreign language, his knowledge of the new environment and cultural and

^{194.} Al-Banna, *al-Aqbat fi Misr wa-l-Mahjar*, 172.

^{195.} Ibid., 166.

social characteristics of the designated society, as well as the ease of arranging accommodation and the priest's stay in a new country.¹⁹⁶ This process was certainly more challenging at the very beginning of the establishment of new communities abroad considering the lack of experience and insufficient practical knowledge of the local environments.

The 1970s marked the foundation of the first Coptic churches in Europe. During his visit to London in 1971, Pope Shenouda invited the local Coptic community to buy a piece of land and build a Coptic church instead of renting other church buildings to pray. In 1972, the Copts of the UK established an organization called the Council of the Coptic Orthodox Church and in 1974, they discovered a Protestant church building in Kensington, London, which was on sale.¹⁹⁷ The purchase was finalized in the following year and the church was consecrated by Pope Shenouda in 1979 as St. Mark's Coptic Orthodox church, making it the first Coptic church in Europe and "the mother church of all Coptic Orthodox Churches in the United Kingdom."¹⁹⁸ In the following years, "imtadat al-khidma" ("the service extended") to other parts of the country and liturgical services were performed in many cities across the UK, primarily in England, including Birmingham, where the second Coptic church in the country was established and consecrated in 1985, then Brighton, Manchester, and Newcastle.¹⁹⁹ With the expansion of different Coptic communities across the country and the acquisition of new church buildings during the 1990s, Pope Shenouda launched his regular pastoral visits to the UK and local Coptic parishes therein, accompanied by numerous priests and bishops.²⁰⁰ During this period, the London congregation was significantly expanded with the arrival of numerous Copts from Sudan, who sought to escape economic and political instability in their country.²⁰¹

During this period, Coptic communities were also established in Scotland and Ireland. Compared to England, migration to Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland has been much lower. There is, therefore, a very limited knowledge about these communities and their histories. However, although there is a lack of scholarly literature on Irish or Scottish Copts, one can find valuable and detailed information about the establishment of those communities in numerous digitized booklets produced by the Diocese overseeing Coptic parishes in Ireland

^{196.} Ibid., 166-167.

^{197.} Ibid., 172.

^{198.} St. Mark's Church, "Who We Are," accessed October 26, 2023, <https://stmark.org.uk/who-we-are/>.

^{199.} Diocese of the Midlands, "The Coptic Orthodox Church in the United Kingdom," accessed October 26, 2023, <https://ukmidcopts.org/coptic/uk/>.

^{200.} Al-Banna, *al-Aqbat fi Misr wa-l-Mahjar*, 172.

^{201.} Stene, "Multiple Choice?," 92.

and Scotland.²⁰² The first groups of Copts in Scotland appeared in the early 1970s in Glasgow, while migration of Copts to Ireland began at the end of 1970s. By the end of the decade there were around forty Copts in Ireland. It was at this period that this small number of Coptic believers felt the need for “the sacramental church service [*khidmat al-kanīsa al-sarā’iriyya*] and its pastoral work,” which would also help to recreate a sense of “belonging to their Mother Church.” Before they obtained their own church, a priest from London would occasionally visit and serve Irish Copts in rented venues in Dublin. The first church building was bought in 1993 in Dublin, which became St. Mary and St. Demiana Coptic Orthodox church, consecrated by the pope a year later. Since then, multiple parishes have been established across the entire Ireland, as well as several in Scotland, some of which are owned by the Coptic Church, while others are still rented.²⁰³

The Coptic communities in the UK are usually considered to be the largest community in Europe. With the lack of accurate and reliable figures, this claim might well be contested and disputed. In 2020, it was reported that there are around 20,000 members of the Coptic churches across the United Kingdom.²⁰⁴ According to the official website of the Coptic church in London, these 20,000 Copts are served in thirty two parishes across the UK and Ireland.²⁰⁵ It is not clear when this information was last updated, but as the author of this website page mentions, the communities continue to grow, thus one might assume that the number of parishes might be higher at the time of writing this thesis. The community in London is by far the largest Coptic community across both countries, with 5000 to 7000 members of different churches in and around the city reported at the end of the 1990s.²⁰⁶ Besides the foundation of church parishes, the UK Coptic community has established a monastery in Scarborough and several Coptic cultural centers (among them are a prominent and active center in Stevenage and Cahir, in Ireland). Today, Coptic churches in the UK and Ireland are organized under three dioceses, namely the

^{202.} Although some other diaspora communities have also produced various materials which tell the story of the establishment of their churches and of the local Coptic community more generally, the Diocese of Ireland, Scotland, and North East England seems to be unique when it comes to the number and magnitude of the production of a large number of simple, black-and-white digital booklets which document different parts of the history of various diocesan parishes. See <http://www.coptic-isneed.org/daily-word/dioceses-churches/>.

^{203.} The Diocese of Ireland, Scotland, North East England, and its Affiliated Regions, “St. Mary & St. Demiana Dublin-Ireland,” accessed October 26, 2023, <http://www.coptic-isneed.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/025.pdf>.

^{204.} Hunter and McCallum Guiney, “The Quest for Equal Citizenship,” 23.

^{205.} Coptic Orthodox Diocese of London, “Coptic Orthodox Church in the United Kingdom,” accessed October 27, 2023, <http://www.copticorthodox.london/diocese-of-london/>.

^{206.} Stene, “Multiple Choice?,” 92.

Diocese of the Midlands established in 1991 (led by Bishop Missael), then the Diocese of Ireland, Scotland, North East England, and its Affiliated Regions established in 1995 (led by Bishop Antony), and lastly the Diocese of London founded in 2017 (led by Bishop Angaelos).²⁰⁷

The story of the establishment of Coptic communities in France seems to be a particular case of the Coptic diaspora in Europe.²⁰⁸ An active presence of the first groups of Copts in France dates back to the 1960s. *Chrétien Orientaux*, an organization of Eastern Christians in France, sees immigration of Copts to France, and elsewhere, primarily as a consequence of religious discrimination and martyrdom of community members in Egypt.²⁰⁹ Before having a stable priest residing in France, the early community was served by a Coptic priest from London who visited them once a month.²¹⁰ In 1974, the French Coptic community obtained its first bishop: Bishop Marcos, ordained Bishop of Marseilles, Toulon, and all of France, thus setting up the first Coptic diocese in Europe.²¹¹ Bishop Marcos (born Blom Nikoval²¹²) was a monk from Anba Bishoy monastery in Wadi el Natroun, a Dutchman with French roots who played a vital role in the formation of the Coptic communities in France and the Netherlands (this will be further discussed in Chapter 3).²¹³ Besides Bishop Marcos, another monk from the Anba Bishoy monastery was sent

^{207.} Diocese of the Midlands, “The Coptic Orthodox Church in the United Kingdom,” accessed October 27, 2023, <https://ukmidcopts.org/coptic/uk/>.

^{208.} Although various figures and reports suggest that France has been a popular immigration destination of Copts, and Egyptians more broadly, and that the Coptic community in France is one of the largest ones in Europe, there is a surprisingly low number of studies with coherent and consistent information on the Coptic communities in France, most of them in French.. Some of the available information in this limited corpus of literature also displays significant discrepancies and contradictions.

^{209.} *Chrétien Orientaux*, “L’Eglise Copte Orthodoxe en France,” accessed October 27, 2023, <https://www.chretiensorientaux.eu/copte-orthodoxe>.

^{210.} Al-Banna, *al-Aqbat fi Misr wa-l-Mahjar*, 173.

^{211.} Pierre De Bogdanoff, “Coptic, Migration: France,” in *The Coptic Encyclopedia*, 6.

^{212.} The spelling of the name is provided by the famous Coptic website and repository “St-Takla.org,” which also mentions Bishop’s birth name in the Arabic script. No other sources confirm this name. See St-Takla.org, “Al-Ustādh Blom Nikoval,” accessed November 30, 2023, <https://st-takla.org/characters/people/baa/blom-nikoval.html>.

^{213.} According to the “St-Takla.org” website, Bishop Marcos was a Dutch national, however the authors point to another source which mentions that he had French nationality. Before he became a member of the Coptic Orthodox Church, he acted as the president of a Christian Orthodox group called “Anba Joanes Maria” in France. Upon meeting Bishop Aghabios of Dairut in France in 1971, Bishop Marcos was invited to visit Cairo, where he became interested in becoming a member of the Coptic Church. He was baptized in the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt and became a monk in 1973. See St-Takla.org, “Al-Anba Marqos Mutran Tulun wa Marsilya, Faransa,” accessed November 30, 2023, <https://st-takla.org/Saints/bishops/meem/morcos-toulon.html>. got baptized in a Coptic church in Egypt and was a monk in Anba Bishoy monastery.

to France as a response to the growing community there; monk Athanasios, who was a French national, received the title of chorepiscopus, or a deputy bishop, assisting Bishop Marcos.²¹⁴

Pope Shenouda changed the organization of the Coptic church in France in 1994, resulting in a unique ecclesiastical structure of a Coptic Church in diaspora. In this reorganization, two separate entities were created: the Coptic Orthodox Church *in* France (l'Église Copte Orthodoxe *en* France) and the Coptic Orthodox Church of France (l'Église Copte Orthodoxe *de* France). The former was a diocese hosting and serving primarily Egyptian Coptic immigrants and their families, who prayed mostly in Arabic, and was directly overseen by the Patriarchate in Cairo. The latter, also referred to as the French Coptic Orthodox Church (l'Église Copte Orthodoxe française), hosts several hundred believers mainly of “native French” origin (i.e., local French people with no connection to Egypt whatsoever), some of whom had earlier converted to the Coptic church or were merely interested and passionate about the Coptic Church and its tradition. In addition, the French Coptic Church incorporates a parish in Sarcelles, which hosts a large congregation of Egyptian and Sudanese Copts. With its adapted approach to serve the local French population interested in the Coptic rite, the French Coptic Church also serves and caters to the needs of the second- and third-generation Copts born in France.²¹⁵ Bishop Marcos became the Metropolitan of the French Coptic Orthodox Church, assisted by Anba Athanasios who received the title of a (full) bishop.²¹⁶ Bishop Athanasios assumed the position of the Metropolitan following Anba Marcos's death in 2008, and as of 2023, the position is vacant again after Anba Athanasios' death in 2023.²¹⁷

Today, the Coptic Orthodox Church *in* France is divided into two dioceses, the Diocese of South France and Switzerland (the French speaking cantons), established in 2015 and is headed by Bishop Luca, and the Diocese of Paris and North France, created in 2017 and led by Bishop Marc. There are around twenty Coptic parishes in France, including both dioceses and the Metropolis, as well as the monastery of St. Mary and Archangel Michael located in Ronchères (part of the Northern Diocese).²¹⁸ As Gaétan

^{214.} De Bogdanoff, “Coptic, Migration: France,” 6.

^{215.} Etudes sur l'Orthodoxie Copte en France, “The French Coptic Orthodox Church,” accessed October 27, 2023, http://eocf.free.fr/eglise_eng.htm.

^{216.} Chrétiens Orientaux, “L'Église Copte Orthodoxe en France,” accessed October 27, 2023, <https://www.chretiensorientaux.eu/copte-orthodoxe>.

^{217.} Chrétiens Orientaux, “Anba Athanasios est décédé,” accessed October 27, 2023, <https://www.chretiensorientaux.eu/copte-orthodoxe/amba-athanasios-est-decede>.

^{218.} Chrétiens Orientaux, “Les paroisses Coptes Orthodoxes en France,” accessed October 27, 2023, <https://www.chretiensorientaux.eu/copte-orthodoxe>.

du Roy has pointed out, the number of Copts in France is highly disputed. Various estimates were made claiming from 40,000, to 100,000 or even up to 250,000 Copts in France, which seem rather exaggerated.²¹⁹ Francophone communities of Switzerland and Belgium are known to be much smaller, each hosting about 200 families.²²⁰

German speaking countries have been one of the most popular immigration destinations for Copts since the 1970s. In Germany, small groups of Copts first appeared in the 1960s in Frankfurt and Stuttgart. In the 1970s, the Coptic community, consisting mostly of university students and young migrants, together with members of the clergy from Egypt established ecumenical relations with local Christian churches in Germany, which helped the foundation of the first Coptic church in the country.²²¹ Bishop Samuel played a central role in this process. The formal foundation of the German Coptic community was initiated in March 1975 when the pope sent an Egyptian priest to establish the first Coptic church in Frankfurt, thus allowing for a permanent and organized service (*“khidma dā’ima muntaẓima”*) to be established.²²² The Copts found an old Evangelical church building, located in an old neighborhood and was left by the local community who wished to build a new church for themselves.²²³ The contract between the two sides was signed the same year and soon after, many Copts in the area began attending the newly established Frankfurt parish, named after St. Mark and led by Father Salib Suryal as the community’s first priest.²²⁴ In the same year, the second and third churches were established in Stuttgart and Düsseldorf. Pope Shenouda notes that a particular social structure of the community in Düsseldorf had a profound effect on the expansion and development of church *khidma* in Germany. The community is characterized by a high number of highly educated professionals, including medical doctors, pharmacists, businessmen, and engineers. These community members played a crucial role in the establishment of their own and other churches across the country with their financial contributions, mainly through numerous donations and by covering financial expenses of building or renovating church buildings.²²⁵ This has been a common development in the

^{219.} Du Roy, “Coptic Traditions’ Digitization in Francophone Europe,” 91. See Chrétiens Orientaux, “L’Eglise Copte Orthodoxe en France,” <https://www.chretiensorientaux.eu/copte-orthodoxe>; and Nicolini, “The Copts in Italy: Migration and Generosity,” 590.

^{220.} Du Roy, “Coptic Traditions’ Digitization in Francophone Europe,” 91.

^{221.} St. Markus Koptische Kirche Frankfurt, “Die St. Markus Kirche Frankfurt,” accessed October 30, 2023, <https://stmarkus-frankfurt.de/die-anfange>.

^{222.} Al-Banna, *al-Aqbat fi Misr wa-l-Mahjar*, 173.

^{223.} Salib Suryal, “Migration, Coptic: Germany,” in *The Coptic Encyclopedia*, 7. Here, ‘Evangelical’ (or *Evangelisch* in German) can also be translated as ‘evangelical Protestant’ and often relates to some of the oldest traditions of the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century.

^{224.} Al-Banna, *al-Aqbat fi Misr wa-l-Mahjar*, 173.

^{225.} Ibid., 174.

establishment of many church parishes across the Coptic diasporas, where highly educated and wealthier members of the community help relieve the financial burden of buying, renting, and renovating church buildings.

In the following years, parishes were established in other major cities in Germany, including in Berlin, where the Copts acquired a church building from the Russian Orthodox Church in 1975, in Munich and Hamburg in 1976, Hanover in 1977, among others.²²⁶ By the late 1980s, around 500 Coptic families constituted the Coptic Church in Germany. In addition, the Coptic Church strived to bring monastic traditions to Germany, as was the case with many other diaspora communities. Establishing monasteries in the lands of immigration was not only done in order to uphold the Coptic monastic tradition by accommodating monks who would reside in those monasteries. These newly established monasteries in the diaspora became spiritual and social centers for the communities, becoming places for spiritual retreats (*khalwa rūḥiyya*), weekend communal family gatherings, spiritual and youth meetings, et cetera. Additionally, as Pope Shenouda explains, monasteries were established to “offer a social and spiritual care (*al-ri‘āya al-rūḥiyya wa-l-ijtimā‘iyya*) for [Egyptian] Christian families, especially for the youth.”²²⁷ Today, there are two Coptic monasteries in Germany, in Kröffelbach, near Frankfurt, and in Brenkhausen, near Höxter in northern Germany.²²⁸

Germany hosts two Coptic Orthodox dioceses, created in 2013, which have their centers in the two monasteries. The Diocese of northern Germany is led by Bishop Damian and has its center in the monastery of Brenkhausen, and the Diocese of southern Germany has its center in Kröffelbach and was led by Bishop Michael until his death in 2023.²²⁹ According to the website of the Coptic Church in Germany, the Diocese of southern Germany is larger and incorporates around thirty five parishes, while the Diocese of northern Germany oversees between fifteen and

^{226.} Ibid.

^{227.} Ibid.

^{228.} “St. Antonius Koptisch-Orthodoxes Kloster Kröffelbach,” accessed October 30, 2023, <http://kroeffelbach.kopten.de/>. Koptisches Kloster Brenkhausen, “Koptisch-Orthodoxes Kloster,” accessed October 30, 2023, <https://koptisches-kloster-brenkhausen.de/?ref=kopten.de>.

^{229.} Koptisches Kloster Brenkhausen, “Die Koptisch-Orthodoxe Kirche in Deutschland,” accessed March 12, 2024, [https://en.wataninet.com/coptic-affairs-coptic-affairs/coptic-affairs/anba-mishael-1942-2023-of-south-germany-and-st-antonius-monastery-passes-away/42125/](https://koptisches-kloster-brenkhausen.de/kirche-in-deutschland/#:~:text=In%20Deutschland%20gibt%20es%20zwei,Kloster%20in%20Kr%C3%B6ffelbach%20(Hessen).%013;Watani,“Anba Mishael (1942 – 2023) of South Germany and St Antonius Monastery passes away,” accessed March 12, 2024, <a href=).

twenty communities.²³⁰ There is a lack of recent estimates on the number of Copts in Germany. A figure from 2007 suggests a number of up to 5,000 members of Coptic churches in the country, while another source estimates this number increasing to 12,000 by 2016, pointing to a growth of the community.²³¹ The official website of the northern German diocese suggests a higher number, providing an estimate of around 20,000 Copts living in Germany.²³²

The beginnings of the Coptic community in Austria date back to the mid-1970s. A committee for the pastoral care (*ri'āya*) of Egyptian Copts in Austria was formed in 1975, as well as another committee made up of women who participated in the organization of parish life for Austrian Copts. Prior to the establishment of the first church, liturgy was held every six months, depending on when the bishops came to Austria with Pro Oriente, a foundation set up by Cardinal König to foster ties between the Roman Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox churches.²³³ In 1976, the first priest was sent to serve the Coptic community in Austria. For this occasion, the Holy Euchologion (the book of the Holy Liturgy) was translated into German. Upon the priest's arrival, the first services were held in Vienna, Graz, and Innsbruck. By the end of the 1970s, the Coptic church in Austria numbered 113 families. At that time, many priests and monks traveled to Austria to help *serve* the Copts there and parishes were later established in Vienna, Graz, Linz, and Innsbruck.²³⁴ The latest projections suggest that the Coptic community in Austria numbers about 6,000 church members, who are served by more than ten priests across seven parishes, suggesting a more densely distributed Coptic community and generally larger parishes than, for example, in Germany. There is also a monastery located in Obersiebenbrunn, in Lower Austria. The Coptic Orthodox church in Austria was officially recognized in the country in 2003.²³⁵ The community is organized under a diocese which also incorporates German speaking communities in Switzerland – Coptic Orthodox Diocese of Austria and German Switzerland. The diocese is led by Bishop Gabriel and has its seat in Vienna.

^{230.} Koptisch-orthodoxe Gemeinden in Deutschland, "Süddeutschland," accessed October 30, 2023, <https://kopten.de/gemeinden-sueddeutschland/>.

Koptisch-Orthodoxe Gemeinden Norddeutschland, accessed October 30, 2023, <https://kopten.de/gemeinden-norddeutschland/>.

^{231.} Carter Hein, "The Semiotics of Diaspora," 12. Ibrahim and Ibrahim, "Kopten in Deutschland," 219.

^{232.} Koptisches Kloster Brenkhausen, "Die Koptisch-Orthodoxe Kirche in Deutschland," accessed May 8, 2024, <https://koptisches-kloster-brenkhausen.de/kirche-in-deutschland/>.

^{233.} Katolische Kirche in Oberösterreich, "Koptisch-orthodoxe Kirche," accessed October 30, 2023, <https://www.dioezese-linz.at/institution/8117/neunchristlichekirchenino/article/99293.html>.

^{234.} Al-Banna, *al-Aqbat fi Misr wa-l-Mahjar*, 177.

^{235.} Ökumenischer Rat der Kirchen in Österreich, "Koptisch-Orthodoxe Kirche," accessed October 29, 2023, <https://www.oekumene.at/mitglieder/1512/koptisch-orthodoxe-kirche>.

Since Switzerland hosts relatively few smaller Coptic communities, its parishes do not constitute a diocese on its own. Rather, as shown, they are overseen by three different bishops and are administratively organized along linguistic and cultural lines, namely German (together with Austria), French (with southern France), and Italian (with northern Italy), thus reflecting the country's linguistic structure. In the section titled "*Les premiers coptes en Suisse*" (the first Copts in Switzerland) of the official website of the Francophone Swiss Coptic parishes, the authors proudly mention the story of the Egyptian Theban Legion as the first Christians in Switzerland, and as the first presence of Copts in the country.²³⁶ During the 1970s and early 1980s, various smaller communities across Switzerland were served by different priests and bishops before having a more organized and stable parish life, for example led by Bishop Samuel (until 1981). In 1983, Father Serapion (today Metropolitan Serapion, bishop of Los Angeles) was ordained priest for Switzerland. Today, the French speaking Swiss communities are centered around their main parish in Meyrin, near Geneva (where Bishop Luca resides), while those in German speaking parts of Switzerland are primarily members of two parishes, in Dietlikon and Grafstal, both near Zürich.²³⁷

Besides western Europe, where the largest Coptic communities can be found, a smaller Coptic presence exists in Scandinavian countries, specifically in Sweden and Denmark. In 1980, Bishop Samuel was sent to Denmark to serve the Copts there, before the arrival of the first priest in 1991. In Sweden, a bishop and a priest were sent to Stockholm to serve a small group of Copts there in 1981. During this time, as Pope Shenouda indicates, a group of Eritreans wished to participate in the occasional celebrations of the Coptic liturgy, since they did not have their own priest and presumably wanted to be served in the Oriental Orthodox rite. After Stockholm, parishes were established in Malmö, Gothenburg, and Uppsala. During his visit to the region in 1993, Pope Shenouda consecrated a Coptic church in Stockholm and two churches in Denmark. In 1995, the Coptic community in Sweden established a new church in Gothenburg and a year later, the Copts in Denmark acquired a church

^{236.} This is a story about a legion of 2,500 young Egyptian Christian soldiers, deployed at the end of the 3rd century to travel from Egypt to Switzerland in order to defend the Roman Empire in the West. The story of the Theban legion (named after the ancient city of Thebes, today Luxor), which was reportedly annihilated amid the persecutions of Christians at the time, produced saints, martyrs, and other important figures, such as St. Maurice, St. Verena, or the siblings Felix and Regula, highly venerated today in the Coptic Orthodox and Catholic churches. These narratives have served Swiss Copts to recreate direct links between Egypt, the Coptic Church, and Switzerland, or more broadly Europe. See <https://egliscopte.ch/les-premiers-coptes-en-suisse/>.

^{237.} Paroisse Copte Orthodoxe de la Vierge Marie, "L'Eglise Copte Orthodoxe en Suisse romande," accessed October 31, 2023, <https://egliscopte.ch/leglise-copte-orthodoxe-en-suisse-romande/>. Koptisch-Orthodoxe Kirche in der Deutschschweiz, "Koptische Gottesdienste," accessed October 31, 2023, <https://www.kopten.ch/gottesdienste>.

building in Taastrup from the Catholic Church, which became the Coptic Orthodox St. Mary and St. Mark church.²³⁸ The community in Denmark grew from around fifty families at the end of the twentieth century to 400 families in recent years.²³⁹ Considering their size, and geographical and linguistic proximity between the two countries, Coptic communities in Sweden and Denmark constitute one diocese, the Diocese of Sweden and all of Scandinavia, led by Bishop Abakir.

In Southern Europe, besides Italy (which will be covered in the following chapter), the Coptic Church has a limited presence. The Copts are present in small numbers in Greece and Cyprus. Amid the lack of sources on these communities (including limited digital presence), little is known about their history and present developments. The Coptic presence in Cyprus commenced at the end of the 1970s and 1980s, like in many other European countries. In 1981, an Egyptian priest was sent to Cyprus to serve Coptic families in Nicosia, Limassol, and Paphos. Ten years later, the Church rented a house in Limassol to become the communal center for service. Upon Pope Shenouda's first visit to Cyprus in 1994, a foundation of the first Coptic church was laid in Limassol. As for Greece, the first Coptic church was established in Athens in 1991.²⁴⁰ There is a lack of even approximate estimates on the number of Copts in Greece, but a low number of Coptic parishes in the country suggests a small Coptic presence in the country. This might come as a surprise since a figure from 2009 suggests a number of Egyptian migrants in Greece to be as high as 80,000.²⁴¹ Therefore, it remains unclear whether this number is an overestimation of the actual number of Copts/Egyptians in Greece or rather points to the possibility that many Egyptians initially enter Europe through Greece before settling in their preferred destinations in western Europe. The Copts living in Greece and Cyprus are organized under a single diocese – Diocese of Athens, all of Greece and Cyprus, headed by Bishop Pavlos. In 2021, it was announced that the Coptic Church in Greece plans to build a Coptic monastery in central Greece, which will be named after St. Anthony, the father of Egyptian Christian monasticism.²⁴²

Spain hosts a small, but steadily growing Coptic community. Traditionally, Spain, and especially Portugal, have not been highly popular immigration destinations

^{238.} Al-Banna, *al-Aqbat fi Misr wa-l-Mahjar*, 177-178.

^{239.} Palle Thordal, *Den Koptisk-Ortodokse Kirkes Liturgier*, xi, https://koptisk.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/kholagy_DK.pdf. "The Coptic Orthodox Church in Denmark: St. Mary and St. Mark," accessed October 31, 2023, <https://koptisk.org/en/home/>.

^{240.} Al-Banna, *al-Aqbat fi Misr wa-l-Mahjar*, 178.

^{241.} Zohry, "Migration and Development in Egypt," 83.

^{242.} Al-Masry al-Youm, "al-Kanisa al-Qibtiyya Tasta'idd li-bina' Awwal Dir Qibti bi-l-Yunan," accessed October 31, 2023, <https://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/2483860>.

among Egyptians. Among other possible reasons, this can primarily be attributed to a less stable economic situation in the two countries (compared to western and northwestern Europe), thus offering fewer job opportunities for migrants. In addition, Spain and Portugal are not as accessible to irregular migrants as are Italy and Greece. However, a vibrant Coptic community is growing across different cities in western, northwestern, and central Spain. The inception of the Coptic community in Spain dates back to the very end of the twentieth century. Bishop Maximos, a General Bishop, visited a small group of Copts in Spain in 2000 to celebrate Christmas and Epiphany. After his visit, the bishop reported to Pope Shenouda about his service and the group's need for a permanent priest in Spain. In his report, Bishop Maximos provided a list of names, addresses, and telephone numbers of Copts residing in the country. An article in *Al-Kiraza* magazine, the official magazine of the Coptic Orthodox Patriarchate in Egypt, reported about Bishop Maximos' visit to Spain and underlined the significance of the establishment of a Coptic community in the country. The article's unnamed author affirms that the presence of a Coptic church in Spain would attract "our children" to it, who are dispersed across different parts of the country. The establishment of a new church in the diaspora, the author continues, also means the creation of a second generation which would be baptized in the Coptic Church, would be brought up within the scope of the church, and would produce a new generation of deacons.²⁴³

The Coptic community in Spain has established parishes primarily in three regions (officially autonomous communities), specifically in Catalonia, Valencia, and Madrid. The main center of the Coptic church life in Spain is in Catalonia, where the first parish was established during the 1990s and where the majority of Coptic believers live today. In total, there are four Coptic parishes in Catalonia. The oldest and the largest Coptic community in Spain is located in Cervera (province of Lleida), and represents the *de facto* seat of the Coptic church in Spain, where the community's principal priest, Father Rewis Anba Paula, also resides. The other three parishes in Catalonia are located in Lleida, Barcelona, and Badalona. The Coptic community in Catalonia, led by Father Rewis, has recently initiated the project of establishing a Coptic monastery near Cervera, which is currently under construction and will accommodate seven monks in the future.²⁴⁴ In the Valencian Community, there are two Coptic parishes, specifically in the capital of Valencia and Rojales (near Alicante). In Valencia, the Copts use St. Paul's Catholic church, which opened its doors for different Middle Eastern Christian denominations in 2018. The use of the church and the parish's various activities are managed and overseen by the Association Aramia,

^{243.} Anonymous author, "Mashru' Insha' Kanisa fi Isbaniya," *Al-Kiraza Magazine* no. 7 & 8 (2001): 23.

^{244.} Personal communication with Father Rewis Anba Paula, on April 8, 2021, in Cervera.

which, besides Copts, encompasses different Orthodox and Catholic communities from Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon.²⁴⁵ In Rojales, the Copts have established a church intended to be the regional center of church life for believers living in the Valencian Community and until today is the only church building owned by the Coptic Orthodox Church. As regards the country's capital, the Coptic community in Madrid numbered only five families in 2020, who have occasionally used a Catholic church for more than ten years. Due to the small size of the community and the lack of resources, the Copts in Madrid do not have their own priest and thus do not have a very active parish life, compared to the communities in Catalonia and Valencia.²⁴⁶

Some of the smallest Coptic communities in Europe are present in several central and eastern European countries. Typically, figures suggest that not many Copts (and Egyptians) have migrated to eastern Europe or the Balkans (except Greece). In many ways, this reflects broader immigration trends in Europe, where many immigrants usually only “pass through” southeastern and central European countries to reach western countries as their desired permanent destinations. However, the presence of smaller groups of Copts in Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, or Czechia suggests that Coptic migrants do not necessarily always desire to or succeed in settling in “the West.” Some Coptic migrants were able to find job opportunities or enroll in university programs in some central and eastern European countries, as is the case with Hungary. Reportedly, there are around 100 families who constitute the local Coptic community in Hungary, who have been served by the same priest since 2004. In 2011, a church in Budapest was officially consecrated by Pope Shenouda.²⁴⁷ Furthermore, there is a Coptic Orthodox parish in Bucharest, as well as one in Prague, which is served by a priest from Vienna twice a month in rented venues inside two Catholic monasteries.²⁴⁸ In 2017, monk Giovanni from the Coptic monastery near Milan was ordained Bishop of the Diocese of Central Europe, overseeing small Coptic communities in Hungary, Czech Republic, Poland, Romania, and Slovenia, with its seat in Budapest.²⁴⁹

^{245.} The association hosts a number of Middle Eastern Christian refugees and, besides regular services and other ritual practices, it provides language classes for its members, specifically in Arabic, Aramaic, Coptic, Spanish, and Valencian. See Las Provincias, “Los cristianos refugiados tendrán un templo para sus celebraciones en Valencia,” accessed November 28, 2023, https://www.lasprovincias.es/fiestas-tradiciones/cristianos-refugiados-templo-20180416004645-ntvo_amp.html.

^{246.} Salguero, “Las Iglesias Orientales en España,” 281–285.

^{247.} Farbaky, “Negotiating Identities,” 32.

^{248.} Nihov, “St. Mina Coptic Orthodox Church, Bucharest, Bucharest,” accessed October 31, 2023, <https://directory.nihov.org/church/634>.

“Coptic Orthodox Church - Prague, CZ,” accessed October 31, 2023, <https://www.copticcz.com/home>.

^{249.} Farbaky, “Negotiating Identities,” 32. There are no known sources confirming the presence of Coptic parishes in Poland or Slovenia.

Arguably the youngest established Coptic community in Europe can be found in Croatia.²⁵⁰ The idea to expand church *khidma* to Croatia originated in Egypt, where some members of the clergy proposed to provide pastoral care to a small group of Egyptian Copts residing in the country. This group consists of several families, as well as of a group of predominantly male workers, mainly located in the capital Zagreb area. Upon initiatives and agreements between representatives of the Coptic Church in Egypt, including the Coptic Bishop of Central Europe Anba Giovanni, and the local Catholic parishes, it was decided that the Coptic community would use the Greek Catholic church in the town of Jastrebarsko to celebrate their Liturgy every six weeks.²⁵¹ The presence of a previously unknown community attracted attention of the local population and the Catholic Church in Croatia. The Catholic Information Agency (Informativna Katolička Agencija), a local Catholic news and information agency, reported about the first ever celebration of the Coptic liturgy in Croatia, held on November 14, 2021 and led by Father Tadros Riad, a priest from St. Mary Coptic church in El Rehab, Cairo. In the report, the Agency also provided their readers with basic information about the Copts and the Coptic Orthodox Church.²⁵² In August 2023, it was agreed that the community will celebrate the Liturgy in a Greek Catholic church in a neighborhood of Zagreb once a month, in order to make it more accessible for Coptic immigrants who mostly live in the capital.²⁵³ Interestingly, the presence of the small Coptic community in Croatia and the visibility of their religious practices, especially among the members of local Catholic churches, inspired a famous Croatian Christian publishing house to publish a book on the Coptic Orthodox Church. The book, titled *Koptska pravoslavna Crkva: Povijest, doktrina, ekumenizam* (*The Coptic Orthodox Church: History, Doctrine, and Ecumenism*), published in 2023, was published to make the (Catholic) Croatian audience more familiar with the history and tradition

^{250.} It is important to mention that there are presumably more smaller groups of Copts in countries which have not served as common immigration destinations for Copts (or Egyptians), but are less visible among researchers or members of other larger Coptic communities in the diaspora if they are not formally organized around church parishes. For instance, to my surprise, some of my Coptic interlocutors in the Netherlands were not even aware of the existence of Coptic communities in Spain, due to their smaller size compared to other communities in the diaspora.

^{251.} Personal communication with Father Tadros Riad, February 26, 2022, in Cairo.

^{252.} Informativna Katolička Agencija, "U Jastrebarskom služena prva liturgija za Kopte u Hrvatskoj," accessed November 3, 2023, <https://ika.hkm.hr/novosti/u-jastrebarskom-sluzena-prva-liturgija-za-kopte-u-hrvatskoj/>.

^{253.} Informativna Katolička Agencija, "Koptski kršćani okupljaju se na bogoslužju u grkokatoličkoj crkvi u Stenjevcu," accessed November 3, 2023, <https://ika.hkm.hr/novosti/koptski-krscani-okupljaju-se-na-bogosluzju-u-grkokatolickoj-crkvi-u-stenjevcu/>.

of one of the oldest Christian churches and to raise the awareness of the importance of the ecumenical dialogue between different Christian denominations.²⁵⁴

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the historical development, geographical distribution, and key factors that contributed to and facilitated the flourishing of Coptic communities across the continent. While economic and political motivations were undoubtedly strong drivers, the chapter has highlighted the need to acknowledge the potential impact of religious discrimination and a desire for a more secure environment for practicing faith. Examining Coptic migration within the broader context of Egyptian emigration trends, at the same time, underscores the shared aspirations and challenges faced by many Egyptians seeking new opportunities abroad.

The establishment of dioceses, monasteries, and parishes across various European countries, which commenced in the 1970s, has provided a strong foundation for the growth of the Coptic Church. Although it has been difficult to obtain somewhat reliable numbers of Copts outside of Egypt, including in Europe, or even the precise number of established churches, a diachronic account of the available information presented in the chapter serves to underline the steady growth. The importance of clergy's commitment to move out of Egypt and serve migrant Copts in their new countries and their thorough preparation for this task, marked for example by their knowledge of local languages, emerged as a crucial factor in the successful expansion and growth of the Coptic Orthodox Church abroad. Besides the priests who traveled and permanently settled in *mahgar*, a central role in this endeavor was played by Bishop Ana Samuel. Today, many Coptic communities outside of Egypt are well established in their host societies, while at the same time second- and third-generation church members point to the ongoing strength and growth of the Coptic communities.

The chapter has charted the course of the Coptic Orthodox Church, highlighting its emergence as a vibrant and growing presence in Europe. By placing these communities on the larger map of Coptic diasporas, the chapter underscores the significance of Europe as a new frontier for Coptic Orthodoxy. Furthermore, the presence of these communities contributes to the changing religious landscape of

²⁵⁴. Informativna Katolička Agencija, "Objavljena knjiga „Koptska pravoslavna Crkva; Povijest – doktrina – ekumenizam“,” accessed November 3, 2023, <https://ika.hkm.hr/novosti/objavljena-knjiga-koptska-pravoslavna-crkva-povijest-doktrina-ekumenizam/>.

Europe, fostering a more diverse and pluralistic environment. The establishment of churches and monasteries, which attract an increasing amount of attention among local populations (including by major religious organizations), not only serve as centers of worship, but also foster a sense of community and connectedness among its members. The following chapter discusses this aspect in more detail through the examples of the Coptic communities in the Netherlands and Italy.

Chapter 4.

The Making of Coptic communities in the Netherlands and Italy

Introduction

This chapter investigates the dynamic formation of Coptic Orthodox communities in the Netherlands and Italy, exploring how commonality and connectedness are fostered among their members. It traces the journey from the initial migration of Copts and the challenges of establishing the first church parishes, to the vibrant orchestration of shared spaces and practices. This analysis delves into the key elements that church leaders emphasize and mobilize to forge and sustain these communities, exploring how ties are fostered both within individual parishes and across dioceses.

In particular, the chapter outlines how these communities establish their presence and create shared spaces that are distinctly 'Coptic' by adapting traditional Egyptian church elements to their European settings. This involves not only the physical acquisition and transformation of church buildings but also the adaptation of church practices, languages, and communal activities that resonate with both older and younger generations. By doing so, these communities navigate between maintaining a tangible link to their heritage and seeking to integrate into the broader societal fabric of their new homes.

Drawing upon the theoretical insights of Brubaker and Cooper, the discussion extends to how these physical and social structures support categorical connections—like common origin and faith—while also facilitating physical co-presence and shared practices. It also sheds light on the importance of communal textual practices in these processes, which play a crucial role in reinforcing narratives of shared belonging and in documenting the evolving stories and nature of these communities.

Coptic Orthodox community in the Netherlands

The first groups of Egyptians, including Copts, in the Netherlands appeared during the 1960s.²⁵⁵ After Nasser's *ta'mim* laws, a small number of individuals and families moved to the Netherlands, some of whom were students at different Dutch universities, while others acquired high profile jobs in banks, universities, or various companies.²⁵⁶ Therefore, as was the case with the rest of Coptic emigrants during Nasser's presidency, the first Coptic immigrants to the Netherlands were few in number and came from

^{255.} For the sake of brevity and conciseness, from here I will only mention Coptic migrants, bearing in mind that they are, in many ways, often part of larger Egyptian migration waves, as discussed in Chapter 3.

^{256.} Personal communication with a member of the Coptic clergy in the Netherlands, December 2020.

educated higher classes of the Egyptian society. Concurrently, it was at the end of the 1950s and early 1960s that the Netherlands was steadily becoming a country of immigration, primarily marked by the arrival of large groups of so-called guest workers (*gastarbeiders*) from Italy, Spain, and Portugal, and later from Turkey and Morocco.²⁵⁷

The second wave of Coptic migration to the Netherlands was marked by the arrival of groups of students during the 1970s and 1980s. These students largely traveled to the country during their summer vacations for short seasonal jobs in factories, agriculture, and car trade industry. Some of these young people returned to Egypt after they had finished their summer jobs. Many others, however, chose to stay and tried to settle in the Netherlands. There is no clear indication of how many of them were able to find employment or to continue their studies after their summer jobs, and, more broadly, how these young people secured their stay in the country. During this time, the social structure of the small Coptic community in the Netherlands started to become more heterogeneous, as emigration from Egypt became easier and more accessible for more Egyptians after Sadat's *infitāḥ* policies. According to van Doorn-Harder, although there are exceptions of Copts working as bankers, pharmacists, doctors or translators, in many cases, it has been challenging for Copts to secure high-profile jobs, and only a few of those with university diplomas have worked at their level of education.²⁵⁸

Immigration of Copts to the Netherlands continued and intensified towards the end of the twentieth century. As discussed earlier, a significant wave of immigration to Europe occurred after the Gulf War in 1990-1991 when many Egyptian Coptic workers left Iraq, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia, some of whom chose to settle in the Netherlands. At the time, the majority of Coptic migrants in the Netherlands were young men in search of opportunities for employment and for a better life.²⁵⁹ It was not rare that men who were already married in Egypt would first migrate to the Netherlands alone, and would subsequently be followed by their wives (and children), who became residents through family reunification. Some of these men formed families after their migration to the Netherlands, either from within or outside of their community. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, an estimated 25 percent of Coptic men in the Netherlands were married to Dutch women.²⁶⁰

^{257.} Masja van Meeteren, Sanne van de Pol, Rianne Dekker et al., "Destination Netherlands: History of Immigration and Immigration Policy in the Netherlands," in *Netherlands: Economic, Social and Environmental Issues*, ed. Judy Ho (New York: Nova Science Publishers, Inc., 2013), 115.

^{258.} Van Doorn-Harder, *De Koptisch-Orthodoxe Kerk*, 161.

^{259.} Bishop Anba Arseny, *Sham'a Mudi'a* (Amsterdam: Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Netherlands, 2021), 49.

^{260.} Van Doorn-Harder, *De Koptisch-Orthodoxe Kerk*, 162.

Copts have settled across almost all regions of the Netherlands. However, there is a higher concentration in the Randstad area, a conurbation in the central-western Netherlands connecting the country's four largest cities: Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague, and Utrecht. Additionally, several dozen Coptic families have settled in and around Eindhoven in the south. This is not surprising since the majority of employment opportunities are found in these large cities. Besides a rather small number of those who moved to the Netherlands to study or those who obtained high profile jobs as engineers or medical doctors, most Copts have worked in the fields of free commerce and business, in hospitality (including in restaurants and hotels), tourism, and to an extent in construction.²⁶¹ Puck de Wit notes that some first-generation Copts have established themselves in the shawarma fast food industry, as well as in popular Dutch snack bars.²⁶²

Throughout the years, and especially since the Coptic community was formally and institutionally formed in the 1980s (when the first church was established), Copts have immigrated to the Netherlands as part of so-called chain migration. Chain migration, as defined by John S. MacDonald and Leatrice D. MacDonald, is a movement in which "prospective migrants learn of opportunities, are provided with transportation, and have initial accommodation and employment arranged *by means of primary social relationships with previous migrants*."²⁶³ Coptic immigrants have, therefore, capitalized on the existing connections and networks with those who earlier emigrated from Egypt and settled in their new host countries. Besides migration through family reunification, these pre-existing connections are usually based on friendship or kinship (for instance, among people who were members of the same church in Egypt) and often provide those who wish to migrate with a plethora of practical information or even arranged employment in the country of destination (usually in restaurants and other hospitality jobs). It is not rare that prospective Coptic migrants without previously established networks forge new connections through their "Coptic circle" and thus get in touch with a member from the already existing Coptic community in the destination country who might provide them with any type of practical information, advice or help related to their migration. Thus, many Copts have attempted and succeeded to gain from the fact that "there is already a Coptic community in the Netherlands," resulting in the expansion of the community and in the strengthening of transnational Coptic ties. One such example is one of my interlocutors from the Coptic parish in Utrecht, a recent migrant in his twenties

^{261.} Bishop Anba Arseny, *Sham'a Mudi'a*, 49.

^{262.} See De Wit, "Egypte is te klein voor mijn gedachten."

^{263.} MacDonald and MacDonald, "Chain Migration, Ethnic Neighborhood Formation, and Social Networks," 82. Emphasis added.

who established contacts with members of the local community in the Netherlands prior to his migration in order to increase his chances for finding employment and securing his stay in the country.

Migration to the Netherlands continued throughout the twenty-first century. The Dutch Government's relaxation of the admission rules for highly-skilled migrants in 2004 has presumably helped more highly qualified Copts to immigrate to the Netherlands. Furthermore, since October 2008, the evaluation process for extending a residence permit for family reunification has been simplified and the rules have been made less strict.²⁶⁴ Although approximate numbers are unknown, as was the case with other popular immigration destinations in the West, there was an influx of immigrant Copts in the Netherlands after a series of Islamist attacks on Coptic churches in Egypt in the late 2000s and early 2010s, and significantly after the January Revolution in 2011.²⁶⁵ Various figures across different periods suggest that the Coptic community in the Netherlands is continuously growing. Usually, the church counts its membership through the number of families, rather than individuals. An estimate provided by de Wit suggests that the Coptic Church had around 2,000 members in 1997, which increased to approximately 4,000 by 2005.²⁶⁶ In 2011, several Dutch news outlets reported about the existence of 6,000 Copts.²⁶⁷ The latest estimates come from the Coptic Church in the Netherlands which states that the Dutch Coptic community numbers around 10,000 members, although it is not clear when this information was last updated.²⁶⁸ Although members of the church, news outlets, as well as most scholars usually speak of "the number of Copts in the Netherlands" (or in any other country as a matter of fact), it is important to emphasize that those numbers refer exclusively to the (registered) members of the church in that particular country. Accordingly, little is known about the number of those who might identify as 'Coptic' but are not members of any local Coptic church community.

It must be noted that the community does not grow solely through migration; today, the Coptic community in the Netherlands consists of many second- and third-generation Copts, who are children (and grandchildren) of first-generation migrants

^{264.} See van Meeteren et al., "Destination Netherlands," 120-121.

^{265.} Personal communication with several first- and second-generation members of the Coptic Church in the Netherlands. The conversations occurred during 2020.

^{266.} De Wit, "Koptische visies op de Egyptische maatschappij," 347.

Van Doorn-Harder, *De Koptisch-Orthodoxe Kerk*,¹⁶¹.

^{267.} For example, NOS, "Koptische kerk regelt eigen beveiliging," accessed November 8, 2023, <https://nos.nl/artikel/209262-koptische-kerk-regelt-eigen-beveiliging>.

^{268.} Koptisch Orthodox Diocese van Nederland, "Over ons," accessed November 8, 2023, <https://www.koptischekerk.nl/over-ons.html>.

and who became integrated into the community through baptism and active participation in various church activities. In addition, the Dutch Coptic community officially hosts a small number of converts, primarily through marriage, as well as a number of Ethiopian and Eritrean Tawahedo believers, who primarily attend parishes in Amsterdam and Utrecht.

The seed of the Coptic Orthodox Church in the Netherlands was planted in 1976, when the late Bishop Marcos arrived in the Netherlands as part of his commitment to serve the small Coptic community once every two months. As discussed in the previous chapter, Bishop Marcos was of Dutch and French descent and later became the Metropolitan of France. Bishop Marcos performed the Liturgy in Dutch and was accompanied by Father Gerges Luka who prayed in Arabic and Coptic. It was during the late 1970s that the members of the young Coptic community in the Netherlands first started to express their need for a fixed church building. As Anba Arseny notes, upon their migration, Copts started gathering in different cities across the country, giving them an opportunity to “revive their customs and traditions, and to exchange interests and benefits.”²⁶⁹ In the early 1980s, several bishops visited the Netherlands, which helped to bring the needs of the Dutch Copts to be heard and eventually fulfilled by the Patriarchate in Cairo. In the spring of 1985, Pope Shenouda decided that a priest would be sent to the Netherlands, who would be the first permanent priest of the community there. On May 19, 1985, the pope wrote an official letter which certified that Father Arsanius El Baramousy, a monk from Baramous monastery in Wadi El Natroun, would be delegated to serve the Coptic community in the Netherlands.²⁷⁰

Father Arsanius, now Bishop Arseny, documents his journey marked by various challenges and difficulties upon his arrival in the Netherlands in 1985 in his book *Sham'a Mudi'a: al-Kanisa al-Qibtiyya fi Hulanda* (“A Shining Candle: the Coptic Church in the Netherlands”).²⁷¹ One of the initial challenges for the establishment of fixed church services and religious celebrations was the lack of a special place for worship

^{269.} Bishop Anba Arseny, *Sham'a Mudi'a*, 49. Translated from Arabic by the author.

^{270.} Ibid., 45-50. In his accounts on the history and beginnings of the Coptic Church in the Netherlands, Bishop Arseny (then Father Arsanius) writes that when the abbot of his monastery notified him that Pope Shenouda decided to delegate him to serve the Copts in the Netherlands, he was utterly surprised and told the abbot that he did not even know where the Netherlands was, but immediately accepted the decision and soon after started preparing for the trip.

^{271.} The original Arabic version of the book was published in 2021 by the Coptic Diocese in the Netherlands and its Dutch translation under the title *Een stralende kaars: De Koptische kerk in Nederland* was published in 2023. For more information about the two publications, see <https://fourcornersoftheworld.pt.rs.ru.nl/publication/779/public/> and <https://fourcorners-oftheworld.pt.rs.ru.nl/publication/1655/public/>.

and the lack of human and material resources. Initially, pastoral visits, prayers, and the Liturgy were performed at the believers' homes in different cities in the Netherlands. However, soon after his arrival, Father Arsanius was informed about an old Protestant church in northern Amsterdam that had been put for sale and, together with some members of the community, went to the venue to meet with the owner of the church building. The owner had initially planned to use the church for an artistic project but later changed his mind and decided to sell it. After several conversations on different occasions, the owner decided to sell the church to the Coptic community. The money for the purchase was gathered largely through donations from community members and the church building was officially handed over to the Copts on October 2, 1985. The first liturgy in the first Coptic church in the Netherlands, named after St. Mary, was celebrated on October 20.²⁷²

The ownership of a church building allowed the Coptic Church in the Netherlands to organize an array of different activities and provide various services to its members since the earliest days. The Liturgy was celebrated three times a week, after which parishioners would gather in the church hall (or church 'lobby') to socialize, have lunch, and expand their networks within the community; the church organized vespers and matins prayers, midnight hymn prayers (*tasbiḥat niṣfal-layl*), Bible study groups, and youth meetings. On the night of January 6, 1986, more than 600 believers gathered to celebrate Christmas in the Netherlands for the first time. It was also during these earliest days that the church organized Sunday school education for its youngest members (explored in more detail in Chapter 5). The Sunday schools, which Father Arsanius saw as having the pioneering role in raising the second generation, and other youth activities were organized mainly by recent young Coptic migrants. Since the beginning, these youth activities included weekly spiritual meetings, social and sports clubs, and a yearly youth conference, which was regularly attended by Bishop Moussa from Egypt, the General Bishop of Youth.²⁷³

Since the very establishment of the first Coptic church in the Netherlands, the local church acquired an all-encompassing role in the lives of its members. The church in Amsterdam became a familiar and stable gathering site and center for Copts living in different parts of the country by opening its doors for the believers not only on Sundays, but also during the week in order to offer constant spiritual care and organize various cultural and social activities for a growing number of its adherents, primarily migrants who wished to remain connected with their homeland culture (for example, through language and interaction with like-minded people) and to

²⁷². Bishop Anba Arseny, *Sham'a Mudi'a*, 50-54.

²⁷³. Ibid., 54-55.

continue practicing their faith. This way, the church *created* a Coptic community under its institutional body and its care, allowing its followers to maintain some of the most important aspects of their daily practices from Egypt. Thus, many early Coptic migrants became members of the newly established diaspora church and were integrated into an institutionally organized community. Furthermore, by acting as a consoler, the Church sought (and still does) to alleviate migratory experiences of the first generation migrants by relieving them of a sense of uprootedness in a new environment. Although it must have been challenging for some Copts living far from Amsterdam to regularly attend church services every Sunday, the relatively small size of the country nevertheless helped to create and facilitate links among church members. Church parish activities, like attending the Sunday liturgy and socializing with other members of the community after the Liturgy, for many evoked the feeling of a “home away from home.” Thus, familiarity and shared experiences largely contributed to the strengthening of interpersonal relationships among migrant Copts and their attachment to the local Coptic church, which became a place for recreating church parish life from Egypt.

In Bishop Arseny’s view, securing a fixed place for worship and having spiritual leadership signified “a stable [Coptic] community” (*mujtama’ mustaqirr*).²⁷⁴ The sacraments, such as baptisms and marriage, were regularly performed and Father Arsanius often went for pastoral visits to the believers’ homes. During the 1990s, the Coptic Church in the Netherlands expanded its services outside of Amsterdam and the Coptic community acquired new church buildings. After initially using a rented church building, the Coptic community in The Hague, today one of the largest in the Netherlands, acquired its own church in 1994. After several priests from Egypt and other diaspora Coptic communities served the congregation in The Hague, including from Gratz and Milan, Father Angaelos arrived in the Netherlands in 2002 to be the community’s permanent priest, the position he maintained until today (as of 2024). The church was named after St. Mark the Evangelist and was consecrated by Pope Shenouda in 2010. St. Mark’s church in The Hague “takes care” (in the words of Bishop Arseny) of around 270 families.²⁷⁵

In 1998, two new churches were acquired, in Eindhoven and Utrecht. Before obtaining their own church building, the Copts in Eindhoven rented a chapel in a retirement home between 1992 and 1998, after which a new church was bought and named after Archangel Michael and St. Anthony the Abbot. In 1998, the pope sent Father Youssef Mansour Rizkalla to Eindhoven for a “permanent *khidma*.” Today, Father Youssef,

²⁷⁴. Ibid., 61.

²⁷⁵. Ibid., 74.

together with a young priest Father Mina Habib, *serve* about 180 Coptic families living in the southern Netherlands. As to the community in Utrecht, *khidma* was established there in 1993 with the first Bible study group which took place in a rented school. Today, the Coptic community in Utrecht uses their own church, a former Catholic nunnery, located in northern Utrecht, which was named after St. George (usually referred to as Mari Guirguis) and St. Demiana after the official acquisition of the building. The community, consisting of 200 families, is served by Father Bishoy Kamel (since 2003) and Father Youhanna Saber (since 2019).²⁷⁶

Besides these larger congregations centered in and around the most populated cities in the Netherlands, the Coptic Church was also able to establish parishes in areas where a lower number of Copts have settled. In the northern province of Friesland, there are small groups of Copts who started gathering during the 1990s to pray and celebrate the Liturgy together. According to Bishop Arseny, in 1985, there were only two Coptic families in the province, and by 1999, that number rose to fifteen. In 2000, the Coptic Church bought a church building in Hilaard, near Leeuwarden, which today serves around fifty families. The naming of the newly acquired church in Friesland tells a story of emplacement in the local environment. When Father Arsanus and members of the local community were thinking about which patron saint to choose for the church in Hilaard, they sought inspiration from the etymology of the name Leeuwarden and the geography of the province. In its modern interpretation and current form, the name Leeuwarden would mean “lion’s grounds/terps” (this theory is largely dismissed by scholars) and, to the members of the Coptic community, the form of the province of Friesland on the map resembled a lion’s head. Therefore, they sought to find a saint whose life story was linked to a lion and ultimately chose St. Paul of Thebes, whose grave is believed to have been dug by two lions.²⁷⁷

In the following years, Coptic churches were established in other regions with smaller Coptic populations, in Assen, in the province of Drenthe, in 2002, and later in Kapelle, in Zeeland, in 2013. The church in Assen serves (*takhdim*) about seventy families, whereas the parish in Zeeland takes care of twenty-five Coptic families.²⁷⁸ The year 2013 was a significant milestone for the Dutch Coptic community, as Father Arsanus was ordained the first Bishop of the Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Netherlands by Pope Tawadros II at a ceremony in Cairo.²⁷⁹

²⁷⁶. Ibid., 73–81.

²⁷⁷. Bishop Anba Arseny, *Een Stralende Kaars*, 96–97.

²⁷⁸. Ibid., 99–108.

²⁷⁹. Bishop Anba Arseny, *Sham'a Mudi'a*, 147.

In recent years, as the number of members of the Coptic Church in the Netherlands continued to grow, both as a result of immigration and family expansion, the church leadership felt the need to relieve the pressure of the largest parishes in the most populated areas in the Netherlands, specifically in the Randstad area. According to several of my Coptic interlocutors, particularly the Coptic churches in Amsterdam, The Hague, and Utrecht have recently become overcrowded. This led to the purchase of two more church buildings in 2018, in Bussum, in the province of North Holland, and in Leidschendam, located in South Holland. These two churches have since welcomed large numbers of church members from different provinces and today the parishes of Bussum and Leidschendam serve 120 and 140 families, respectively.²⁸⁰ Besides these purchased church buildings, the Coptic community has rented buildings of different Syriac Orthodox churches in Enschede since 1995, in the eastern part of the Netherlands, where the concentration of Copts is much lower compared to other parts of the country. The Coptic community of Enschede consists of around thirty-five families, who use a chapel of the Syriac church of St. Kuryakos every first Saturday of the month.²⁸¹ The 'youngest' Coptic parish in the Netherlands was established in the small town of Beverwijk, in North Holland, when Bishop Arseny signed the purchase contract of an unused Protestant church building in May 2024, helping to remove the pressure from the largest community in Amsterdam.²⁸² The news of the purchase of the new church building in Beverwijk was celebrated and shared on the same day on Facebook by the Coptic Media Center (*al-Markaz al-I'lāmī al-Qibṭī li-l-Kanīsa al-Urthūdhuksiyya*), the official information center of the Patriarchate in Cairo, reflecting a common trend of sharing news from various diasporic Coptic communities around the world.²⁸³ The parish of Beverwijk is going to be served by Father Kozman, a young priest born and raised in Germany, becoming the first priest born outside of Egypt to serve in a church belonging to the Diocese of the Netherlands.²⁸⁴

After being ordained as the Bishop of the Coptic Diocese of the Netherlands, Bishop Arseny was commissioned by Pope Tawadros to start his spiritual and pastoral care of the Coptic community in Belgium, particularly in the region of Flanders, the Dutch speaking part of the country. In 2016, newly ordained priest Father Moussa became

^{280.} St. Verena Coptic church in Bussum is the largest Coptic church building in the Netherlands. The total surface of the church building is around 1400 m², of which 1000 m² is the surface of the main church nave.

^{281.} Bishop Anba Arseny, *Sham'a Mudi'a*, 99.

^{282.} Facebook post by the Media center of the Coptic Orthodox diocese of the Netherlands, May 11, 2024.

^{283.} Facebook post by the Coptic Media Center, May 11, 2024.

^{284.} Personal communication with a member of the Coptic church in Bussum, on July 19, 2024.

the first priest to serve the Copts in Belgium, commencing his service in Antwerp in a rented church. In the same year, the celebration of the Liturgy started in the province of West Flanders, in the town of Kortrijk, where Copts rented a Catholic church for five years. Today, the Diocese of the Netherlands owns two churches in Antwerp, specifically St. Mark church in Berchem, and St. Mary and St. John the Evangelist church in Wilrijk, as well as a church in Brugge, purchased in 2023 and which serves around fifty Coptic families.²⁸⁵

Besides the foundation of church parishes across the country, the formation of the Dutch Coptic community and the expansion of its communal religious life was further manifested through the establishment of a Coptic monastery. According to Bishop Arseny, over the years, one of the goals of the Coptic Church in the Netherlands was to establish the Coptic monastic life in the country, a tradition that was born in Egypt in the third century AD. After discovering a former Catholic monastery in Lievelede, a village in the province of Gelderland, in 2010 that had been put up for sale, Bishop Arseny signed the contract of purchase in 2016. In the same year, the monastery welcomed its first three monks.²⁸⁶ The building complex consists of eight cells for monks, two churches, multiple accommodation rooms, library, studying rooms, et cetera.²⁸⁷ Today, the monastery in Lievelede represents the spiritual and cultural center for members of the Coptic community in the Netherlands, particularly for the youth. Since its establishment, the monastery has served as a location for youth spiritual retreats (*bayt al-khalwa*), various kinds of youth and family meetings, as well as for the yearly youth conferences during summer, and as of early 2024, it hosts three monks. In late 2023, the community applied for a permit to build a mausoleum in the monastery complex, where deceased members of the community would be buried.²⁸⁸

Since 2015, the Coptic diocese of the Netherlands has been legally registered as a religious denomination (*kerkgemeenschap*). It is a member of several local organizations and councils, where it cooperates with other Christian churches, including mainline

^{285.} Bishop Anba Arseny, *Een Stralende Kaars*, 129-131.

Facebook post by the Media center of the Coptic Orthodox diocese of the Netherlands, July 6, 2023. Besides Coptic churches in Antwerp and Brugge, Copts use two churches in Leuven and a church in Brussels, which are not under the care of the Dutch Coptic Diocese.

^{286.} Gerard Lepoeter, "Een Koptisch-Orthodoxe kerk in Zeeland," *Bulletin Stichting Oude Zeeuwse Kerken* 78, April 2018, 11.

^{287.} Bishop Anba Arseny, *Sham'a Mudi'a*, 106-108.

^{288.} Wout Dusseldorp, "Met mausoleum wordt Achterhoekse onderkomen hét officiële klooster van de koptische-orthodoxe kerk in Nederland," accessed January 5, 2024, <https://www.gelderlander.nl/oost-gelre/met-mausoleum-wordt-achterhoekse-onderkomen-het-officiele-klooster-van-de-koptische-orthodoxe-kerk-in-nederland-af93313b/#:~:text=Lievelede%20krijgt%20een%20mausoleum%20en,koptisch%20orthodoxe%20christenen%20in%20Nederland.>

Catholic and Protestant churches in the Netherlands, through the Raad van Kerken (Council of Churches), SKIN (*Samen Kerk in Nederland*) – an organization of migrant/international churches, as well as with other Orthodox churches in the country through OZI (*De Orthodoxe Zendende Instantie*, “The Orthodox Sending Agency”) and more closely with the rest of the Oriental Orthodox churches in SOKIN (*Samenwerkingsverband van Oriëntaals-orthodoxe kerken in Nederland*, “Partnership of Oriental Orthodox churches in the Netherlands”). Based on the accounts from several of my interlocutors in the Dutch Coptic community, as of early 2024, the Diocese does not have any formal relations with other Egyptian organizations or institutions in the country, although the bishop occasionally participates in important events and celebrations at the Embassy of Egypt in The Hague.²⁸⁹

Coptic Orthodox communities in Italy

Since the 1970s Italy has been one of the most popular immigration destinations for Copts, and Egyptians in general, and today it hosts arguably the largest Egyptian community in Europe. According to a report from the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, at the end of 2017, 38.2 percent of Egyptian immigrants in Europe resided in Italy.²⁹⁰ Another report published in 2016 asserts that Italy hosts the largest number of Egyptians in Europe, comprising predominantly young men (almost half of them are between 25 and 44 of age) with generally lower levels of education.²⁹¹ Due to the increase in illegal migration to Italy since the beginning of the twenty-first century, it is difficult to acquire accurate estimations on the number of Egyptians living in Italy, which has consequently led to considerable discrepancies between different sources. For example, Caritas reports the number of around 46,000 regular (‘legal’) Egyptians migrants in Italy in 2003.²⁹² This is significantly lower compared to many other post-2010 reports; a 2012 report by the Egyptian Foreign Ministry assumes the presence of 190,000 Egyptians in Italy in 2009, while a source from 2018 estimates

^{289.} The Coptic diocese of the Netherlands used to be a member of the Association of Egyptian Organizations in the Netherlands (*Vereniging van Egyptische Organisaties In Nederland*), but left it for reasons unknown to the author. Regarding the bishop's participation in events at the Egyptian Embassy, one such example was the presence of Bishop Arseny and several other senior members of the community at the event organized by the Embassy to celebrate the beginning of Ramadan in March 2024.

^{290.} Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics (CAPMAS), “Migration Booklet in Egypt 2018,” 42.

^{291.} De Bel-Air, “Migration Profile: Egypt,” 3-4.

^{292.} Andrea Stocchiero, *Fostering Egyptian Local Development Through Diasporic Networks in Italy*, (Rome: CeSPI, 2004), 6.

this number to be 119,000.²⁹³ A 2020 report by the ISMU (*Iniziative e Studi sulla Multiethnicità*, “Initiatives and Studies on Multiethnicity”) mentions the presence of 128,000 Egyptians.²⁹⁴ Although it is difficult to verify the accuracy of these figures, these recent estimates point to a possible rapid growth of Egyptians in Italy.

Taking this into account, the challenge of estimating the total number of Copts in Italy becomes even more difficult since religious affiliation and differences do not appear in most emigration (in Egypt) and immigration (in Italy) reports. Therefore, as is the case with most diaspora Coptic communities, approximate estimates usually come from within the Coptic Orthodox Church. According to various sources, ranging from personal communications with members of the clergy to different scholarly works centered around Copts in Italy, there are between 20,000 and 40,000 active members across all Coptic churches in Italy, although some sources estimate this number to be as high as 70,000.²⁹⁵

The first significant flow of Coptic (and Egyptian) migrants to Italy occurred during the 1970s. This wave primarily consisted of young well educated migrants. According to Father Mina, one of the first Coptic priests in Italy who serves a parish in Milan, the first Coptic immigrants in Italy primarily moved there to continue their studies. Besides studying, Copts migrated to Italy to seek better job opportunities, largely settling in the north of the country, with Brescia in the region of Lombardy becoming an important employment hub for many Copts (and Egyptians) during the 1970s and 1980s.²⁹⁶ In the following decades, during the 1980s and 1990s, the demographic structure of Egyptian immigrants in Italy diversified, when more people with lower levels of education immigrated to the country. Notably in 1990 and 1991, many Egyptians, and among them Copts, migrated to Italy after leaving Gulf countries due to political and economic instabilities therein. Most of them were male unskilled workers who sought to find employment in a foreign country, even temporarily. As Stocchiero notes, although many Egyptian immigrants initially moved to Italy with

^{293.} Zohry, “Migration and Development in Egypt,” 83. Nicolini, “The Copts in Italy,” 590.

^{294.} See Fondazione ISMU, “XXVI Rapporto ISMU sulle migrazioni 2020,” accessed November 22, 2023, <https://www.ismu.org/xxvi-rapporto-ismu-sulle-migrazioni-2020-comunicato-stampa-23-2-2021/>. It is not clear, however, if this number relates only to the legal Egyptian migrants in the country with a regulated residence status, and if it also includes members of the second generation who do not automatically become Italian citizens by birth.

^{295.} See Bernardo, *Ricostruire una comunità* and Nicolini, “The Copts in Italy.” While most of my interlocutors and some scholars, including Bernardo, estimate the presence of around 20,000 and 30,000 Copts in Italy, Nicolini mentions a rather high number – 70,000 relying on the sources provided by the International Congress of Coptic Studies and Ambrosiana Community Report of 2016.

^{296.} Personal communication with Father Mina, on November 18, 2021, in Cologno Monzese.

a purpose of finding temporary employment and earning money before moving back to Egypt, most of them eventually decided to settle permanently in Italy.²⁹⁷ Some of the early immigrants pursued their careers in their educational fields, while others opened restaurants and other types of businesses. From an early stage, Milan, and more generally the north of Italy, emerged as a principal immigration destination for those who wished to continue their studies or find employment outside of Egypt. The city eventually became known among Italian Copts as “la città del lavoro” (the city of work), even more so than the capital of Rome.²⁹⁸ More broadly, Milan today hosts a large Egyptian community, which numbered almost 24,000 people in 2003, and has grown since especially after 2011, reportedly consisting of a considerably large number of irregular migrants.²⁹⁹

Italy experienced an immigration boom at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of 1990s, which prompted the need to address and regulate the country’s laws and policies regarding immigration. During the 1990s and early 2000s, Italy tightened its immigration-related laws, seeking to curb and penalize irregular migration and which led to more rigid rules when it comes to obtaining a resident permit.³⁰⁰ Amid these stricter immigration rules, together with tightened immigration policies at the level of the European Union (exemplified by the Schengen agreement from 1990 and the Maastricht Treaty from 1992), illegal migration primarily from North African countries to Italy and other European Mediterranean countries increased significantly at the turn of the twenty-first century. Besides irregular migrants from Morocco and Tunisia, many young fresh graduates or predominantly unemployed Egyptians with low education levels engaged in irregular migration, either through the Mediterranean Sea from Libya or by overstaying their Schengen visas. Zohry argues that the main reasons for the rise of irregular migration among young Egyptians were not necessarily linked to the tightening of immigration laws in

^{297.} Stocchiero, *Fostering Egyptian Local Development Through Diasporic Networks in Italy*, 8.

^{298.} Many of my Coptic interlocutors in Italy mentioned that Milan has been known as the city of work and employment opportunities, while Rome is considered to be famous for tourism and enjoyment.

^{299.} Petra Mezzetti, “Gli Egiziani a Milano,” in *Gli Egiziani in Italia. Tre casi studio: Roma, Milano, Emilia Romagna Working Papers 14/2005*, ed. Andrea Stocchiero (Rome: CeSPI, 2005), 36. See also Zohry, “The Migratory Patterns of Egyptians in Italy and France.” In 2022, a total of 20,542 individuals with Egyptian nationality entered Italy illegally via sea, occupying the top spot on the list of foreign irregular migrants arriving on boats that year. See Fondazione ISMU, “Sbarchi e accoglienza: 10 anni tra alti e bassi,” accessed November 22, 2023, <https://www.ismu.org/sbarchi-e-accoglienza-i-dati-degli-ultimi-10-anni-tra-alti-e-bassi/>.

^{300.} Michele Colucci, *Storia dell'immigrazione straniera in Italia: Dal 1945 ai nostri giorni* (Rome: Carocci Editore, 2018), 2-3. Annalisa Camilli, “La lunga storia dell'immigrazione in Italia,” *Internazionale*, accessed November 20, 2023, <https://www.internazionale.it/bloc-notes/annalisa-camilli/2018/10/10/storia-immigrazione-italia>.

the EU, but was primarily caused by the high unemployment rates in Egypt, fewer possibilities for employment in the Arab Gulf (compared to previous years), as well as the geographical proximity between Egypt (or in fact Libya) and Italy.³⁰¹ There are no clear indications or reliable information on how many of Egyptian irregular migrants in Italy are Copts, however, based on personal communications with several members of the Coptic communities in Sicily, Rome, and Bologna, Coptic churches in those cities host a number of Coptic believers who entered Italy via the sea, as well as those with a refugee status.

The Coptic community in Italy continued to grow throughout the 2000s and 2010s, especially after the 2011 Revolution in Egypt when a large number of Copts sought to escape potential dangers related to the Islamist rule of Mohamed Morsi, and the wider political, economic, and social instability in the country. These and more recent waves of immigration to Italy are marked by the arrival of predominantly young people, both regularly (e.g. through employment, studies, or as asylum seekers) and irregularly, via the Mediterranean Sea. Some young Egyptians (primarily men) have, for instance, capitalized on the existing cooperations between Egypt and Italy and found employment in Italy after graduating from the Italian technical institute of Don Bosco located in Shubra, Cairo.³⁰²

In the words of a Coptic priest serving in one of the churches in Milan, what complicates the task of acquiring somewhat accurate and stable estimates on the number of Copts in Italy is the fact that “migration is a live thing” and is always in progress, therefore, some Copts engage in temporary migration and move from one city or region to another, or to a different country, while at the same time new Copts arrive on a regular basis.³⁰³ Since the 1990s and even more so in recent years, migration and expansion of the Coptic community across different cities in Italy occurred largely through previously or newly established informal networks between settled and prospective immigrants to Italy. Such chain migration patterns have been a common development in broader immigration trends in Italy in the past thirty years.³⁰⁴

^{301.} Zohry, “Egyptian Youth and the European Eldorado,” 5–6.

^{302.} The Salesian Institute of Don Bosco was founded in 1926 in Cairo and was initially dedicated to training young Italians of Egypt. Today, it serves to train young Egyptians in different technical, craft skills and help them find employment. For more see <https://donboscocairo.org/>.

^{303.} Personal communication with a Coptic priest from Milan, on November 3, 2021, in Milan.

^{304.} Personal communication with Simona Beretta, a diocesan consultant at the “Church of the people” of the Archdiocese of Milan, on November 8, 2022, in Milan.

Copts, like other Egyptians, have settled across various cities and regions in Italy since the 1970s. The largest Coptic presence is in the region of Lombardy, primarily in the province of Milan, where between 10,000 and 20,000 Copts are members of the local Coptic Church. Groups of Copts are also present in other larger cities across Italy, including in Rome (where several thousand Copts reside), Turin, Florence, Bologna, as well as in smaller numbers in Sicily, mainly in and around the cities of Catania and Palermo. The Copts living in Italy are a diverse and heterogeneous community, with diverse backgrounds with regard to their regional origin in Egypt, their education levels, social class and professional backgrounds, and their migration history and status. For instance, Copts living in the north of Italy have largely established themselves as entrepreneurs and many of them own their own businesses (mainly restaurants) or work in construction. In addition, they tend to be more highly skilled and independent when it comes to their employment. On the other hand, a large number of Copts who live in Rome and other southern parts of the country, including Sicily, often have temporary jobs. Many of them also work in the catering industry and in the plant and floral industry.³⁰⁵ As discussed earlier, Coptic communities in the central and southern parts of the country include a higher number of individuals “without papers,” compared to the communities in the north. In addition, Coptic believers in Italy differ among themselves when it comes to their ecclesiastical organization since they are members of two separate, highly independent dioceses. Even within the two dioceses, there are certainly various regional and local differences with their own particular developments that make each church parish a unique unit (for example, social structure and parish activities might well differ between a large church in Rome and a small church community in Sicily, although they belong to the same diocese). Consequently, today it is more sensible to speak of Coptic *communities* in Italy, rather than a single Italian Coptic community.

The establishment and formal formation of the first Coptic community in Italy began in the 1980s. At this stage, we can indeed speak of *a* (single) community, since the number of Copts in the country was still relatively small and larger differences among different groups of believers had not yet been formed. Reportedly, the Coptic Orthodox community in Italy was born from the migrant believers' need to maintain the connection with their culture and their religious traditions, as well as to secure an Orthodox Christian education and upbringing of their children born in *mahgar*. The need for the establishment of church parishes in Italy, according to the Coptic church leaders in Rome, arose from the necessity to provide spiritual care for the believing immigrants and to “preserve their Coptic Orthodox identity,” by spreading the culture and teachings of the Church to future generations.

³⁰⁵. Bernardo, *Ricostruire una comunità*, 133.

Pope Shenouda mentions that at the very beginning, Copts used a French church in Venice to pray and in 1981. He then sent bishops to perform occasional liturgical services for this small group of Copts.³⁰⁶ The first Coptic priest in Italy, Father Beniamino el-Baramusi, arrived in 1984 upon Pope Shenouda's request. Father Beniamino was based in Milan, from where he would travel to other cities and expand his network in order to find Copts dispersed across the country. During this period, the Copts in Milan started using the church of San Pietro Celestino located in the central neighborhood of San Babila, which would later become the largest parish in the entire diocese.³⁰⁷ Father Beniamino left Italy already in 1985, after whom several temporary priests (all of them from monasteries in Wadi el-Natroun) arrived in the country with the responsibility to establish a Coptic community. Among them was Father Bishoy Aziz, who managed to rent a Catholic church in Trastevere, in Rome, which was used three times a week up until 1987. In 1990, Father Barnaba El Soryany arrived in Italy and settled in the capital, becoming the founder of the Coptic community in Rome. Two years later, Pope Shenouda sent Bishop Kirolos, a General Bishop from Minya, to serve the Coptic immigrants residing in Milan and the rest of the Italian North.³⁰⁸

As the *khidma* stabilized and the communities in different Italian cities grew during the 1990s, the need for a higher level of ecclesial organization, i.e. for establishing a diocese in Italy emerged in the Patriarchate in Egypt. In 1995, Father Barnaba was ordained as the first bishop of the Coptic Orthodox Church in Italy. However, in 1996, the Church acquired a new structure and Italy became home to two independent dioceses; Bishop Barnaba became the Bishop of Rome and its affiliated regions, while Bishop Kirolos was ordained as the Bishop of Milan and its affiliated regions in most of the north of Italy. The Diocese of Rome incorporates a large territory of the country and provides care for Copts located in Rome, Florence, Bologna, Turin, Genoa, and the rest of the Italian South.³⁰⁹ The Diocese of Milan is responsible for northern and northeastern regions, specifically Lombardy, Veneto (excluding Venice), Trentino, and Friuli, as well as the Italian-speaking Canton Ticino in Switzerland. According to several of my Coptic interlocutors from Milan, the reason for the existence of two dioceses in Italy is purely practical and relates to the need for a better organization and a more centralized *khidma* in a large geographical territory.³¹⁰ In addition,

^{306.} Al-Banna, *al-Aqbat fi Misr wa-l-Mahjar*, 175-176.

^{307.} Personal communication with Father Mina, on November 18, 2021, in Cologno Monzese.

^{308.} Bernardo, *Ricostruire una comunità*, 129.

^{309.} *Ibid.*, 129-130.

Note, Turin, although located in northwest of Italy, belongs to the Diocese of Rome.

^{310.} A priest from Milan mentioned that although the Coptic communities in Italy were still rather small at the time of the establishment of the two dioceses, Pope Shenouda had a vision and "predicted" their growth and that such ecclesial organization would better serve the Italian Copts' spiritual needs.

besides being the leader of the Diocese of Milan, Bishop Kirolos became the abbot of St. Shenouda monastery in Lacchiarella, located around 20 km south of Milan, officially recognized by the Church Synod in Egypt in 1988. After the passing of Bishop Kirolos in 2017, a new bishop for the Diocese of Milan was chosen later that year - Bishop Antonio.³¹¹

The Coptic diocese of Milan today encompasses 17 parishes, most of which are situated in the region of Lombardy and four are located in Milan. The largest (and oldest) parish is St. Mark (referred to as San Marco by its members) in the center of Milan, which hosts around 1000 families. The seat of the Diocese is the Virgin Mary and St. Anthony the Abbot church in Cinisello Balsamo. The church, a former marble factory, hosts between 800 and 900 mostly Egyptian Coptic families. Besides senior priests born and educated in Egypt, some parishes in and outside of Milan are served by priests who grew up and were educated in Italy, which is almost a unique development among Coptic communities in Europe.³¹² As of today, there are three Coptic priests who were raised and ordained in Italy, all of them serving in the Diocese of Milan. These priests are particularly active and engaged in activities and issues regarding youth, such as organizing diocesan youth meetings, guiding youth translation groups, and leading retreat trips to the monastery.

The monastery in Lacchiarella is one of the most active communal centers, a place for regular spiritual days and retreats, youth excursions, and a meeting site for the clergy. It initially hosted three monks (one of them being Bishop Giovanni, Bishop of Central Europe) during the late 1990s, which grew to ten in recent years. The monastery is also the resting place of Bishop Kirolos, visited regularly by many members of the Coptic Church from different parts of the world.³¹³

Coptic churches belonging to the Diocese of Rome are geographically dispersed and most of them are not located close to one another, as is the case with churches of the Diocese of Milan. The largest congregation is the church of St. George in northeastern Rome, served by several senior priests. One of the priests shared that he frequently travels from one city to another visiting different Coptic communities, often traveling 700 km during one trip. According to another senior priest and the official website of the diocese, there are three churches in Rome and five more parishes in several smaller towns around Rome, which all together serve about 800 families. During

^{311.} Anonymous author, *La Chiesa Copta: Una storia e una presenza* (Milan: Diocesi Cristiana Copta Ortodossa di Milano e dintorni, 2021), 8-36.

^{312.} Based on the available information, besides the dioceses of the Netherlands and Milan, only several Coptic churches in France and the UK have priests who were raised outside of Egypt.

^{313.} Anonymous author, *La Chiesa Copta*, 6.

our conversation held in English, while enumerating Rome's parishes, the priest was mentioning their names in Arabic, or in the common "Egyptian Coptic" way, for instance Mari Morqos and Mari Guirguis, unlike the young priests from Milan who would almost exclusively refer to the same saints as San Marco and San Giorgio. Besides Rome and the region of Lazio, Coptic churches of this diocese are also found in Turin, in the very northwest of the country, then multiple parishes in Reggio Emilia, Bologna, Florence, and Perugia, to several smaller parishes in Sicily, in the country's very south.³¹⁴ This geographical diffusion of Coptic churches belonging to the Diocese of Rome has contributed to a higher decentralization of the service and a relative independence regarding church activities and practices, especially when compared to the case of closely located churches of the other diocese. Therefore, as mentioned above, even though they are part of the same diocese, churches in Turin, Rome, and Catania certainly show a high degree of heterogeneity among each other, due to the differences in local social and legal dynamics, different social structures of the communities, disparate access to resources, and the proximity or distance from other Coptic communities. Besides churches, the Diocese of Rome established a monastery, named after Virgin Mary, located in Laurentina, close to the capital. The monastery, bought originally as a private villa and certainly not as big or well-developed as the one in Lacchiarella, serves as the seat of the Diocese.

Creating Coptic communal spaces

A principal precondition for creating a tight, well-connected community in diaspora is securing a place where religious practices can be performed and where individuals who share some fundamental attributes such as ethnicity, religious belonging, and language can come together. Fenton argues that "[t]he exercise of religion in groups and the dedication of a place for group worship are necessary ingredients in the process of becoming at home."³¹⁵ Therefore, firstly, acquiring worship spaces not only allows for the performance of religious practices but crucially transforms them into communal and collective activities; and secondly, these venues root these traditions and their practitioners in a new land, effectively creating a 'new home' where elements of 'homeland' traditions are maintained and the community is able to grow. By striving to root themselves in a new environment, first-generation Dutch and Italian Copts have forged material ties to their new land and created 'Coptic spaces'

³¹⁴. Diocesi Copta Ortodossa di Roma, "Principali città della Diocesi," accessed November 23, 2023, <https://dcoroma.it/churches>.

³¹⁵. John Y. Fenton, *Transplanting religious traditions: Asian Indians in America* (New York: Praeger, 1988), 170-171.

that evoke 'homeland' traditions and community life from Egypt, while at the same time adapting such traditions in order to pass them on to next generations. I argue that it is specifically at the nexus of seeking to reproduce 'homeland familiarity' and trying to adapt to the new environment that the rooting and formation of diaspora Coptic communities can take place.

Here, I use the metaphor of *rooting* as a way to understand how Copts in Europe express and deal with their diasporic experiences through the multilayered construction of ideas of 'home' and how groups of individuals become communities in the first place. The botanical metaphors of roots, rooting, (up)rootedness, and rhizomes (plant stem that sends out roots) have served scholars to better interpret and illustrate the experiences of migration, wayfaring, formation of diasporic communities, emplacement, as well as family 'origins' and kinship.³¹⁶ Diasporic rooting can thus be understood as a set of mechanisms through which migrants forge material and immaterial ties to their 'hostland,' allowing them to develop certain senses of belonging, both to their own community and the new environment. As a plant grows roots to be physically attached to the soil, rooting bears connotations of staying in place.³¹⁷ Acquiring places for worship, replicating particular visual and material cultures of Coptic churches in Egypt, and reinterpreting and adapting their meanings are all signs of such rooting. Through this rooting, I argue, Coptic diasporic communities engage in upholding the connections to Egypt and cling to memories of past places, at the same time emplacing themselves in a host environment and allowing a community to be formed.

Copts in the Netherlands and Italy have created shared spaces that are founded upon various material media. These are understood as necessary for practicing faith as a collective and thus as constituting the meaning of being a member of the Coptic Church. In this process, various visual and material objects can function as "mediators" of familiarity, memories, and a sense of belonging, and thus carry a significant potential in the process of home-making in a new place.³¹⁸ By deploying strategies and tools of 'rooting,' the Coptic communities in Europe challenge the

^{316.} See for example, Cicilie Fagerlid and Michelle A. Tisdell (eds.), *A Literary Anthropology of Migration and Belonging: Roots, Routes, and Rhizomes* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020) and Darieva, *Making a Homeland*.

^{317.} Fagerlid and Tisdell, "Introduction: Literary Anthropology, Migration, and Belonging," in *A Literary Anthropology of Migration and Belonging*, 2.

^{318.} See Birgit Meyer, "Material Mediations and Religious Practices of World- Making," in *Religion Across Media: From Early Antiquity to Late Modernity*, ed. K. Lundby (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 1-19. and Idem, "Picturing the Invisible: Visual Culture and the Study of Religion," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 27 (2015): 333-360.

static idea of diasporic belonging and offer an alternative to understanding Egypt as *the* (only) homeland.

This section delves into the material aspect of community formation in Coptic churches in Europe. I will explore the challenges and opportunities that arise during this process, ultimately forming the foundation for discourses used by church leaders and lay members for creating a sense of groupness among individuals. Two main aspects will be covered; namely, the acquisition of church buildings, which will focus mainly on the Coptic experience in Italy, examining the challenges they face in securing churches and dedicated spaces for worship, and the creation of 'Coptic communal spaces' in the Netherlands and Italy, exploring how church leaders and members of these communities strive to replicate Coptic church life from Egypt, delving into how their members negotiate concepts of authenticity, change, and adaptation within their new contexts and how these are understood as tools for strengthening communal ties.

Acquiring churches

For religious communities, securing a permanent place of worship transcends its function as a venue for prayer and rituals. Churches, synagogues, mosques, and other houses of worship serve as powerful symbols of 'community identity' and stability. They offer a dedicated space for religious practice, fostering a sense of belonging and shared experience among members. This is particularly true for minority faith groups, where a dedicated space for worship becomes a potent symbol of their presence and acceptance within the broader society. Mazumdar and Mazumdar illustrate how building a place of worship symbolically legitimates a Hindu immigrant group's presence in California.³¹⁹

However, the process of acquiring such a space, especially for religious minorities in countries with a dominant religion, can be fraught with challenges. Egyptian Copts have long fought discrimination and restrictions regarding building and renovating churches. Not only has the Coptic Church had to find ways to combat and overcome these restrictions, but the very issue of building new Coptic churches has often been the driving reason for sectarian strife and attacks on Christians in different parts of Egypt (largely in Upper Egypt). While most European countries do not share Egypt's explicit legal restrictions (which usually favor mosques over churches), Coptic communities still encounter significant obstacles in establishing fixed parishes, particularly in Italy as compared to the Netherlands. Unlike in Egypt,

^{319.} See Shampa Mazumdar and Sanjoy Mazumdar, "Religious Placemaking and Community Building in Diaspora," *Environment and Behavior* 41, no. 3 (2008): 307-337.

where church leaders have sometimes circumvented legal barriers by constructing churches without formal permissions, such strategies are not feasible in Europe. In Italy, despite formal equality for all religious communities, Coptic communities face a complex web of legal and bureaucratic hurdles. Limited financial resources further restrict their ability to build new churches, while regulations regarding the use of existing religious buildings often place them at a disadvantage compared to local Catholic Christians. These very challenges, however, can become a catalyst for strengthening communal bonds. The collective effort required to navigate complex legal frameworks, raise funds, and secure a permanent space fosters a sense of shared purpose and accomplishment within the community. Overcoming these obstacles strengthens the connection between individual members and their church (both a particular parish and the diocese more broadly), as the place of worship becomes not just a physical space, but a testament to the perseverance and resilience of their community. The struggle for a permanent home becomes a shared narrative, reinforcing the bonds of belonging and collectiveness within the Coptic diasporas in Italy, as well as in the Netherlands.

When coping with these challenges, many aspects of the social and legal realities of the Coptic community in Italy (and elsewhere) are defined by its minority status. In these circumstances, the church and its members are often compelled to compromise, invent and revisit the meanings of their tradition. One of the leading challenges of the Coptic Orthodox Church in Italy is related to the issue of acquiring places of worship.³²⁰ Although shared by other communities in *mahgar*, this particular issue differs considerably from the case of the Coptic community in the Netherlands, whose leaders have been able to buy unused Catholic and Protestant church buildings, as mentioned earlier.

As a religious minority, the Copts had to contend with the dominant position of the Catholic Church in Italy. Regulations regarding places of worship are handled at the regional level, and some scholars characterize this area as particularly 'delicate' with unresolved issues.³²¹ Furthermore, the status of minority religions remains somewhat ambiguous, with the Catholic Church holding a special, protected position

^{320.} Bernardo has explored the legal difficulties of acquiring churches in Italy in more detail. She also makes the connection between building a community and the significance of acquiring places of worship in the case of the Coptic community in Rome, however, without paying much attention to the communal narratives and discourses related to these topics. See Bernardo, *Ricostruire una comunità*.

^{321.} Bernardo, *Ricostruire una comunità*, 133.

as outlined in the 1984 concordat between Italy and the Vatican.³²² One key provision in this agreement restricts the requisition or purchase of unused Catholic church buildings, which are considered heritage sites.³²³ This, therefore, stands in contrast to the situation in the Netherlands, where Coptic communities are able to acquire former Catholic (and Protestant) churches.

Such legal provisions and regulations, sometimes followed by various ambiguities and regional differences, together with limited resources, have led to two principal practices related to acquiring places of worship that dominate in the case of the Coptic communities in Italy. These are renting Catholic churches/chapels and buying and transforming unused public or private venues. Here, we see a remarkable difference between the two Coptic Orthodox dioceses in Italy. Churches used by the parishes belonging to the Diocese of Milan (including the monastery) are mostly transformed abandoned venues, such as factories, garages, and other types of buildings. These transformed spaces are owned by the Diocese. In the words of a Coptic priest serving in the Milanese diocese, the Coptic Church “saves” those abandoned places and transforms them into Coptic places for worship. It is widely believed in the community that it is better that these abandoned venues become Christian places for worship than to become buildings that cater other religions or places for secular use, such as hotels or clubs. More than anything else, abandoned buildings run the risk of becoming places for various illegal activities. This is the case with St. Simeone and St. Anna Coptic church in the neighborhood of Gorla, in Milan, which was bought as an abandoned gym and had been previously used as a drug dealing spot. Thus, by creating a church of such a site, Copts “rescue” (according to one of my interlocutors) an impure space and make it “sacred,” at the same time benefiting local residents (who would, we can assume, prefer a church instead of an abandoned site at risk for attracting illegal activity in their neighborhood). As a Coptic priest from Milan described to me, the Copts in Milan “created a ‘Coptic space’ from nothing.”³²⁴ More broadly, such accomplishments become even more significant considering how challenging and burdensome it is to acquire a place for worship for religious minorities in Italy, as much as in Egypt.

The pride in the accomplishment of establishing church parishes “from nothing” is evident in various church publications. Such publications and texts often emphasize

^{322.} For the full text of the 1984 Agreement, see “Servizio per i rapporti con le confessioni religiose e per le relazioni istituzionali,” available via https://presidenza.governo.it/usri/confessioni/accordo_indice.html.

^{323.} Governo Italiano, “Accordo tra l'Italia e la Santa Sede e le successive intese di attuazione,” accessed November 23, 2023, https://presidenza.governo.it/usri/confessioni/accordo_indice.html.

^{324.} Personal communication with a Coptic priest from Milan, on November 3, 2021, in Milan.

the central role of pioneering priests, later bishops, in the establishment of church communities. A prominent example from Italy is a booklet published by the Diocese of Milan on the occasion of celebrating the ecumenical relations with the local Catholic church and the plan to establish a new Coptic church in the town of Paderno Dugnano, not far from Milan. The booklet was officially released and presented during a public exhibition held in Paderno Dugnano in late 2021, during which the Coptic community in Milan presented the history of the Coptic Church, its traditions, and the history of the diocese to a wider audience. The booklet reflected the content of the exhibition. A large part of the booklet is dedicated to Coptic martyrdom and persecution, highlighting the strong persevering character of the Coptic Church. Furthermore, a prominent section focuses on the founder of the Diocese of Milan, Bishop Anba Kirolos and his accomplishments in creating the Coptic community in Italy, and more specifically in Milan.³²⁵ In the text, the authors (a group of priests and youth) emphasize that the community would not exist if it was not for their previous leader and that his legacy is now being continued by the current bishop Anba Antonio. The text is accompanied by a large number of photos, of both bishops, Coptic churches belonging to the Diocese, as well as of community members.

Similar trends are evident in the Coptic community in the Netherlands. Although church leaders in the Netherlands do not need to deal with the same legal obstacles like those in Italy, establishing parishes through buying unused local church buildings (and thus keeping them ‘alive’) is considered by both clergy and lay church members a success. The previously cited book by Bishop Arseny about the Coptic Church in the Netherlands was published, according to the bishop, as a “testimony to God’s work with us in establishing the service in the Diocese of the Netherlands.”³²⁶ In this book, Bishop Arseny narrates the story of his arrival to the Netherlands, writes about initial challenges and difficulties (*ṣu’ūbāt*) in securing a fixed place for worship and establishing a stable church *khidma* for Coptic believers in the country, and provides an overview of communal activities, practices, and short histories of each Coptic parish in the country. The word *ṣu’ūbāt* is often mentioned in different Arabic-language church publications (including in the communal periodical *al-Tariq*, discussed in more detail in the following chapter) to describe the initial challenges faced by the bishop (then Father Arsanious) and other first-generation migrants in establishing the community. As mentioned earlier, once the early migrants found a place to celebrate the liturgy every weekend (in Amsterdam) and the church was able to offer an array of ritual, spiritual, and social activities to its members, this signified

^{325.} For more information, see the entry in the project database, <https://fourcornersoftheworld.pt.rs.ru/publication/806/public/>.

^{326.} Bishop Anba Arseny, *Sham’a Mudi’a* 25. The text was translated from Arabic by the author.

a stable community. In fact, from this point, the author refers to the Copts in the Netherlands as “the Coptic community” (*al-mujtama’ al-qibṭī*) when writing about the growth of the church, its practices, activities, and the establishment of other parishes in the country.³²⁷ The pride is also expressed through the fact that new parishes are established primarily through the collection of donations and *barakāt* (lit. blessings, here referring primarily to material gifts) from members of the church. Furthermore, the pride in establishing *al-mujtama’ al-qibṭī* in the Netherlands through the establishment of Coptic churches and the preservation of Coptic religious life from Egypt expressed through this publication (among many other ways) serves, according to the bishop, as a “testimony” and “experience which we will leave to the coming generations so they can celebrate the name of God with us...”³²⁸ A Dutch translation of the book, published in 2023, was officially presented during the celebration of the tenth anniversary of the establishment of the Coptic diocese in the Netherlands, held in the church in Bussum and attended by many community members, as well as by a number of local (non-member) Dutch people, including the mayor of the city.

In addition, similar narratives about the pride of the establishment of church *khidma* in the Netherlands were expressed in a 2024 Arabic-language documentary created by the Egyptian Coptic TV station Ahgapy and the Coptic diocese in the Netherlands. In the documentary, entitled “*al-Khadim*” (“The Servant”), Bishop Arseny retells the story of the creation of Coptic churches and the Coptic community in the Netherlands. The movie starts with a Bible verse from Mark 9:35 “Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the *servant* of all,” alluding to the title of the documentary and the hard work and dedication of the bishop in his *service* to God, the Coptic Church, and the believers.³²⁹

The examples of publications in Milan and the Netherlands show us that the narratives of taking pride in the establishment of the community and Coptic parishes in a new land expressed in this type of writing, which might represent a genre on its own that I will call ‘testimonies,’ reflect those heard among community members. During many of my conversations in different churches in the Netherlands and Italy, lay church members often emphasized the efforts and success of their leaders (bishops) in establishing new Coptic churches. In fact, these ‘testimonies’ do not simply reflect what is said, felt, and told among church members, they actively produce and reproduce such narratives within the communities, especially considering the

^{327.} Ibid., 49.

^{328.} Ibid., 25. Translated from Arabic by the author.

^{329.} The documentary is available on YouTube. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fuJj-oDqm7M&t=28s>.

contexts in which they operate and are propagated. Such narratives are (re)produced and told during different celebratory communal events, such as church feast days, anniversaries, and various public events during which the Copts present the story of their Church (like the exhibition in Milan). Such publications, the narratives they create and disseminate, and the events during which they are proclaimed serve to strengthen the sense of belonging to one bounded, solidary group led by a prominent clerical figure, founder of the community, who serves (*yakhdim*) and takes care (*yar'ā*) of his flock.

Turning to the Diocese of Turin and Rome, we encounter a different story from the one in Milan and northern Italy. Similarly to what happens in the north, the main place of worship in Rome, St. George Coptic Orthodox church, is a transformed church that used to be a garage. In addition, the building of the unofficial monastery that serves as bishopric was initially bought as a villa. However, aside from the main church and the bishopric, parishes across the Roman diocese mainly make use of unused Catholic chapels. Many of my interlocutors across different churches of the Roman diocese, both clergy and lay members, expressed their regret that they “do not own churches they use” and often compared themselves to Copts belonging to the Milanese diocese with regard to the ownership of church buildings. In some cases, Copts under the Roman diocese co-use churches with local Catholic communities or rent small Catholic chapels attached to the main church buildings, for an affordable price.

When trying to understand the differences in how these two dioceses acquire their places of worship, one needs to take a closer look at their own historical trajectories, structures of the two communities and intra-communal developments. Since the earliest Coptic presence in Italy, Milan, the country's administrative and business capital, has been the major destination for immigration. Related to this, many Copts who settled in and around Milan have secured solid jobs and were able to financially support their diocese. Thus, an early and accelerated migration in a smaller geographical space, with a group of faithful that succeeded in integrating itself well in the local job-market, contributed considerably to the development of the diocese, thus making it financially and organizationally-equipped for securing their own places of worship. Even here too, the option of using Roman Catholic churches was available and made use of, such as the example of the St. Mark Coptic church in Milan, originally Pope Celestine V Catholic church, whose building cannot be bought as it has a protected status. Unlike the Diocese of Milan, its ‘sister diocese’ in Rome still faces substantial challenges when it comes to organizational and practical issues. With its isolated churches across the whole country, smaller and diffused groups of

believers, and more diverse social structure (including numerous asylum-seekers and low-middle class members of the community), the Coptic Orthodox diocese of Rome lacks the necessary means to conduct its activities properly and further develop, including purchasing buildings that would be transformed into Coptic churches. This is different from Milan, where the Copts proudly remember the late Anba Kirolos and his innovative projects regarding the reconstruction of venues that later became Coptic churches. These included factories that could be repurposed to serve as church buildings and regular meeting points of Coptic believers living in and around Milan. According to many, Anba Kirolos, an engineer by training, was a creative and inventive leader who was able to give life to abandoned buildings and provided his flock with places where they could preserve their faith. The late bishop is thus sometimes referred to as “our spiritual engineer” by the members of the community.³³⁰

Familiarity, ‘authenticity,’ and adaptation in new churches

Recreating Egyptian parish life in Europe went hand in hand with renovating and adapting newly obtained places for worship in order to make them (visually and materially) “more Coptic.” Similar phrases were mentioned to me by many Copts in the Netherlands, Italy, and Spain during our conversations about the establishment of new parishes. As all churches that eventually came into use by Copts in the Netherlands are former Catholic and Protestant church buildings, it was and still is considered imperative to turn newly acquired churches into particular ‘Coptic spaces.’ In Italy, as well as in Spain, where the community faces the same legal challenges as in Italy due to the protected status of Catholic church buildings, the task of creating Coptic spaces might be more challenging. Various kinds of adaptations and innovations are needed to enable the performance of Coptic practices in a diasporic community in attempts of recreating what church members have described to me as an “authentic Coptic atmosphere.”

In terms of architecture, spatial planning, and aesthetics, these newly obtained unused Protestant and Catholic church buildings, some of them initially rented, initially do not have what it takes to function as Coptic churches, that is, to celebrate the Sunday liturgy and socialize in a familiar, ‘Coptic’ atmosphere. Securing a fixed place for worship, for example by buying an unused local church, meant that the members of the parish could make material changes to the interior of the church (with limited changes to its exterior) in order for it to resemble Coptic churches in Egypt. In a conversation with a first-generation member of the Coptic community in Utrecht, my interlocutor said: “We try to make the church as Coptic as possible.”

³³⁰. Personal communication with a Coptic priest from Milan, on November 3, 2021.

Interestingly, this viewpoint was shared by some of my research participants in different Coptic churches in Italy. Yet what does it mean to make a church “as Coptic as possible?”

Some of the most prominent characteristics, such as the dome or the planning of the main church nave, cannot easily, if at all, be replicated in an already existing Protestant or Catholic building. Yet there are elements within the already-existing church buildings that can be tweaked according to Coptic religious practices and aesthetics. The first thing my interlocutor from Utrecht mentioned about making the church look ‘Coptic’ was the altar. Creating an altar facing east with a wooden iconostasis, a prominent feature of traditional Coptic church buildings, was one of the initial steps in reforming a previously Protestant/Catholic space. The wood for iconostases, as well as for the pews, is usually imported from Egypt, which some community members saw as striving to replicate the ‘authenticity’ of Coptic churches in Egypt. Additionally, Bible verses are carved into the iconostasis, reproducing yet another component of the tradition from Egypt. While the clergy in some churches decide to have Bible verses carved in Arabic or Coptic, as is the case with churches in Egypt, in some churches those verses are solely in local languages and sometimes they are bilingual (see Image 2). During my visits to a couple of Coptic churches and the nearly finished monastery in Catalonia, I noticed a large amount of Spanish text in various parts of the buildings, including on the iconostases and the baptistery of the monastery. When admiring the iconostasis of the Coptic church in Cervera (see Image 3) which contains a text in Spanish, I asked the priest whether it was permitted to use Arabic (as a foreign language) in a rented church in Spain (an assumption coming from my own expectation to see Arabic text). The priest replied with a dose of surprise and asserted: “Yes, ..., it is fine to put Arabic, but we are in Spain, so of course we put Spanish.”³³¹ Linguistic choices for iconostasis inscriptions in diasporic churches, therefore, may reveal broader linguistic ideologies and attitudes directly linked with the ways newly established communities see themselves in their new societies. Sometimes, the choice to have carved Bible verses on iconostases in the local language reflects the need to appeal to the young generations who will be able to read those verses while they participate in the liturgy, but they also point to the rooting strategies of a Coptic community who seeks to inscribe itself and its traditions in a new environment, as well as to a particular linguistically-based attitude towards the wish for integration.

³³¹. Personal communication with a Coptic priest in Spain, April 8, 2021.



Image 2. Bilingual (Italian and Arabic) inscription in the iconostasis of St. Mark's Coptic church in central Milan.



Image 3. Spanish inscription in the iconostasis of the Coptic church in Cervera.

Icons are another element of the Egyptian Christian tradition that immigrant Copts seek to transmit and preserve in the *mahgar* in order to reproduce a ‘Coptic habitus’—a system of collective practices and perceptions that evoke a sense of belonging to the Coptic Church and of being a Copt—according to Pierre Bourdieu’s concept.³³² Besides the iconostasis, icons, as a fundamental part of the Coptic Orthodox tradition (as well as of Eastern Christianity more generally), were most often mentioned by my Dutch and Italian Coptic interlocutors when I posed the question: “What makes a place ‘Coptic’?”³³³ In most cases, Egyptian Coptic iconographers have been commissioned to paint and create icons and mosaics for various newly established Coptic churches in the diaspora. For example, in the case of Coptic churches in the Netherlands, the most prominent icon painter is the late Adel Nassief (d. 2021), one of the leading figures in the field of icon painting in the neo-Coptic style.³³⁴ Besides the neo-Coptic style, which most often features on church iconostases due to its high and clerically sanctioned status in today’s Coptic Orthodox Church, Coptic churches in the Netherlands, Italy, and Spain display a variety of formats of icons and iconic pictures, ranging from those on the iconostasis, to those painted on canvas and framed in wood, to simple icons in the form of posters and printed pictures downloaded from the Internet. In addition to their primary role in different ritual practices and more specifically for veneration, icons and religious images in Coptic churches also evoke a shared sensorial experience that reminds the believers that they belong to a community. Icons are material representations of belonging to Christianity, the Coptic Church, and to the Coptic community. Therefore, they engage its spectators in a particular spiritual and sensorial storytelling which represents a form of place-making. Many icons depicting popular Egyptian saints, such as St. Verena or St. Abanoub, remain or become meaningful in a diasporic community through the reproduction and retelling of hagiographies in Sunday schools.

^{332.} Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

^{333.} For more on the status and importance of icons in the Coptic Orthodox tradition, see Ragnhild Finnestad, “Images as Messengers of Coptic Identity: An Example from Contemporary Egypt,” *Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis* 16 (1996): 91-110; Yosra El Gendi and Marco Pinfari, “Icons of contention: The iconography of martyrdom and the construction of Coptic identity in postrevolutionary Egypt,” *Media, War & Conflict* 13, no. 1 (2020): 50-69; and Helene Moussa, “Coptic Icons: Expressions of Social Agency and Coptic Identity,” in *Studies in Coptic Culture: Transmission and Interaction*, ed. Mariam F. Ayad (Cairo: AUC Press, 2016), 155-172.

^{334.} Neo-Coptic style is the term given to a new Coptic iconographic style that was developed in the 1960 – 1980’s by the late Professor Isaac Fanous. It was during the patriarchate of Pope Kyrillos VI when a renewed interest in Coptic arts and ancient Egyptian (Christian) heritage arose. The style incorporates elements of more traditional Orthodox or Byzantine iconography with elements of ancient Egyptian art. Today, the Neo-Coptic style is the dominant iconographic style of the Coptic Orthodox Church.

Challenges of creating Coptic spaces are greater if the building used by the community was not originally a church or if it was rented, thus limiting or even removing the possibility for making any permanent or substantial material changes to both the interior and exterior of the building. In the case of rented Catholic churches, Italian Copts compromise by hanging various icons or posters that do not damage the walls, insert a removable (i.e. portable) iconostasis, and if possible, provide a space for social gatherings after the liturgy. During my visit to the small Coptic community of Catania, in Sicily, in 2021, I was able to experience how a rented Catholic chapel transforms into a 'Coptic church' during the Liturgy, and how it almost ceases to be one after the service. Several Coptic and Eritrean families use a Catholic church in Catania (officially rented by the Copts) several days per week and on Sundays they share it with the local Catholic community. To prepare for the celebration of the Coptic liturgy, Coptic parishioners install an improvised iconostasis and hang removable 'icon posters' on the walls, evoking a Coptic atmosphere in a non-Coptic space. Following the Liturgy, the priest and the deacon remove the posters and the iconostasis, almost in a hurry, to bring the chapel to its 'original state' for the Catholic community to have their own mass.

In addition to icons and iconostases, elements that meet spiritual and theological requirements of a Coptic church building, church leaders in the Netherlands and Italy have made numerous spatial and aesthetic changes to their purchased church buildings in order to make them look and feel "more Coptic." Upon acquiring their new church buildings, church leaders of several Coptic parishes, including Amsterdam, Utrecht, and Eindhoven, decided to renovate and reorganize the main planning of their churches in order for them have a large church hall, or a 'lounge room,' often referred to in Arabic as *qā'a* (*qā'at al-kanīsa*, church hall). In some instances, the existing planning of a purchased church building did not require any structural changes, as is the case with the church in The Hague, whose lounge room is shown on Image 4. In Italy, equipping rented Catholic churches with a *qā'a* is a significantly bigger challenge. Especially in the case of smaller communities who rent small chapels, having a lounge room is not possible. In some situations, however, an adaptation or a compromise is needed. This was the case with the small Coptic community of Reggio Emilia. The community rents a small chapel within a larger Catholic church building. Although the entire church remains unused, the Copts do not have resources to rent the main church chapel. While the priest was leading me to their small chapel within this larger church complex, we walked through an open hallway, resembling a small patio. The priest pointed to a large plastic dining table and a couch, above which several Coptic posters were hung, and said: "Because we

don't have space inside our church to sit, talk, and eat together after the liturgy, we use this space when it's warm enough outside."³³⁵



Image 4. Lounge room (*qā' at al-kanīsa*) of the Coptic church in The Hague.

³³⁵. Personal communication with a Coptic priest in Reggio Emilia, November 30, 2021.

A church lounge room plays a significant role in creating a homelike atmosphere in a new church building and in strengthening communal bonds. It is a space where parish members spend a considerable amount of time in their parish life; they socialize and spend time with each other after the Sunday liturgy, eat together, engage in various social and cultural activities, and children play with each other before Sunday schools. A *qāʿat al-kanīsa* is, therefore, a space where connectedness among church members is forged and strengthened and where a “thick identity” can be formed. In addition, the walls of this part of the church are often decorated with various visual media, such as icons, posters depicting saints, and photos of clerical leaders, e.g. popes and bishops. Church lounges embody all those sensorial experiences which materialize community bonds and are supposed to evoke a sense of belonging to both a group as well as a place. The fact that every Coptic church in the Netherlands and Italy (and virtually anywhere else) contains a lounge signals that church leaders hold community formation and the maintenance of its bonds in high esteem.³³⁶

Besides church lounges, first-generation Copts usually felt the need for a kitchen and minimarkets containing traditional and popular Egyptian food products, which would be incorporated into the main church buildings. Especially food, as a staple cultural element that bears a communal dimension, often acts as a material representative of a recognizable culture or a community. Several Coptic churches in the Netherlands and Italy contain kitchens, minimarkets, and food shops filled with Egyptian food products. Many parishioners shop in these markets because these are often the only places where they can buy authentic Egyptian food products.³³⁷ With popular Egyptian brands of products such as black tea, dairy products, desserts, coffee, among others, many Copts who visit the church can have a ‘taste of home’ in the Netherlands or Italy. While second- and third-generation Copts certainly do not cherish the same kind of sentiments and attitudes towards these food products as their parents and grandparents who were born in Egypt, such products become part of young Copts’ communal religious and cultural repertoire through their socialization at home and in the church. By providing popular and traditional Egyptian food products in their churches, the Coptic communities in the Netherlands and Italy, primarily its first

^{336.} Magdalena Nordin confirms the importance of the church lounge (which she calls “lobby”) as a place for the transmission of traditions among immigrant Syriac families in Sweden. See Magdalena Nordin, “Family and the Transmission of Traditions in the Syriac Orthodox Church in Sweden,” *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society* 36, no. 1 (2023): 19–32.

^{337.} This is particularly the case in the Netherlands, where one cannot easily find popular Egyptian products compared to the vast availability of other larger Middle East and North African migrant communities (such as Moroccan, Turkish, or Syrian). In Milan, however, due to the large presence of Egyptians in and around the city, the possibility of purchasing Egyptian foods in different parts of the city is quite high.

generation, does not only recreate sentiments of familiarity in a new environment – it also attempts to bridge and re-root a sensorial world (of smells and flavors) that was left behind.³³⁸



Image 5. ‘Coptic wall’ in the minimarket of Virgin Mary’s Coptic church in Amsterdam.

³³⁸. See Sabrina Dinmohamed, “Exploring Immigrants’ Experiences Through Cultural Practices and Homemaking: The Case of Dominican Immigrants’ Food Practices,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 46, no. 10 (2023): 2220–2241.

Besides resembling a 'proper' Egyptian shop, the church minimarket in Amsterdam also displays specifically Coptic visual elements that engage a particular way of seeing. Although it might in first instance be perceived as a primarily secular space, the market is included as part of the wider religious space and is blessed by introducing numerous icons of saints, photos of important Coptic figures from Egypt, such as Pope Shenouda III, and the Netherlands, for example of the Coptic bishop of the Netherlands, Anba Arseny, as well as Bible verses in Arabic. However, one should not assume that the creators of such visual assemblages establish a link with the religious sphere primarily because the shop is located within the church. Many shops and businesses (minimarkets, bakeries, dry cleaners) owned by Copts in Egypt portray similar visual and material trends. Such an aesthetic assemblage, combining different types of visual elements considered to be representing the Coptic tradition and 'identity,' can be described as "imagetexts." David Morgan suggests that visual and material representations such as the one on the wall of the church minimarket (see Image 5) should be taken as a synthesis, where each object does not necessarily 'work on its own', but the collection of such objects creates a medium that turns photos, icons of saints, and texts into an interrelated semantic unit.³³⁹ This particular 'Coptic wall'³⁴⁰ contains a photo of the leader of the Dutch Coptic community, two icons of Jesus, and two Bible verses and thereby illustrates belonging to a community that is at once, in a general sense, Christian and, more specifically, local or Dutch Coptic. It also mediates a commitment to the Church, its teachings and one's faith. In addition, the Arabic language, as the first language of many of the community members, represents yet another layer of commitment to preserve the connection with the 'old' and root it in the 'new' home (exemplified by, among other ways, teaching Arabic to the children).

³³⁹. See David Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 66-68.

³⁴⁰. I adopt here Morgan's expression who gives the example of a "Judaic wall."



Image 6. Gift-/bookstore of the Coptic church in Eindhoven.

According to some of my interlocutors, church gift- and bookstores represent another fundamental element that makes a church ‘Coptic.’ Priests or senior lay members who often take care of administrative tasks and welcome outsiders like me are usually surprised when they hear I am interested in reading and buying Coptic books. Several members of the community revealed, often with regret, that the interest in buying and reading (physical) books has decreased, either due to technological advancements or because reading has become ‘less popular’ especially among the youth. I asked my interlocutor from the church in Utrecht: ‘Then, why do you have all these books if nobody buys them?’ She replied:

We want to keep [an] authentic atmosphere and structure of the church because every church in Egypt has them... Also, many people bring their books when someone dies and they don’t want to throw them away, so they donate them to the church.

Father Youssef, who serves the community in Eindhoven, shared similar views. Since books are mostly on the teachings and tradition of the Coptic Orthodox Church, available in Arabic, Dutch, and English, this represents a direct way for young people born in the Netherlands to learn more about their Church. Therefore, church bookshops are not merely bookshops. Keeping a corner of the church dedicated to a

bookshop, even if not frequented often by the parishioners, symbolizes not only the “authentic atmosphere” from Egypt, but also represents a communal material legacy (of books from community members and from the ‘homeland’), the priests’ appeal to the youth, their mission to educate the young generations and, more broadly, their vision for the future of the community. Therefore, both the church bookshops and the literature itself symbolize an effort, on the one hand, to transmit and root cultural memory out of its traditional environment and, on the other, to root the community through education and transmitting the knowledge of the Church to future generations.

Moreover, regarding future generations, after establishing their church parishes, church leaders also made sure that new church buildings contain adequate and designated spaces for Sunday school education. In several church parishes across the Netherlands, Coptic Church leaders have expanded and renovated their church buildings in order to incorporate Sunday school classrooms. In Amsterdam, all the above mentioned spaces, including church *qā’a*, minimarket, and Sunday school classrooms, are located in the building of the Coptic cultural center, a separate building next to the St. Mary church that came under the property of the Coptic Church in 2007, thus creating a large church complex, bearing resemblance to such complexes in Egypt.³⁴¹ In many Coptic churches in Italy, especially those belonging to the Diocese of Rome, Sunday school education, social activities, and other communal practices are most often performed in the same space – in the church nave, due to the limited space available.

Parish life and church activities

Church activities and practices in the Coptic communities in the Netherlands and Italy are to a great extent centralized at the diocesan levels, but can also significantly differ from one parish to another. Differences in the ways members of different parishes organize and perform their activities, and what activities they offer in the first place, emanate from various factors. These include the size of the parish, its social and demographic structure, including generational differences, ethnic/national composition, place of birth of parish members, the presence (or absence) of a stable priest, how old/young the parish is, and its geographical proximity to other parishes and the diocesan seat. To this we should add personal and individual choices or preferences of parish church leaders which considerably contribute to particular local dynamics and developments of each diocesan parish. Besides the central role

³⁴¹. Bishop Anba Arseny, *Sham’a Mudi’a*, 64–66.

parish priests play in deciding and organizing activities in their churches, many lay community members also play an active role in the decision-making when it comes to the choice and organization of certain parish activities. These are usually first-generation members who participate in or coordinate the organization and performance of an array of primarily social, cultural or educational activities. Such an active role of senior parish members who assist and cooperate with the clergy in organizing various activities at the parish level reflects a common practice in Coptic churches in Egypt.

On the whole, church activities in the Diocese of the Netherlands are unified and centralized to a great extent. This is largely facilitated by the fact that Coptic churches of the Dutch Coptic diocese are located in a relatively small geographical area. Many activities and practices performed across different churches in the diocese, therefore, characterize broader Dutch Coptic church practices. However, as discussed above, certain aspects of Dutch Coptic parish life, for example frequency of certain activities or language usage, may differ depending on the parish.

In the majority of Coptic Orthodox churches in the Netherlands the liturgy (often referred to by community members in Egyptian Arabic as *oddas*,³⁴² or *dienst* in Dutch) is celebrated on a Sunday. In larger parishes, the liturgy is held more than once a week or even multiple times a day. For example, in Amsterdam, the largest parish in the country, liturgy services are provided on Mondays, Wednesdays, Saturdays, and Sundays, with three services on both weekend days. In the parishes in The Hague, Utrecht, and Eindhoven, liturgical services are also held multiple times a week. On the other hand, in most other parishes, there is only one weekly liturgy, held on Sundays, and in the case of the smallest communities, such as those in Enschede (where Copts use a Syriac Orthodox church) and Kapelle, the liturgy is celebrated only once and twice a month, respectively.

Besides main liturgical services held in the morning, several churches also organize evening prayers (vespers). In general, and particularly in larger parishes, different types of church activities are organized across the entire week and during different periods of the day, which encourages church members to frequently visit their parishes in addition to attending the Sunday morning liturgy.

Some of the examples of different types of activities that are organized in almost every Coptic parish in the country, with considerable modifications and differences in how they are performed in each parish, include Sunday school education, or more

^{342.} From the Modern Standard Arabic *quddās*, meaning (holy) liturgy or mass.

broadly church upbringing activities (see Chapter 5), Bible study groups, various social services and volunteering activities (such as visiting the sick or collecting donations), spiritual and school trips (especially for the youth; for instance, to the monastery in Lievelede or trips abroad), social gatherings and celebrations, such as celebrations of saint days or weddings, to name a few. Some parishes, such as the one in Amsterdam, have organized different types of groups which gather members of the same age, who have similar interests and goals, or which are brought together to organize and perform certain types of activities. These include youth groups (which hold weekly parish meetings), women's groups (such as "Osret omm el nour" ("Virgin Mary group"³⁴³) in Amsterdam, whose members visit the sick, bake and make food for those in need or during festivities, and hold joint prayers), as well as groups for translating and publishing books, of which the largest and most important one being in Amsterdam, called "Osret al-targama wa al-nashr" ("Translation and publishing group").³⁴⁴

Church leaders also organize activities at the diocesan level, which bring together members of different parishes of the diocese. These are usually various types of celebrations and commemorations, including celebrations of anniversaries of the establishment of diocesan parishes (the celebration is often referred to in Arabic as *'īd al-kanīsa*) or of the diocese itself, celebrations of the establishment of new parishes, joint youth meetings (often between two or three parishes), joint Christmas prayers and choir group concerts, or New Year's celebrations held in the church. In addition, it is also common that members of one, usually smaller, parish attend activities and events of another (larger) parish which has a 'richer' and more active parish life. For example, as the smaller parish near Leeuwarden does not organize youth meetings, its youngest members occasionally attend youth meetings organized by the parish in Amsterdam. Furthermore, especially during various pan-diocesan celebrations and anniversaries, members of the Dutch Coptic diocese express pride and celebrate the community's leaders (primarily Bishop Arseny, as well as other members of the clergy and the earliest immigrants to the Netherlands) and their achievements in establishing a Coptic church outside of Egypt 'from scratch,' often expressed during

^{343.} *Omm el nour* (or *umm al-nūr*), lit. "the mother of light," is one of the nicknames for Virgin Mary in the Coptic Church, as well as in other Arabic-speaking Middle Eastern churches. The word *osra* (or *usra*, in MSA), meaning family, is often used in the Coptic Orthodox Church to denote different types of groups within a parish, for example groups performing certain types of activities (like the examples given above) or age groups corresponding to classes in the Sunday schools.

^{344.} See Koptisch Orthodox Diocese van Nederland, "Groepen," accessed December 18, 2023, <https://www.koptischekerk.nl/jongeren/>. Bishop Anba Arseny, *Sham'a Mudi'a*, 61.

speeches, on churches' social media accounts, and visually by posting or hanging photos of the bishop during the events.

As they are organized at the diocesan level and meant to welcome and include Copts from different parishes, these pan-diocesan (or 'trans-parish') activities and events help to create a sense of belonging to a single community, whose members are meant to engage in shared, communal practices and who have common needs, priorities, and aspirations. It is exactly through these shared or unified activities and practices at the diocesan level that needs, priorities, and aspirations become common; they become 'ours.' The diversification of church activities plays a crucial role in strengthening and deepening the sense of groupness among Coptic believers in the Netherlands. This occurs as the diversification and broadening of parish life leads to the blurring of the categories of 'religious,' 'cultural,' and 'social,' and most activities and practices performed within church confines then all become religious, cultural, and social at once. The Church, therefore, comes to organize and shape a larger deal of everyday life for many Copts, comprising all generations, leading to more powerful degrees of connectedness and the sense of belonging together. Some Copts in the Netherlands have expressed that such developments make them feel as if all church members (i.e. of the diocese) are "one close family" ("een hechte familie").³⁴⁵

Although there are many similarities in how the Dioceses of Milan and Rome organize and perform their ritual, social (and cultural), and educational activities and services, based on the common practices of churches in Egypt and shared among different Coptic communities in *mahgar*, it is difficult to speak of uniform and common church activities of 'the Copts in Italy,' as suggested earlier. To this we should add that due to the dispersion of Coptic parishes of the Diocese of Rome across a large geographical area, church activities and practices in this diocese are more diverse and heterogeneous to a much larger extent than those in the northern Italian diocese. Due to the constraints of space, some principal trends and characteristics of church practices common in both dioceses will be described first, followed by several examples of particular developments in individual parishes in the two Italian Coptic dioceses.

³⁴⁵ The quote is taken from an article published by De Gelderlander newspaper and authored by Monique Rademaker. See Monique Rademaker, "Christelijke kopten vierden kerst in Lievelede: 'Hier kan het woord van God nog beter tot je komen'," *De Gelderlander*, January 7, 2024. <https://www.gelderlander.nl/oost-gelre/christelijke-kopten-vieren-kerst-in-lievelede-hier-kan-het-woord-van-god-nog-beter-tot-je-komen~a6f34209/>. The description of the feeling of belonging to a family has been mentioned to me too by several members of the Coptic church in the Netherlands.

In general, all Coptic churches in Italy, regardless of their size, structure and their particular dynamics, organize a number of activities that are seen as 'universal' and as a continuation of Coptic Orthodox traditions in Egypt. These include weekly liturgical services, the practice of sacraments (such as baptism and marriage), celebrations of the most important Christian feasts (like Christmas and Easter), as well as commemorations of important dates celebrated according to the Coptic calendar (such as feasts for saints' days), Sunday school education for the youngest members of the parish, as well as social, mostly informal meetings for various types of occasions which allow parishioners to bond and socialize with one another.

As is the case with other Coptic diasporic communities, Sunday is usually the main day of parish church activity in Coptic churches in Italy. In most parishes in Italy, therefore, the Holy liturgy is held on Sundays. In larger parishes, the liturgy is held several times a week, for example once during the week and twice in the weekends, on Saturdays and Sundays. In the case of the communities who rent Catholic churches for their services and co-use them with local Catholic congregations, the day and time of the liturgy depend on the agreement and availability of the church building (which is the case with the community in Catania, as mentioned earlier). For those communities who are the sole renters of local church buildings, as is the case, for example, with the community of St. Mark in central Milan, the liturgy and other activities in the church can be organized independently.

The factors that determine the types of activities that are organized in each Coptic parish in Italy, their frequency, and the ease with which they are performed include the size of the congregation, the availability and number of priests in the parish, as well as of financial resources, church building ownership and local legal regulations related to religious worship, and the demographic structure of the congregation. Like in the Netherlands, and presumably in other Coptic diasporic communities, parishes with a smaller number of believers usually have a smaller variety of activities and are organized and performed less frequently than in larger parishes (for example, that is the case with liturgical services). Furthermore, unlike some churches in Milan or the St. George parish in Rome, where each parish is served and led by two or even three priests, several parishes of the Diocese of Rome do not have a stable, fixed priest. In this case, priests from other parishes travel and perform the liturgy in different cities, often on a weekly basis. In addition, due to a smaller number of people, and particularly due to the lack of people to help with the liturgy, priests are sometimes compelled to conduct and lead the majority of communal services on their own. The priest in Bologna, for instance, performs the liturgy usually four times a week, regularly visits parish members at their homes (known in the Coptic Church as

iftiqād, pl. *iftiqādāt*), anoints the sick, performs prayers for the departed, and teaches Coptic in the Sunday schools. The priest conducts these practices often on his own.

When it comes to activities that are organized at the diocesan level, the cases of the two Coptic dioceses in Italy reveal distinct developments, primarily due to the differences in their ecclesiastical structures and geographical distribution of parishes across the country. The Diocese of Milan often organizes pan-diocesan, or trans-parish activities, which include joint celebrations of the most important feasts (such as Christmas, Easter, and the beginning of the Coptic New Year (Nairouz)), monthly youth meetings and spiritual days. The relative geographical proximity of churches belonging to this diocese (the majority of the largest parishes are located in the province of Milan) allows church leaders and their members to organize and participate in such activities with ease and relative frequency. Consequently, this leads to the possibility of creating communal bonds among members of the diocese and the feeling of belonging to a larger community, other than only to one's own parish. This was demonstrated to me in conversations with multiple second-generation Copts living in and around Milan who all confirmed that they are friends with other young people from different churches in their diocese.

The Diocese of Rome tells a rather different story. Because churches belonging to this diocese are scattered across the country, it is not common for their members to socialize with one another and participate in shared activities on a regular basis, if at all. Therefore, the members of parishes in Turin, Florence, and Catania, all belonging to the same diocese, virtually never come together to attend an event that hosts parishioners from different cities. In practice, only Coptic churches of Rome occasionally organize such 'trans-parish' activities and events. Compared to the Diocese of Milan, as well as to the Diocese of the Netherlands, members of different churches belonging to the Diocese of Rome do not forge strong and direct links with one another primarily due to the geographical distance. In addition, as demonstrated earlier, the demographic heterogeneity of the parishes in the Roman diocese, characterized by differences in the members' countries of origin (Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Syria, and Palestine), educational background, and economic and residence statuses, plays a significant role in whether and to what extent the sense of belonging to a larger community can be achieved. However, this lack of actual relational connectedness can be compensated by different kinds of strategies. For instance, the Coptic priest serving the community of Catania (and other parts of Sicily) regularly posts news and important events from other churches in the diocese on his Facebook page, which acts as an official page of the church in Catania. Writing in Arabic, the senior priest shares posts entitled "*al-Akhhbār min Rūmā*" or "*al-*

Akhhbār min Tūrīnū” (News from Rome/Turin), containing reports of various types of important events, such as ecumenical meetings in which the diocese participated, celebrations, or important milestones of the diocese or individual parishes, often accompanied by a large number of photos. Such a practice represents an alternative to a traditional newsletter (which exists in the Netherlands and northern Italy), which reflects the perceived need to stay updated with news from other parishes seen as parts of a larger community (thus, for example, news from Milan are not shared on this page), ultimately serving to connect geographically isolated Copts of Sicily to the rest of the diocese.

It is noteworthy that there is little cooperation between the two Coptic dioceses in Italy. The two dioceses act and function completely independently from each other and their leaders rarely meet or cooperate on common goals, initiatives or challenges they face on a daily basis. In addition, the two dioceses do not share textual materials, as they publish and use their own Italian translations of Arabic (and English) books from Egypt. This lack of active cooperation might seem surprising considering the fact that they are both minority diasporic religious communities which belong to the same Church and are located in the same country and the same national context. However, their own particular, internal structures and priorities, as well as the focus on serving their own flocks presumably take priority over the fact that the two communities belong to the same Church. This pattern may reflect a similar dynamic in Egypt, where bishops tend to act competitively with one another (especially if they are geographically close to each other) and focus primarily on ‘protecting’ their own territory by seeking to secure as much resources as possible for their own dioceses. As indicated in the previous section, both dioceses have active cooperation and the closest relationship with the local Catholic Church, or more specifically with local Catholic dioceses and other Christian churches through various organizations and councils in their own regions (for example, the Coptic diocese of Milan is a member of the Council of Christian Churches of Milan).³⁴⁶ Taking this into account, there is yet another reason for us to regard the Copts in Italy as *communities*, rather than a (*single*) *community*, regardless of the shared national context in which they live.

Communal languages

Coptic communities in the Netherlands and Italy navigate between three languages - Arabic, Dutch/Italian, and Coptic - in most of their communal church practices

³⁴⁶. See Consiglio delle Chiese Cristiane di Milano, “Le Chiese,” accessed January 5, 2024, <https://www.consigliochiesemilano.it/elenco-chiese>.

and activities. The use of each of the three languages (Arabic, Coptic, and the local language) typically varies based on church practices, generational differences, and on societal and individual attitudes towards the status of each language within particular parishes or the entire dioceses.

The liturgy in the Coptic churches in the Netherlands is usually performed in three languages, namely in Arabic, Coptic, and Dutch. When it comes to Arabic, usually a mix of Egyptian Arabic and Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) is used. The Egyptian vernacular, mother tongue of the majority of first-generation church members, is often used in sermons, while MSA is reserved, for example, for psalm readings. Besides Coptic and Arabic as the traditional languages of the Coptic liturgy in the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt,³⁴⁷ parts of the liturgy are translated to Dutch as an adaptation strategy primarily to cater to the needs of the second and third generations, who were born in the Netherlands and who speak Dutch as their first language (sometimes along with Egyptian Arabic). More broadly then, translating (parts of) the liturgy into local languages among diasporic Coptic communities can be seen as a vision for securing the future of the Coptic Church outside of Egypt, which should be further carried by those born in *mahgar*, who are expected to preserve church traditions in their mother tongues. In the Netherlands, such a vision was manifested already in 1976 (thus, even before the first church parish was established) when the first Dutch translation of the Coptic liturgy was published by the young Coptic community, led by Bishop Marcos. The latest version published in 2013 contains the Arabic and Coptic parts of the text transcribed in the Latin script according to Dutch pronunciation (unlike previous versions where those were written in their original scripts) and the parts delivered by the priest are provided only in Dutch. Bishop Arseny dedicated this edition to the “beloved children of the church” (“Geliefde kinderen van de kerk”), which explains the move to include more Dutch text and transcribe Arabic and Coptic parts, which most second- and third-generation Copts would not be able to read.³⁴⁸

The language(s) in which the Holy Liturgy is celebrated also depends on the size of the parish, its social (demographic) structure, as well as on the possibilities or preferences of the priest. For example, in the St. Mary parish in Amsterdam, there are usually three liturgical services on Sundays, which almost completely overlap. The

^{347.} Although Coptic is certainly seen as the indigenous, ‘authentic’ and ‘original’ language of the Copts and their Church, Arabic and Coptic started to be used together in various Coptic religious practices as early as in the tenth century.

^{348.} See Traditional. *De Heilige Liturgie volgens de Koptische ritus* (eighth edition) (Amsterdam: Koptisch Orthodox Bisdom van Nederland, 2013), <https://fourcornersoftheworld.pters.ru.nl/publication/1644/public/>.

first is held in Mari Mina chapel, a small chapel in the main church building, and is celebrated in Arabic and Coptic. This service is predominantly attended by the first-generation parishioners. The second service is performed in Dutch and is geared towards the youngest community members, usually the third generation, and lasts two hours. The third service is considered to be the main liturgy of the week; it is celebrated in the main church, it lasts around three hours (which is a usual duration of the principal liturgy in the Coptic Orthodox Church), and is performed in Arabic, Coptic, and Dutch.³⁴⁹ Because of its size and a more diverse structure, the Amsterdam parish is the only parish that holds three different services celebrated in different languages in one day. Another example of a particular organization of the liturgy concerns the parish in Utrecht. In the Mari Guirguis and St. Demiana church in Utrecht, the liturgy is celebrated multiple times a week. The main weekly liturgy is held on Sundays and is celebrated in Arabic, Coptic, and Dutch. Besides the majority of its 200 families who are of Egyptian Coptic origin, the parish in Utrecht also hosts several converts (who became members of the church through marriage). In order to integrate these primarily Dutch-speaking converts into the community and allow them to become familiar with Coptic traditions and rituals, the parish provides a liturgical service on Saturday which is celebrated completely in Dutch. Besides the small number of converts who occasionally attend, this liturgy is primarily attended by other Dutch-speaking Copts (for example, the second generation or those from mixed marriages) and is led by Father Youhanna. With its two priests who perform various practices and activities according to their language competencies (Father Bishoy primarily ‘operates’ and communicates in Arabic, while Father Youhanna, besides his native Arabic, is also fluent in Dutch), the parish in Utrecht has succeeded in catering to all of its members regardless of their origin, country of birth, or their preferred language of communication.

As Coptic is almost exclusively limited to the liturgy and for singing traditional Coptic hymns, known as *alḥān*, Arabic and Dutch are the primary languages of daily communal communication in the Netherlands and, as discussed earlier, the main languages of most publishing and educational practices (further discussed in Chapters 5 and 6). Official Facebook pages and communal newsletters are available in both Arabic and Dutch.³⁵⁰ The newsletter sometimes features a variety of documents

^{349.} It is interesting to note that the official website of the Dutch Coptic diocese writes “Egyptian” (*Egyptisch*) when referring to (Egyptian) Arabic in its schedule of liturgical services in the church in Amsterdam.

^{350.} The diocese has two official information and media Facebook pages, in Arabic and Dutch, on which community leaders (it is most likely that these pages are led by a senior lay member) share news, updates, and events related to the diocese, its activities, feasts, and celebrations, as well as sermons and YouTube Bible study lessons created by members of the diocese. As of March 2024, the Arabic page has around ten thousand followers, while the Dutch version has 1300 followers.

and information types, each presented in different languages to cater to its diverse audience. For instance, the June 2024 issue includes details about the upcoming youth conference written exclusively in Dutch, alongside a separate document about the celebration of the “feast of the church” (*ʿīd al-kanīsa*) which is presented solely in Arabic. This multilingual approach ensures that specific segments of the community receive information in the most accessible and relevant language. Notifications, news, and notes posted on walls inside churches are written either in Arabic or Dutch (and sometimes in both languages), and the official diocesan website is in Dutch and English, presumably due to its public character and possible encounter with the local population who might want to become familiar with the Coptic Church in the Netherlands.

In general, when one enters a Coptic church in the Netherlands, one can hear communications in both Egyptian Arabic and Dutch among the parishioners, with Arabic being the predominant language among first-generation migrants, and Dutch the primary language of daily communication of second- and third-generation Copts. Dutch is, however, also increasingly adopted by many first-generation Copts, especially recent young migrants who move to the Netherlands for work.³⁵¹ The adoption of Dutch among more senior, earlier first-generation migrants is also a matter of interest among church leaders, illustrated by the organization of Dutch classes in some parishes, such as by the Om el Nour group in Amsterdam.

In the case of intergenerational communications, both Egyptian Arabic and Dutch can often be heard during one conversation, as a considerable number of young Copts born in the Netherlands can have a simple conversation in their parents’ and grandparents’ mother tongue, although most of them cannot write or read it. A common linguistic phenomenon among different generations of church members is the use of Arabic church terms even when speaking the language of the host country. Besides different practical reasons, the insistence on the use of the original terms in Arabic, like *alhan*, *abouna*, or *oddas*, even when speaking or writing in Dutch, Italian, or any other language, socializes children and youth into the common church language terminology, common among all Coptic communities around the world.

In Italy, in most cases, the liturgy is conducted in Arabic, Italian, and Coptic, with certain modifications and differences across different parishes in the country. This

^{351.} E.g., one of my interlocutors in the Coptic church in Utrecht is a first-generation Copt from Cairo in his late twenties who moved to the Netherlands for work during the Covid 19 pandemic. He needed to learn Dutch for his work, and after only a couple of years in the country, he is able to hold extensive conversations in Dutch. He has an active role in the church, working closely with both first- and second-generation parishioners.

reflects the broader linguistic reality of most Coptic communities in Italy, who juggle between those three languages in their religious practices, as well as in their daily lives more broadly, similar to the situation in the Netherlands. These three languages are sometimes used simultaneously (as is often the case with liturgy), while in other contexts they are negotiated and prioritized differently in various public and private spheres (e.g., official Facebook pages of individual churches are largely in Arabic and official websites of both dioceses are solely in Italian). However, the languages of the liturgy and of other church activities differ considerably per parish. This certainly refutes the idea that each of the three languages, or more broadly Arabic, Coptic, and the local language of the host country, holds a fixed place in Coptic church practices and that there is a universal language hierarchy across all diocesan churches in *mahgar*. Differences in language preferences and how and in which contexts certain languages will be prioritized or used, according to what scholars have called language ideologies,³⁵² largely stem from particular demographic structures of each parish, as well as from individual choices and leanings of parish leaders, primarily the priests.

A higher degree of linguistic divergence and heterogeneity in various church activities is undoubtedly present in the parishes belonging to the Diocese of Rome. Noticeable differences in the social structure between each parish, reflected in the parishioners' countries of origin, ethnic (and religious) belonging, residence status, and educational background, and the geographical distribution and distance between parishes contribute to this heterogeneity and the lack of uniformity when it comes to the status and roles of certain languages in parish activities of churches in the Roman diocese. During my visits to different Coptic churches across Italy, priests and lay community members have expressed diverse attitudes regarding the importance of preserving Arabic and Coptic in various church practices outside of Egypt, as well as regarding the status of Italian as the majority language of the host population and as the mother tongue of many second- and third-generation Copts. Several examples will follow in order to illustrate this diverse linguistic setting.

With regard to Coptic, several priests from different parishes across Italy, and particularly from the Diocese of Rome, have seen preserving Coptic in their churches as an important element of what they referred to as “keeping the tradition.” Today, in most Coptic churches in Italy, Coptic is used only in the liturgy and for singing *alhān*. A senior priest serving a medium-sized congregation belonging to the Roman

³⁵². See, for example, Bambi B. Schieffelin, Kathryn Ann Woolard, and Paul V. Kroskrity, *Language Ideologies: Practice and Theory* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); and Darren Paffey, *Language Ideologies and the Globalization of “Standard” Spanish* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014).

diocese has expressed during our conversations his particular interest in preserving the Coptic language in his parish. Such an attitude and a strong interest in Coptic have not been widely shared by priests or lay members during my fieldwork in the Netherlands and Italy. The priest went on to explain that Coptic is, in fact, the “true language” of the Copts. This has led him to teach Coptic to the children in his parish as part of the Sunday schools. The priest’s attitudes toward the status of Coptic and the attention to keeping it as an active element of parish life, and more broadly of the parish’s collective identity, is however sometimes challenged by the younger generations, who “do not see the point in praying in Coptic.”³⁵³ This reflects a wider decline in the interest in and the difficulty of learning and teaching Coptic in many diasporic communities, taking into account the limited number of Copts who master the language themselves, as well as the fact that the younger generations born outside of Egypt do not resonate with Coptic to the same extent as their peers in Egypt.

Attitudes around Coptic being the Copts’ true language are shared by many Copts in the Netherlands, as well as in Germany, as shown by previous research among Coptic communities in Berlin.³⁵⁴ In the Netherlands, a first-generation Coptic migrant living in Utrecht shared similar views on Coptic as “the true language of the Coptic community.” She lamented the historical neglect of Coptic, noting that during her formative years in the sixties and seventies, the importance of Coptic was often downplayed, not being emphasized as a crucial part of their “identity” and heritage in churches. In her words, there seems to be a shift in recent times, with younger Copts now showing a renewed interest in understanding and learning Coptic, perceiving its significance for their community and “identity” more profoundly.³⁵⁵ This resurgence is supported by greater availability of resources and experts both within and outside the community, making it easier for young Copts to learn the language. This change has parallels in some North American communities where the teaching of Coptic is approached more systematically,³⁵⁶ or even through initiatives such as the digital European Academy for Coptic Heritage “TEACH”.³⁵⁷ However, in many parishes in the Netherlands and Italy, such systematic educational efforts are sparse, and interest in Coptic remains sporadic. Therefore, in most cases, Copts of different generations, in

³⁵³. Personal communication with a Coptic priest from Italy, on November 25, 2021.

³⁵⁴. See Carter Hein, “The Semiotics of Diaspora.”

³⁵⁵. Personal communication with a first-generation member of the Utrecht parish, on June 15, 2021, in Utrecht.

³⁵⁶. See, for example, Botros, “Competing for the Future.”

³⁵⁷. TEACH, “Courses: Introduction to Coptic Language,” accessed May 23, 2024, <https://teach.eu.com/>.

both the Netherlands and Italy, only know parts of the liturgy, as well as some *alḥān*, *tarānīm* and *tarātīl* (popular songs and melodies) which they memorized by heart.³⁵⁸

Attitudes toward the role and status of Arabic across different Coptic churches in Italy also reveals variation and the absence of uniformity when it comes to the choice and organization of parish activities. For example, for a senior priest serving in a Coptic church in Rome, teaching Arabic to the second and third generations has a high priority. As the priest explained to me, Arabic represents the connection with their (children's) parents, with Egypt, and senior priests in the parish. Related to the last point, he added: "I want them to be able to understand me in Arabic."³⁵⁹ Consequently, the presence of more senior, primarily Arabic-speaking priests in a church is likely to encourage parish leaders to consider Arabic the desired transgenerational lingua franca of that particular community. The presence of non-Arabic speaking community members in certain parishes, on the other hand, led to a decreased use of Arabic in some parish activities and its lower importance for daily communication among parishioners. Examples include the parish in Reggio Emilia, where the liturgy is occasionally performed also in English due to a number of congregants from non-Arabic speaking countries (for example from Eritrea and Ethiopia) and asylum seekers who do not speak Italian, and in Catania, which hosts many Eritrean Tawahedo believers, leading to Italian adopting the role of the main lingua franca of this small community.

Stene reminds us of the importance of paying attention to the time of immigration when understanding the attitudes and the level of usage of Arabic within a community. As she points out, the more recent the immigration, the higher tendency to use and stick to Arabic within family and in the church.³⁶⁰ The ambiguity over the status of Arabic is evident across individuals, generations, and parishes. While some parishioners, clergy, or lay members, regard Arabic as "the language of [Arabic/Muslim] occupation," and not the true language of the Copts, others describe it as the "mother tongue of our parents and grandparents," or emphasize its importance for studying and reading about the Coptic Church and its traditions. Indeed, some first-generation church members in Italy and the Netherlands relayed that Arabic, sometimes calling it "Egyptian," was imposed upon them in the seventh century by Islam, drawing parallels between this historical imposition and the contemporary challenges of adapting to the adoption of languages of their new host countries after migration.

³⁵⁸. Stene notes that this is also the case with the majority of congregants in the Coptic churches in London. See Stene, "Multiple Choice?," 93.

³⁵⁹. Personal communication with a Coptic priest serving in Rome, on December 4, 2021, in Rome.

³⁶⁰. Stene, "Multiple Choice?," 94.

For all of these reasons, some churches organize Arabic classes while others do not, even within the same diocese. For example, a Sunday school teacher from Milan who was born in Egypt but grew up in Italy shared with me her pride in the fact that “many of our children here in Milan speak good Arabic, ..., unlike in some other communities in Europe.”³⁶¹ Overall, it is important to note that Arabic in the Coptic Orthodox Church has a more practical and pragmatic role compared to its role in Islamic tradition. Compared to Muslims, Copts would rarely consider the language sacred in any religious sense. In addition, as Stene rightly points out, the very strong link between Arabic and Islam has led many Copts, both in Egypt and in the diaspora, to develop a rather negative connotation with the language, or at least to not consider it as a fundamental element of their communal identity.³⁶²

Adoption of Italian in the performance of various church activities, as well as its status as a principal language of the parish life (alongside Arabic) more broadly, is seen largely as a matter of adaptation by many members of the Coptic communities in Italy, similarly to the attitudes of many Copts in the Netherlands to Dutch. As the communities expanded and grew over time, many now have both second- and third-generation members. Italian and Dutch have acquired a more prominent role in many church activities and practices. Italian is used in the liturgy, midnight prayers (vespers), Sunday school education, youth meetings and lectures, for translating Arabic books and producing new publications, for spreading and transmitting information, for example on the official diocesan websites, Facebook pages of individual churches or through newsletters, and as the language of communication with the Italian state and local Catholic churches. Therefore, Coptic communities in Italy adopt and use Italian for various purposes in their daily parish activities, often alongside Arabic, as is often the case with Copts in the Netherlands.

Besides being seen as a necessity or strategy for adaptation, the increasingly frequent use of Italian among Coptic communities in Italy is linked to the so-called ‘integration discourse.’ As discussed in the Introduction, although the question of integration is not central to this study and the term ‘integration’ was never explicitly mentioned by the author during conversations and interviews with members of different Coptic communities in Italy, the term was, instead, brought up by many community members and church goers themselves, both clergy and lay Copts, and was most often directly associated with the use and adoption of Italian. Throughout my fieldwork in the Coptic churches across Italy, I have learned that adopting and mastering the Italian language is high on the list of priorities for both Coptic Orthodox dioceses

^{361.} Personal communication with a member of the Coptic church in Milan, March 23, 2023.

^{362.} Stene, “Multiple Choice?,” 95.

in Italy. In addition to the need to cater to those church members born in Italy, this priority stems from the need to actively, and sometimes symbolically, participate in the Italian public and social life. Besides supporting individual church members to participate in the Italian public life and the economic market by emphasizing the importance of the acquisition of the Italian language (expressed, for example, through providing Italian classes to more senior members or recent immigrants), leaders of both Italian Coptic dioceses view Italian as the necessary means for their ecumenical relations, primarily with the local Catholic Church, allowing the Coptic Church to play an active role in the religious landscape in the country. It is important to note that not all members of Coptic communities across Italy have equal access, opportunities, and resources to master Italian. As higher levels of education, better financial resources, and economic independence usually indicate higher chances of the acquisition of the local language among immigrants, there is almost a widespread opinion among Italian Copts that the members of the Coptic community of Milan are “more integrated” as they “are more educated and financially stable,” as described by several of my interlocutors in Rome, Bologna, and Catania.³⁶³

Adopting Italian in different church activities is also a choice. In the Diocese of Milan, the emphasis on the importance of using Italian and dedication to adopt it in many of the church’s activities and practices emerged in the vision and efforts of the late Bishop Kirolos, which today are carried on by Bishop Antonio. In a conversation with a young Coptic priest serving in Milan during which “integration” and the Italian language were brought up, the priest mentioned that both bishops have strived to “translate and adopt Italian as much as possible.”³⁶⁴ The priest talked about these endeavors with pride and saw them as a positive strategy that helps the community to grow and root itself more firmly in the host society. Another priest from Milan shared similar views. When talking about the late bishop and his accomplishments in the creation of the diocese, the priest spoke of the bishop’s early efforts to translate the liturgy and other textual materials into Italian. The priest explained that this is the “sign that the community is going forward” and that the “church meets the needs of the growing and evolving community.”³⁶⁵

Besides being a tool for adaptation and a reaction to the circumstances induced by migration, the endeavor to use Italian as much as possible is clearly seen through a positive lens by community members, as they indicate the community’s growth and

^{363.} In their study of Egyptian immigrants in Italy, Stocchiero and Mezzetti mention education, intermarriage, and linguistic competencies, among others, as some of the most significant facts of a “better integration.” See Stocchiero, *Gli Egiziani in Italia*.

^{364.} Personal communication with a Coptic priest serving in Milan, on November 3, 2021.

^{365.} Personal communication with a Coptic priest serving in Milan, on October 31, 2021.

prosperity. This vision of growth is directly linked to the fact that those of younger generations, born in Italy, are seen as future leaders of the community. As one of the above-quoted priests mentioned, the church translates the liturgy and books into Italian in order for them to “serve all the generations and to leave them in legacy once third-generation Copts become priests...”³⁶⁶ Unlike in the example of the parish in Amsterdam which organizes three different liturgical services for different generations and thus performs them in different languages, the priest told me that church leaders in Milan “encourage everyone to learn Italian as soon as possible, ... we don't want to do separate liturgies according to the language and generation because we don't want to make a separation between the faithful.”³⁶⁷ Without needing to assess whether the Coptic community of Milan (or Lombardy more broadly) is well “integrated” in their host society or not, it is safe to say that one of the ways church leaders seek and envisage communal growth and rootedness in the local society, besides securing fixed places of worship, is through the Italian language and its vast use in the performance of various church practices. In this, the diocese of Milan steers a markedly different course from those in the Netherlands and Rome.

Coptic textual practices in the Netherlands and Italy

Here, I will provide an overview and illustration of the most significant characteristics and trends within the textual practices of the Coptic churches in the Netherlands and Italy, with a broader consideration of such practices among several other communities in Europe. Besides presenting some of the most important information and facts related to the textual practices of those churches, I aim to shed light on similarities and the common practices and attitudes regarding the publishing, writing, and use of different types of texts across different European Coptic communities, at the same time underlining some relevant differences and particularities in such practices.

A large majority of the publications found in various church bookstores were published in Egypt. Based on estimations made during the visits to multiple Coptic churches and monasteries in the Netherlands, Italy, Spain, and Germany, more than half of the publications found in and sold by those churches come from Egypt. Although around forty-three percent of the collected publications in the database were published in Egypt, a large number of materials from there have not ended up as part of the project database, as the primary focus of the researcher was to collect as many materials published in Europe as possible. These publications, including

^{366.} Personal communication with a Coptic priest serving in Milan, on November 3, 2021.

^{367.} Personal communication with a Coptic priest serving in Milan, on November 3, 2021.

hardcover and paperback books, simple booklets, and magazines, were either brought to the churches by community members or have been continuously brought from Egypt since the establishment of the first Coptic parishes in the Netherlands. It is not clear how many of these books were originally meant to be sold, both to community members and ‘outsiders,’ and to what extent they represent part of churches’ material (as well as immaterial) heritage collections.

In most cases, printing and publishing by Coptic Orthodox churches in the Netherlands and Italy (and in Europe more broadly) went along with the very process of the establishment of the first communities on the continent during the 1970s and 1980s. Usually, upon gathering into communities, led and guided by a priest (whether by a ‘temporary’ one or their own permanent priest), Copts in their respective countries began with translations and printing of liturgy books, or more generally of books used in the church during liturgical services and for the sacraments, such as baptism or holy matrimony. For example, the community in the Netherlands produced its first liturgy book as early as in 1976, even before the formal establishment of the first parish in the country.³⁶⁸ Some of the earliest publications by the communities in the Netherlands and Italy are indeed liturgical and ritual books, including euchologies (liturgy books, often in Arabic, Coptic, and the local language, commonly known as *al-kholagy* in Egyptian Arabic,³⁶⁹ or in Dutch as *de heilige liturgie* and in Italian as *il santo messale*), *Agbeya* prayer books (the book of seven daily and night prayers),³⁷⁰ and sacrament books. The second type of newly published materials are communal periodicals. In some communities, periodicals have been published since the establishment of the first parishes in the 1970s and 1980s; for example, the Coptic Orthodox of France has been publishing its (online) magazine *La Voix de Saint-Marc* since 1975 and the Coptic community in the Netherlands published its first issue of the magazine *Al-Tariq/De Weg* in 1985, which continues to be published today. Coptic communities in Italy have also been active in publishing periodicals; first with *Tralci-Niklima*, a magazine by Italian Coptic youth which was published earlier during the twentieth century (and is inactive now), and currently with another youth magazine titled *Eccliseia*, published by the Diocese of Milan since 2018. The

³⁶⁸. Traditional. *De Heilige Liturgie volgens de Koptische Ritus* (seventh edition) (Amsterdam: Koptisch Orthodoxe Kerk in Nederland, 2011), 10.

³⁶⁹. From the Greek *euchologion*. However, the Arabic derivative of the word adopted by the Coptic Orthodox Church refers to and translates as the ‘holy liturgy’ (as the term *euchologion* is primarily used in Eastern Orthodox and Eastern Catholic traditions).

³⁷⁰. The name of the prayer book comes from the Coptic word *Ti-Agpia*, meaning “the hours.” Besides the more Arabicized *Agbeya*, other common transcriptions include *Agbia*, *Agpeya* and *Agpia*. The first version of *Agbeya* in the Netherlands was published in 1996, while a commonly used one in the community of Milan was published in 2001.

third group of newly published materials are translations of books by Pope Shenouda III. In the Netherlands, these were translated mainly during the 1990s, while the Coptic community of Rome translated Pope Shenouda's writings largely in the early 2000s. Other types of publications that were newly produced and published by Coptic churches in Europe (particularly those in the Netherlands, Italy, and Spain) include hagiographies (saints' lives; either newly authored or translations), various books and booklets about the Coptic Orthodox Church (i.e., so-called 'who we are' publications, meant for the younger generations and the outsiders), and more generally books about the teachings, rituals, and spirituality of the Coptic Orthodox Church in local languages.

The books found in church gift- and bookstores are written in a wide variety of contemporary languages. The majority of publications are produced in Modern Standard Arabic. Coptic, a classical language, features primarily in liturgical books, such as the Euchologion and Agbeya, and is sometimes transcribed in the Latin or Arabic scripts in order to facilitate the reading and memorization of the text.³⁷¹ Although it might at first seem as an innovative practice that started in diaspora, transcribing Coptic text of the liturgy into Arabic gained prominence in the 1940s as part of the efforts to facilitate the reading of the text in Coptic, principally for deacons, since only highly educated members of the community were able to read, write, and understand Coptic (which is still the case today).³⁷² It is clear that the communities in the Netherlands and Italy, as well as in Spain, have been active to a great extent in publishing in local languages. In fact, the vast majority of the newly published materials in the communities in these three countries were published in or contain text in Dutch, Italian, or Spanish.³⁷³ This development, usually directly related to the necessity to cater to the needs of the second and third generations and more broadly as a way to secure the growth of the community, is particularly accentuated in the Diocese of Milan, where the late Bishop Anba Kirolos,³⁷⁴ was strongly committed to translate and publish as much as possible in the Italian

^{371.} Coptic language is the last stage of the Ancient Egyptian language which became the primary language of Egyptian Copts around the third century AD. After the Arab conquest of Egypt in the seventh century, the language gradually lost its prominence, being steadily replaced by Arabic already by the tenth century. Today, Coptic is not a spoken language anymore and it retains its place only in the performance of some religious rituals in the Coptic Church, such as the liturgy.

^{372.} Voile, *Les Coptes d'Égypte sous Nasser*, 101.

^{373.} For example, out of eleven collected publications published by the community in Catalonia between 2013 and 2016, six were published solely in Spanish, four are bilingual (Spanish and Arabic), and one is trilingual (the Holy liturgy book, in Spanish, Arabic, and Coptic).

^{374.} "Anba" (or in full Arabic transcription *al-anbā*) is a common designation, preceding the clerical figure's first name, to denote Coptic bishops.

language as part of his vision for the future of the community, as discussed in the previous section. Among more than twenty publications published by the Diocese of Milan, whether collected physically or discovered online by the author, only one publication has been written solely in Arabic since the end of the twentieth century.³⁷⁵ In addition, a considerable amount of books in the Dutch and Italian Coptic church bookstores are also written in English. These publications are often from Egypt (sometimes published bilingually, in Arabic and English), while some of them were published in different English-speaking countries, such as the UK or Australia, and circulated to the Netherlands and Italy.



Image 7. Books in English, Dutch, and French in the bookstore of the Coptic church in The Hague.

³⁷⁵. Anba Kirolos wrote a series of spiritual essays and articles which were originally published in the Arabic version of *Al-Kiraza* magazine in the 1990s, which were later gathered and republished in a two-part book series by the Diocese of Milan in 2018 and 2019, to honor the bishop's legacy after his death. See Bishop Anba Kirolos, *Shafatak ya 'Arus Taqturan Shahdan (min Maqalat al-Anba Kirolos Mutran Milano): al-Juz' al-Awwal* (Milano: Monastero Anba Shenuda a Milano, 2018) and idem, *Shafatak ya 'Arus Taqturan Shahdan (min Maqalat al-Anba Kirolos Mutran Milano): al-Juz' al-Thani* (Milano: Monastero Anba Shenuda a Milano, 2019). For more on these publications, visit the project database: <https://fourcornersoftheworld.pters.ru.nl/publication/810/public/> and <https://fourcornersoftheworld.pters.ru.nl/publication/812/public/>.

Publications of the Coptic churches in the Netherlands and Italy, either new ones or those imported from Egypt or other diasporas, can be categorized across multiple 'genres' or 'subcategories' (as proposed by Murre-van den Berg), often recognized by both scholars and practitioners as distinct and separate genres.³⁷⁶ Therefore, 'genre repertoires' of the communities in the two countries are certainly broad and diverse and reflect remarkable similarities and common trends. Taking into account substance, form, and the intended use of the communities' publications, the most prominent categories include religious teaching, theology, history, liturgy and prayer books, Scripture, spirituality, hagiography, and youth publications. Although the aim was to place and categorize all publications within one particular 'genre,' a considerable amount of materials belong to two or more genres due to the blurriness of many of these categories (as discussed earlier), and nine out of 136 publications collected in various Coptic churches across Europe were classified under the 'Mixed Genre' category (primarily periodicals). Other, less prominent genres include (auto)biography, arts and culture, language and grammar books (for example, two publications for learning Coptic published in Egypt), and religious practice (a highly ambiguous category in itself).³⁷⁷

A diverse range of authors can be identified in the publications found and used in the Coptic churches in the Netherlands and Italy. They can be largely categorized into three groups. The first group, by far the largest, consists of authors who are members of different orders of the clergy, including popes, bishops, and priests. Therefore, as a general rule, there is an evident predominance of male authors. As the majority of the publications were published in Egypt, the authors are priests or bishops who lead various Coptic churches and dioceses across Egypt, including in Alexandria, Cairo, Asyut, Fayum, and Mallawi. In the Netherlands, it is primarily Bishop Anba Arseny who has authored new diocesan publications. Besides the bishop, several diocesan priests have written or contributed to the writing and editing of different types of publications, mainly magazines and small booklets. In Italy, the contribution of the clergy therein is somewhat less visible. However, one of the most prominent authors is certainly the late Bishop Anba Kirolos, who was particularly fruitful in writing spiritual essays.

^{376.} For more on how the project members have defined and used the concept of 'genre' to categorize and analyze collected publications, see the *FourCornersoftheWorld* project database, <https://fourcornersoftheworld.ptvs.ru.nl/genres/>.

^{377.} The 'religious practice' category includes five publications, among them a cookbook with recipes for fasting published in Egypt and a book about engagement and holy matrimony in the Coptic Church published in Spain.

The second group includes lay community members (in Egypt, the Netherlands, or elsewhere) often highly educated individuals who are either experts on or have a great interest in certain topics and disciplines. Sometimes they are 'entrusted' or 'commissioned' to write on certain aspects of Church history or traditions by priests or bishops, while in other cases authors write and publish their books independently and hand out copies to their local church or the diocese, either as a donation or to be sold. Motivation for writing and publishing different types of books by lay community members sometimes comes from the need to 'give back' to their church, which is perhaps even more pronounced in the case of those church members living outside of Egypt. Such endeavors can thus be seen as a way to (actively or symbolically) participate in the preservation of Coptic Church traditions outside of Egypt. Therefore, the active participation and engagement of (senior) lay community members in church publishing practices is seen as a type of *khidma* to their church and the community, as some of these authors also serve as deacons, teach in Sunday schools, and participate in the organization of parish life. This group also includes second-generation Copts. They are often members of church youth groups who are responsible for publishing and translation activities in their parishes or dioceses. Among them are groups like *I figli della luce* (The children of light) in the Diocese of Milan and *Osret al-targama wa al-nashr* (Translation and publishing group/family) in Amsterdam.

The last group consists of a small number of local Dutch and Italian authors who are not members of the Coptic Church, but are in some way connected with the local community. These individuals, who also act as translators and correctors, often have an educational and professional background in different fields of Coptic studies and are asked to write, translate, and collaborate on various community projects (usually publishing and educational activities) primarily due to their expertise, interest in studying the Coptic Church and its tradition, and possibly for a variety of other personal reasons and motivations. Notably, it is often the case that these Dutch/Italian, non-member authors are Christians and are active members of their local (Catholic or Protestant) churches. In both the second and third groups we can see a number of female authors.

It must be noted that a considerable amount of books found in the churches, which are now part of the *FourCornersoftheWorld* database, are not linked to any particular author or their contents are written and prepared by groups of multiple authors and editors, for example by youth groups. Not signing the author of a publication is indeed a common practice in the Coptic Orthodox publishing in Egypt. Brigitte Voile notes that most hagiographies published by the Mahabba Publishing house (Maktabat al-

Mahabba) are not signed, except when they are authored by a prominent personality or an expert, such as the historian Iris Habib ElMasri.³⁷⁸ Such practice has evidently spilled over into the diaspora, where a large number of books and particularly smaller booklets published in the Netherlands and Italy do not have a signed author.

The single most prominent author of the publications found across different Coptic churches in the Netherlands and Italy, as well as on official websites of various other Coptic churches in Europe and North America, is Pope Shenouda III. Pope Shenouda is arguably one of the most prolific authors in the history of the Coptic Orthodox Church. According to Sana Hasan's account, Pope Shenouda authored sixty-three books by 2003,³⁷⁹ while the website of a Coptic Orthodox church in Hamilton (Ontario, Canada) lists more than 140 books written in Arabic.³⁸⁰ Besides the fact that he was the head of the Coptic Orthodox Church for forty years, Pope Shenouda distinguished himself as one of the first leaders of the Sunday schools, as an educator, writer, spiritual leader, and a prominent public figure even before his papacy, which, together with his strong political presence (especially compared to his predecessor Pope Kyrillos VI) and an influential position at the ecumenical scene, made him the most authoritative and beloved figure among Coptic believers in the recent history of the Church. Pope Shenouda wrote on a variety of topics, across different genres,³⁸¹ and for different groups and audiences. In fact, one could say that most of his writings are intended to reach out to the widest audiences, they often deal with broad and familiar spiritual and theological concepts (such as salvation, Holy Spirit, or inner peace), and are written in a simple, direct, and often instructive style. The pope's publications became influential within the Coptic community, both in and outside Egypt, as well as among other Orthodox churches (chiefly Oriental ones), and today remain an important source of reference to the official teachings of the Coptic Orthodox Church.

The influence and popularity of Pope Shenouda's writings is evidently visible in the Coptic communities outside of Egypt. This is illustrated by the fact that many diasporic churches have Pope Shenouda's books as part of their digital libraries on their official

^{378.} Voile, *Les Coptes d'Égypte sous Nasser*, 78.

^{379.} Hasan notes that Pope Shenouda mentioned this number himself to the author during one of their interviews. See Hasan, *Christians versus Muslims in Modern Egypt*, 96.

^{380.} Although it is not clear whether all of these are original versions, it is known that Pope Shenouda wrote primarily in Arabic. This number includes multiple-volume books as separate entries. Saint Mina Coptic Orthodox Church (Hamilton, Ontario – Canada), "Pope Shenouda III Books," accessed February 20, 2024, <https://www.stminahamilton.ca/groups/servants/pope-shenouda-iii-books>.

^{381.} Among others, he wrote poetry that was published in the official magazine of the Coptic Orthodox patriarchate in Egypt, *Al Kiraza*.

websites.³⁸² Such a development is also visible in the Netherlands and Italy. Pope Shenouda's books abound in many bookstores of the Coptic churches across these two countries. Several Coptic churches in the Netherlands, such as those in Amsterdam and Eindhoven, have separate shelves dedicated to Pope Shenouda's books. The Coptic diocese of the Netherlands has translated and published thirteen publications by Pope Shenouda in the Dutch language. Besides the Dutch translations, the churches possess and sell publications in other languages, largely in Arabic and English, as well as in German and French. A similar situation can be found among Coptic communities in Italy. The Coptic diocese of Rome has published twenty-three publications in Italian, which are all now available in a digitized format on the official diocesan website. It is interesting to note that the covers of Pope Shenouda's original publications from Egypt, which feature an illustration of the St. Mark cathedral at Abbassia, Cairo (the seat of the Coptic Orthodox Patriarchate) on their front covers, with a book summary placed within a church building arch on their back covers, are replicated in the Italian translations (see Image 8). Such a design thus gives them a very recognizable and familiar appearance within the Coptic Church.³⁸³ The shelves of the bookstore of the Saint George parish in Rome in particular, the largest parish in the diocese, are filled with Pope Shenouda's publications.

In the Diocese of Milan, church leaders have also translated some of Shenouda's publications into Italian, although much less compared to the Roman diocese, among them a series on the history and teachings of Jehovah's Witnesses titled *Contro i detrattori della fede: I testimoni di Geova* ("Against the detractors of the faith: Jehovah's Witnesses") published in 2019, based on Pope Shenouda's famous articles against the teachings of Jehovah's Witnesses originally published in the English version of *Al Kiraza* magazine.³⁸⁴ Although the three dioceses have not translated and published as many books by Pope Shenouda as some of the largest English-speaking dioceses in the US or Canada and their publishing seems to have slowed down or even stopped (which is the case in the Netherlands), the books remain present in churches' bookstores and are regularly mentioned by parishioners as important sources of learning about teachings and theology of the Coptic Church and as an indispensable element of the Church's educational corpus in the Sunday schools. One can argue that Pope Shenouda's writings have become 'classics' of the contemporary Coptic

^{382.} See for example The Diocese of Ireland, Scotland, North East England and its Affiliated Regions, <http://www.coptic-isneed.org/pope-shenouda-books-new/>;

^{383.} See Diocesi Copta Ortodossa di Roma, "Libri Spirituali," accessed February 20, 2024, <https://dcoroma.it/library/books>.

^{384.} The precise year of publication of these articles is unknown.

See *Contro i detrattori della fede: I testimoni di Geova* (Milan: Diocesi cristiana copta ortodossa di Milano, 2019), <https://fourcornersoftheworld.pters.ru.nl/publication/910/public/>.

Orthodox literature, almost functioning as required (school) readings in many of today's Coptic communities in diaspora and represent an element of the 'homeland' heritage that many diasporic communities feel they need to preserve.



Image 8. Italian translations of Pope Shenouda's books in St. George's Coptic church in Rome.

Another prominent author among publications found in the Netherlands and Italy is Father Tados Yacoub Malaty. Throughout his long ministry and service in the Church, Father Tados has authored numerous books and booklets mainly in spirituality, theology, and history. He has particularly established himself in subgenres of Bible studies, Bible exegesis, and the history of the Coptic Orthodox Church. During my visits to bookstores of different Coptic churches across the Netherlands and Italy, I noticed a large presence of Father Tados' books, primarily in the Netherlands. Most

of them are books in theology and written mainly in Arabic and to a lesser extent in English.³⁸⁵ Unlike the case of Dutch and Italian translations of Pope Shenouda's publications, no translations of Father Tadros Malaty's books by Coptic churches in the Netherlands and Italy are known to the author as of early 2024. His numerous books are, however, available on multiple websites of different Coptic churches and publishing houses around the world. One of them is the popular and rapidly growing Saint Shenouda Press, a pan-Orthodox publishing house based in Australia, which has (re)published multiple books by Father Tadros in English, French, German, Spanish, and Swedish and made them available online.³⁸⁶

It must be emphasized that we need to take into account many practical matters and challenges linked to the publishing of new materials in diaspora, besides clear ideological motivations and aspirations of church leaders to publish and print as many materials as possible. Some diasporic churches may publish and print less materials compared to those in Egypt due to limited financial resources (this is especially the case with smaller and younger communities) and smaller numbers of church members (hence, less 'demand' for publishing). Furthermore, in many cases, church leaders prioritize using such limited financial resources for renovations of diocesan churches or for establishing new ones. Publishing of new materials also depends on personal choices, affinities, and priorities of individual priests or lay members of particular churches, and might reflect their own particular social dynamics and cultures. It is not uncommon that individual churches within one diocese publish their own materials (which may or may not be used by other churches in the diocese), as they strive to meet particular needs of their parishioners (for example, when it comes to the language) or even reflecting personal initiatives of parish priests who are passionate about books and reading. For example, besides the official diocesan periodical *al-Tariq/De Weg*, the Archangel Michael and St. Anthony Coptic church in Eindhoven publishes its own magazine for children *Het Licht*, which

^{385.} As of February 2024, there are five publications by Father Tadros Malaty in the project's database, all of them collected in the Netherlands, of which three are bilingual, in Arabic and English, and two are published in English. <https://fourcornersoftheworld.pt.rs.ru.nl/publications/?q=tadros+malaty>.

^{386.} Although the publishing house was established at the Coptic monastery of St. Shenouda in Putty (New South Wales), in Australia, the press has a broader 'Orthodox' character and aims to reach audiences beyond members of the Coptic Orthodox Church. According to the official website of the publisher, Saint Shenouda Press is "a Christian Orthodox book Publisher," which targets primarily children and youth, helping them to "be rooted in the Orthodox tradition, while remaining engaged with the contemporary world." They publish books in multiple languages, helping them to reach out to wider audiences in different parts of the world, and currently ship their publications to the US, Canada, UK, and within Australia. Saint Shenouda Press, "About Us," accessed February 21, 2024, <https://www.stshenoudapress.com/about/>.

reflects one of the parish priests' ambitions to teach the children about their Church and strengthen their spirituality through textual materials.

Arguably the most prominent reason for publishing and printing less materials is the shift to the digital and online spheres. Many Coptic churches increasingly shift to the use of digital and online texts, i.e. in PDF formats or texts published on various transnational Coptic Orthodox websites, due to the ease of use and sharing of such sources among church members. Liturgical services are followed on smartphone applications, books are often read as PDFs on one's phones or laptops, and Sunday school lessons are created, shared, and used as PowerPoint presentations. Some notable examples of popular Coptic apps within the transnational Coptic Church, most of which were developed by diaspora churches, include *Coptic Reader* (developed by the Diocese of the Southern United States), *Coptic Church*, *Coptic Bible*, *Coptic Copt4G*, and *CopticHymns*. These apps are often used to follow the liturgy, for learning and singing hymns, for different types of readings and prayers, as well as a reminder of important Coptic feasts. For example, the Coptic diocese of Milan has its own application, called *CopticMi*, which was developed by a second-generation church member and which contains daily Bible readings, different types of sources and digital books, and examples of songs sung in the Coptic Church. Various types of textual materials, primarily those used in the church, such as Agbeya, the Holy Liturgy (most often according to St. Basil), Coptic Synaxarion or Katamares (daily readings), are increasingly published as PDF books (thus not as printed materials) and made available on the websites of diocesan churches.³⁸⁷ Therefore, many diasporic churches today have their own digital libraries on their official websites, which either complement the physical ones present inside church buildings or slowly substitute them as the interest in buying and reading printed books is decreasing and thus the need for publishing physical books is seriously questioned by church leaders.

Among new materials that continue to be published among the Coptic communities in the Netherlands and Italy throughout the years, one particular group of publications stands out – liturgical and ritual books, the most commonly used materials in the church. Whether printed or digitally, new editions of Kholagys and Agbeyas continue to be re-edited, corrected, and republished (and reprinted in the case of physical books) over the years. This usually concerns the need to revisit and correct mistakes in earlier translations to local languages (from Arabic, English, or Coptic) or to adapt

³⁸⁷. The Virgin Mary Coptic church in Turin has been particularly active in publishing digital versions of liturgical, ritual, and prayer books in Italian in the last ten years, which are also used by other churches in the diocese and are now available on its official website. See Diocesi Copta Ortodossa di Roma, "Libreria: Liturgia," <https://dcoroma.it/library/liturgia>.

them and republish them in a more accessible writing style.³⁸⁸ Such endeavors are always conducted in collaboration with native Dutch/Italian speakers, often local individuals who are non-members of the church but who often act as translations and correctors in publishing. To illustrate, the Coptic Diocese of the Netherlands has published at least eight editions of the Holy Liturgy (known to the author) in Arabic, Dutch, and Coptic since 1976 and three versions of Agbeya in Dutch, specifically in 1996, 2008, and 2020, where the later editions contain corrections and linguistic and stylistic improvements compared to older versions. The Coptic church in Turin, for instance, published a revised and corrected version of Agbeya in 2019, originally published in 2000. The revision, conducted by Andrea Nicolotti, an Italian professor of history of Christianity at the University of Turin, was done as part of the goal to transmit the knowledge and heritage of the Coptic Orthodox Church to a wider audience in a more accessible language.³⁸⁹

Conclusion

The journey of the Coptic communities in the Netherlands and Italy, as explored in this chapter, reflects the intricate process of community formation in a diaspora setting. While the categorical attributes of a shared faith and ethnic origin serve as the foundation, the path to establishing a sense of belonging is far from monolithic and straightforward. The desire to create a unified community confronts the complexities of internal diversity, geographical dispersion, different practical and legal obstacles, and the need to integrate into new surroundings.

The establishment of physical spaces of worship, adorned and equipped with material and visual elements that are understood to be representative of a particular 'Coptic imagery' and of being a member of the Coptic Orthodox Church more broadly, signifies a commitment to permanence and the creation of a diasporic Coptic spaces. This fosters a sense of homeland familiarity for first-generation immigrants, providing a sanctuary for relieving migratory experiences, religious practices and cultural and social connections. However, the definition of an authentic Coptic space is not uniform and may differ per community depending on internal differences, particular social structures, and individual priorities and affinities (often of the clergy).

^{388.} Gaétan du Roy has written about similar developments in the Coptic community in Paris, see du Roy, "Coptic Traditions' Digitization in Francophone Europe," 91-98.

^{389.} See Andrea Nicolotti, ed., *Agbia: La Liturgia delle Ore della Chiesa Copta Ortodossa* (Turin: Chiesa di S. Maria Vergine a Torino, 2019), <https://dcoroma.it/files/Agbia%20dato%20a%20Gamil.pdf>.

Across the Netherlands and Italy, as well as in Spain, Coptic communities adapt their practices to new circumstances, such as navigating material and spatial constraints and translating the liturgy into local languages. While all communities endeavor to “preserve Coptic traditions”—a sentiment echoed by many church members—the continued use of Arabic and Coptic predominantly caters to the preferences of first-generation Copts. These languages serve not only as a link to the traditions and heritage of the ‘Mother Church’ but also enable young Copts born outside of Egypt to maintain a connection with Egypt’s Christian heritage. Conversely, the adoption of local languages like Italian in Milan reflects a dual desire: integrating younger generations in church life and deepening connections with the broader society. Interestingly, both first and younger generations see Italian and Dutch as ‘languages of integration.’ This is particularly evident in Milan, where the use of Italian also honors the legacy of the community’s founder, the late Bishop Anba Kirolos, perpetuating a commitment to this linguistic practice. However, the choice of languages remains a subject of ongoing discussion within these communities, highlighting diverse perspectives on their role and implications for the future of the Coptic presence abroad.

The concept of (material) rooting offers a valuable lens to examine these diasporic communities. Examining the preservation and reproduction of elements from their material and visual cultures offers an alternative view of Egypt being the sole homeland. By creating and reproducing a diverse religious material repertoire in their new environment, Copts in the Netherlands and Italy ensured the formation and maintenance of communal bonds in the diaspora. Securing places for worship by purchasing or renting church buildings signifies the commitment of these communities to stay and settle, and allows its members to grow roots in an environment where they – again – represent a minority. As discussed, such a task is not performed without challenges and differs per particular local contexts. Securing a place of worship and recreating such Coptic sensibility came with more obstacles for the Copts in Italy, compared to those in the Netherlands. However, a common thread runs through all studied communities – the immense pride surrounding the establishment of new parishes and places for worship, often expressed through newly published materials which glorify and celebrate the efforts of communal leaders – pioneering priests and later bishops – in overcoming challenges and building communities from scratch. This achievement is seen as a shared accomplishment and a symbol of the community’s growth.

The quest for a strong sense of groupness presents a significant challenge. Various practical and conceptual challenges certainly hinder this task. The scattered nature

of the Coptic communities belonging to the Diocese of Rome, for instance, points to a lower degree of intercommunal connectedness and further complicates the notion of a unified whole. While outsiders might perceive each of these communities as monolithic entities and as single communities within their national contexts only based on their shared ethnic and religious background, internal communal dynamics and prevailing narratives show how church leaders in each diocese seek to strengthen the connectedness among their members by creating shared spaces in which parishioners participate in shared visual and material cultures and joint practices, including the translation and publishing of new textual materials. Whether individual Coptic communities in the Netherlands, Italy, or Spain can be considered as entirely unified, homogeneous communities is debatable, nevertheless, it is clear that church leaders actively seek to forge a strong sense of belonging among its members through the creation, expansion, and diversification of parish life practices.

Chapter 5.

**“Who we are:” Magazines of
the Coptic communities in
the Netherlands and Milan**

Introduction

The role of textual practices in shaping community formation and fostering a sense of shared belonging among European Coptic communities is central to understanding their dynamics. This chapter focuses on the impact of periodical publishing within the Coptic diasporas of the Netherlands and northern Italy. Specifically, the investigation centers on communal magazines issued by the Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Netherlands and the Coptic Orthodox Diocese of Milan and its surroundings. The objective is to discern the roles these publications play, their significance to the communities they support, and the motivations behind their creation. To what extent do these magazines reflect and define the boundaries of the Coptic communities in European regions, while also connecting them to the broader tradition of Coptic publishing in Egypt and elsewhere?

Additionally, the analysis highlights key church discourses within these periodicals. While the messages often resonate with those from the Church in Egypt, they adapt and take on new meanings in the diaspora, addressing issues pertinent to the migrant experience. These include the preservation of traditions, the reinterpretation of church stances on sensitive (social and moral) matters, maintaining ties with Egypt, and engaging the youth within the church framework. By delving into the content and objectives of these publications, this chapter intends to show how they act as reflections of self-perceptions of the publishing churches, offering insights into how these institutions view their roles within their communities.

Periodical publishing in the Coptic Orthodox Church

The contemporary Coptic Orthodox Church of Egypt has a notable tradition of publishing communal newspapers, periodicals, and magazines. Besides various periodical publications founded by Egyptian Christian individuals, like the popular and influential newspapers *Misr* and *al-Watan* (established in 1895 and 1899, respectively), which had a more general thematic scope (mainly political and cultural), most periodicals that can be linked to the Copts are those published by Coptic Orthodox churches. The first Coptic periodical (in its institutional sense) was *al-Nashra al-Diniyya al-Ushbu'iyya* ("The Weekly Religious Bulletin"), founded by Father Youssef Habashy in Cairo in 1892. Since then, tens of daily, weekly, and monthly periodicals have been published under the auspices of the Coptic Orthodox Patriarchate, and more specifically by individual churches across Egypt.³⁹⁰

³⁹⁰. Rubir Al-Fares, *al-Majallat al-Qibtiyya: Dirasa Tarikhiyya wa Mukhtarat* (Cairo: Rawafed li-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzi', 2021), 29.

Al-Fares notes that the most common topics and issues covered by the majority of Coptic Orthodox periodicals in Egypt are Biblical exegesis, sermons and education, Church history, and the explanations of Church teachings and its rituals. Some prominent examples of Coptic magazines and journals that have been published throughout the twentieth century, most of which are inactive today, are *al-Firdaws* (founded in 1926 by Father Menassa Youhanna, a famous Coptic figure and author), *al-‘A’ila al-Qibtiyya* (“The Coptic Family,” 1909), and *al-Yaqza* (“The Awakening,” 1925), as well as those which are active until today, including *Madaris al-Ahad* (Sunday school magazine, 1947), *Risalat al-Kanisa* (“The Message of the Church,” 1964) and the biweekly official magazine of the Coptic Orthodox Patriarchate *al-Kiraza*, founded in 1965 by the Clerical College headed by then Bishop for Education Anba Shenouda (later Pope Shenouda).³⁹¹

According to Elizabeth Iskander, since the Egyptian national media did not offer Copts representation of their religious identities and values in the public media sphere in the twentieth century, the result was a surge of communal publications which were more inward oriented. Thus, the majority of these periodicals focused on Church affairs and on topics such as Christianity, history of the Coptic Church, its tradition and spirituality, and Bible studies, and less on national social and political issues. Ultimately, the Coptic media in Egypt have been confined to the issues particular to the Coptic community, creating a particular “Coptic media sphere.”³⁹² In 2022, Pope Tawadros II organized a celebration on the occasion of 150 years of the existence of Coptic press in Egypt, i.e. newspapers and periodicals founded by lay and clergy Copts.³⁹³ The speakers at the celebration, which was held at St. Mark’s Cathedral at Abassiya in Cairo and named “Coptic press and periodicals... 150 years of serving the Church and the Country,” highlighted the important role Coptic newspapers and periodicals have played for the Church, the community, and the wider society, and paid special attention to five Coptic periodicals active until today, specifically *Madaris al-Ahad*, *Risalat al-Kanisa*, *al-Kiraza*, *Majallat Morcos*, and the weekly newspaper *Watani*. At the end of the ceremony, it was declared that December 3 would be celebrated as the annual Day of the Coptic press.³⁹⁴

^{391.} Ibid., 30–33.

^{392.} Iskander, *Sectarian Conflict in Egypt*, 29.

^{393.} It is not clear which exact year the organizers took as the starting year of the establishment of the first paper/periodical and to which publication they refer, considering al-Fares’ data pointing to 1892 as the year of the foundation of the first Coptic periodical.

^{394.} Nader Shukry and Mariam Farouq, “Pope Tawadros celebrates 150 years of Coptic press,” accessed March 19, 2024, https://en.wataninet.com/coptic-affairs-coptic-affairs/coptic-affairs/pope-tawadros-celebrates-150-years-of-coptic-press/40376/#google_vignette.

This publishing tradition was extended to the Coptic *mahgar* since the establishment of Coptic churches outside of Egypt starting in the 1950s. Many Coptic communities in North America, Australia, and Europe established parish- or diocese-based newsletters, magazines, and journals. Notable examples include *Coptic Church Review*, a scholarly journal published in New Jersey dedicated to Biblical studies, patristics, and the doctrines of the Coptic Orthodox Church, *Al-Risalah*, another periodical published in New Jersey (not active anymore), and several other popular magazines currently published by different Coptic churches in the USA and Canada.³⁹⁵ In Europe, it seems that periodical publishing is not highly developed and we have little information on where and when periodicals have been produced. Additionally, there is a lack of research on Coptic periodical publishing among European Coptic communities, contributing to the evident invisibility of such contemporary publishing traditions. However, there are a few notable exceptions to this lack of information. Several examples include *La Voix de Saint-Marc*, the official magazine of the Coptic Church in France, published in Fontanieu since 1975, a former digital magazine titled *Tralci-Niklima*, published by a group of Coptic youth in Italy, and the two magazines that are at the center of this study: *al-Tariq/De Weg* and *Eccliseia*, published by the Coptic Orthodox dioceses of the Netherlands and Milan, respectively.³⁹⁶ In addition to *al-Tariq*, another magazine is published in the Netherlands: *Het Licht*, a Dutch language magazine for children published by the Coptic community in Eindhoven.³⁹⁷ Both *al-Tariq* and *Eccliseia* reflect the periodical publishing tradition of Egypt in many different ways, while, at the same time, they have introduced innovations and reflecting the specific local environments in which they are produced and published, as well as the wider migration context and diasporic experiences more broadly.

^{395.} See for example the magazines of the Coptic diocese of the Southern United States, <https://suscopts.org/magazines/>; and Magazine *Athanasius* published by the St. Mary and St. Athanasius church in Mississauga, in Canada, <https://www.cccnet.ca/magazine>.

^{396.} It is possible that there are active periodicals published by other Coptic dioceses in Europe, however the author has not been able to obtain any additional information on this topic.

^{397.} *Het Licht* ("The Light") has been published since around 2018 and the aim of the church in Eindhoven is to publish it three times a year. The main goal of the magazine is to teach small children about their Church, its history, and heritage, mainly through simple Bible stories, quizzes and games, and colorful illustrations. The magazine is published solely in a printed form and the priests and Sunday school servants in the church try to actively encourage children to read it. Personal communication with Father Youssef Mansour, on September 23, 2021, in Eindhoven.

Researching periodicals: Magazines of the Coptic Orthodox dioceses of the Netherlands and of Milan

The official magazines of the Coptic communities in the Netherlands and Milan reflect the wider periodical publishing culture of the contemporary Coptic Orthodox Church, for example regarding their thematic composition, formats, and broader goals. However, the magazines and other types of periodicals published by communities in *mahgar* acquire new roles and additional meanings in comparison to such publishing traditions in the homeland. Although they represent an important source for studying Coptic communities, in or outside Egypt, popular communal magazines and journals have not yet been sufficiently researched by scholars.

Existing research on magazines and journals has long emphasized that periodicals are a mirror of the society and that they reflect realities of their times.³⁹⁸ Indeed, from newspapers to scientific/scholarly journals, one of the main characteristics of the majority of periodical publications is that they process and transfer news, events, developments or discussions that occur around them onto the paper. Because of this, magazines offer us a possibility to better understand the ways their creators reflect on, describe, and react to the world around them. Compared to the magazines published in Egypt, those published by diasporic Coptic communities often have an additional goal, that of preserving traditions and heritage from Egypt, offering an insight into the challenges and priorities of church leaders and the communities in this endeavor. Therefore, such publications, often published monthly or every several months, provide a lens for understanding how diasporic communities react to and deal with various migration-caused matters.

Understanding a community requires delving into the stories it tells about itself. As Tim Holmes suggests, magazines serve as prime cultural resources. If we understand culture as "the stories we tell about ourselves," magazines are brimming with narratives that both reflect and construct communities and their realities.³⁹⁹ In addition, these publications do not exist in isolation; they reference and draw inspiration from the surrounding culture. Magazines capture the interests and desires of readers while simultaneously presenting an idealized vision shaped by the editors. Therefore, they do not solely describe societies and communities, they

^{398.} David Abrahamson, "Introduction: Scholarly Engagement with the Magazine Form," in David Abrahamson and Marcia R. Prior-Miller (eds.), *The Routledge handbook of magazine research : the future of the magazine form* (New York: Routledge, 2018): 1.

^{399.} Tim Holmes, "Mapping the Magazine: An Introduction," *Journalism Studies* 8, no.4 (2007): 515.

also prescribe how these should be, providing the readers with ideals, guidelines and aspirations they should follow.⁴⁰⁰

This perspective extends to religious magazines as well. They can be powerful tools for promoting personal piety, strengthening denominational identity, and fostering a sense of belonging. Historical studies have shown how religious periodicals played a crucial role in helping immigrants bridge the gap between their heritage cultures and their new surroundings. By analyzing the content and messages of religious magazines, researchers gain a deeper understanding of a community's values, beliefs, and aspirations for the future. The content of the magazine can reveal not only the existing social realities and challenges faced by the community, but also the ideals and goals they strive towards.⁴⁰¹

In this chapter, I aim to explore how group boundaries are delineated and reproduced in line with the knowledge that is produced and transmitted in the two communal magazines in the Netherlands and Milan. What exactly is encompassed by 'Coptic tradition' and 'Church teachings' and how are these articulated and upheld in the context of the diaspora? What kind of knowledge is understood to be necessary for an Italian or Dutch Copt to have and what values should define a member of the Coptic Church, whether in these particular communities or more generally? This inquiry will not only shed light on the content of the discussions but also reveal the underlying meanings and importance these narratives hold in how the pursuit of continuity of the Coptic communities and the Coptic Church abroad is sought and negotiated. Some expressions, topics, and narratives in the two magazines align with broader Christian and Orthodox themes and frameworks, while others are distinctly related to Egypt and uniquely specific to the Coptic Church.

Despite their numerous differences and the fact that they are published by two independent dioceses in different national contexts, both *al-Tariq* and *Eccliseia* navigate similar core themes, reflecting broader trends in Coptic (diasporic) periodical publishing as well as Coptic textual practices from Egypt. The following discussion delves into two prominent themes that permeate much of the content of both magazines in more detail, which relate to the main goals and intentions of the two publications.

^{400.} Carolyn Kitch, "Theory and Methods of Analysis: Models for Understanding Magazines," in David Abrahamson and Marcia R. Prior-Miller (eds.), *The Routledge handbook of magazine research : the future of the magazine form* (New York: Routledge, 2018): 9-21.

^{401.} Ken Waters, "Religious magazines: Keeping the faith," in David Abrahamson and Marcia R. Prior-Miller (eds.), *The Routledge handbook of magazine research : the future of the magazine form* (New York: Routledge, 2018): 308-322.

A prevalent concern in both magazines is the need to uphold strong connections with the Coptic Church in Egypt, its history, and its rich Christian and pharaonic heritage. In order to preserve this link in the diaspora, the magazines intend to transmit such knowledge to church members (especially the youth) and foster a profound sense of pride in belonging to the Coptic Church and their broader Coptic community. Contributors in these magazines frequently engage in the reproduction of narratives and discourses emphasizing the persevering character of the Coptic Church and its traditions. These narratives are especially poignant in the diaspora, where they gain additional layers of meaning, serving as tools for ensuring the group's continuity.

The second prominent theme is that of the guidance provided by the church for navigating the complexities of modern, everyday life. Articles within both magazines tackle a range of social and moral issues, reflecting contemporary debates within the transnational Coptic Church, and offer advice and scriptural grounding to help readers navigate conflicts between their faith and the secular world. This guidance is crucial for helping community members maintain their religious and ethical bearings in diverse societal settings.

Both themes not only underscore the shared objectives of these periodicals—to act as repositories of Coptic tradition and guideposts for the faithful in diaspora—but also reflect the particular challenges and concerns brought about by migration. These themes serve as indicators of the pressing issues *and* as defining elements for these communities, reflecting the need and challenges of maintaining the connection with Egypt's long Christian heritage and its social and moral norms. In addition to the magazines, this analysis also incorporates material from official church and diocese websites and social media pages, broadening the scope of textual practices considered. This inclusion allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how these themes are articulated and reinforced, highlighting their significance in the contemporary dynamics of the Coptic Church, both in Egypt and diaspora. Analyzing these digital materials provides dynamic insights into the ongoing developments and discussions within the Coptic Church and particular dioceses, more specifically, revealing how churches view and present themselves to both members and outsiders.

A brief note on methodology is due here. Around forty copies of *al-Tariq* were analyzed for this study, spanning the years from 2010 to 2023, whereas sixteen copies of *Eccliseia* were available to the researcher, covering the period from 2018 to 2021. Both physical and digital copies were consulted. The analyzed content was published in three languages, in Arabic, Dutch, and Italian. In terms of the methods used for the analysis of the two magazines, the primary method was close reading of the contents

of these two publications, initially approached through a more general reading to identify large themes and keywords. This preliminary step helped in recognizing patterns that were common across both magazines, which then guided a more focused analysis.

Subsequently, the research combined the information gleaned from the magazines with conversations and experiences from fieldwork conducted in different churches in the Netherlands and Milan. These interactions were further augmented by observations from social media and church websites, aiming to place the findings within the broader intentions of the publishing of the two magazines and their anticipated usage.

Although not every text within these issues was scrutinized in detail, an analytical approach was maintained by following article titles and subsections of the magazines. This method was employed to observe how often certain topics appeared and to assess which general themes were recurrently analyzed within these publications. Especially concerning *al-Tariq*, it must be noted that a large portion of earlier issues (prior to 2010) were not available to me, thus the findings and conclusions do not necessarily apply to the entire publishing span of the magazine. However, through conversations with clergy and lay members familiar with the publishing of the magazine, an attempt was made to understand a more general character of the publication. This helped ascertain how the patterns and themes I analyzed might indeed fit into the wider frame of the whole history of the magazine.

Al-Tariq/De Weg

Magazine *al-Tariq* (*Majallat al-Tariq*), or in its Dutch name *De Weg*, is the official magazine of the Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Netherlands and Belgium. The title of the magazine in both languages means “the way, path, road,” and refers to John 14:6, “I am the way and the truth and the life” (*Anā huwa al-ṭarīq wa-l-ḥaq wa-l-ḥayā*), which features on the Arabic cover. It is a bimonthly, bilingual magazine (in Arabic and Dutch) edited by the Coptic Bishop of the Netherlands, Anba Arseny.

The publishing of the magazine started in 1985, the year when the Coptic community in the Netherlands was officially established. The publishing continues to the present day, both in its physical form and electronically; printed copies are sent to home addresses of community members for free and since several years ago, the Diocese has decided to publish the magazine on its official Facebook page too. Various issues

of the magazine are also often available in church bookstores across the diocese. As of early 2024, around 180 issues have been published.⁴⁰² While the first issue of *al-Tariq*⁴⁰³ contained articles written and edited solely by Bishop Arseny, for a long time the magazine has featured both clerical and lay contributions that cover a wide variety of topics. These texts, differing in their forms, can be placed within various traditional genres, including theology, history, educational texts, texts related to various social and family issues, spirituality, and hagiography. However, building upon the discussion in the introduction chapter, boundaries between these ‘genres’ are often blurred, perhaps pointing to the entire magazine/periodical format constituting a genre on its own.



Image 9. Copies of *al-Tariq* magazines in the gift-/bookstore of the Coptic church in The Hague.

^{402.} A special booklet published in 2010 on the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the establishment of the first Coptic church in the Netherlands mentions that until 2010 there were around 150 published issues of *Al-Tariq*. Since then, the diocese has continued to regularly publish the magazine and although there might have been smaller changes in the frequency of the publishing of the magazine, we can assume that around seventy or eighty more issues have been published as of early 2024. Bishop Anba Arseny, *Zilveren Jubileum: Koptisch Orthodoxe Kerk in Nederland* (Amsterdam: Koptisch Orthodoxe Kerk van de Heilige Maria in Nederland, 2010), 22.

^{403.} From this point, for the sake of conciseness, I will only refer to the magazine by its Arabic title.

When it comes to the contributors of the magazine, as already mentioned above, they come from both lay and clerical circles. The bishop, as the editor of the magazine, presents his regular introductory text or preface on the first page, written in Arabic and often discussing various spiritual and social topics, such as family Christian values, instructions on the correct celebration of different feasts, meanings of peace, and interpersonal relations. Other clerical contributions are written almost exclusively by the diocesan priests who have their own sections in fields they are trained in or are most interested in. Clerical contributors to the magazine include both senior and junior priests, all of whom are primarily Arabic speaking (i.e., all of them were born and raised in Egypt). The priests contributing to the magazine boast a diverse range of educational backgrounds, spanning from high school diplomas to university degrees in various fields such as engineering, pharmacy, and medicine. However, it remains unclear whether they have any formal theological training or specific expertise in the topics they discuss within the magazine. The priests who regularly write in the magazine serve different parishes across the country, although the Amsterdam parish is slightly overrepresented. Additionally, deacons have also made contributions to the magazine.

As regards lay authors, they are of both Coptic and non-Coptic origin. However, the majority of them are Copts who are, in one way or another, connected to the Coptic Church and are members of Coptic communities both in and outside the Netherlands. Some of the lay contributors are holders of PhD diplomas and write texts related to their fields of expertise, for example, Samuel Moawad and Clara ten Hacken in early Egyptian Christian historiography, literature, and hagiography, and Milad Moussa in the field of counseling. Hosting several lay contributors from inside and outside of the Coptic community in every issue of the magazine has been a practice already for several decades.

As noted, *al-Tariq* magazine is composed and published in two languages – Arabic and Dutch. Each issue has two covers and usually contains twenty-three pages (excluding special issues or ones that cover more than two months). There is a linguistic division of the corpus of the magazine, meaning that the content of the magazine is different in Arabic and Dutch. As a matter of fact, this division is followed nearly consistently in each issue. The majority of the text is written solely in Arabic, comprising roughly two thirds of the magazine, while approximately two sections in each issue are reserved for Dutch. In addition, small parts are written in both languages, including the first, or the title page which contains the table of contents and contact information (address of the Church in Amsterdam, email addresses of the Church and of the Bishop, and relevant telephone numbers).

The magazine is divided into a number of thematic sections or columns. Most of these sections feature regularly in the magazine, thus solidifying its structural and thematic composition. The sections cover various themes and aspects of Coptic traditions, culture, and faith, as well as the ‘Coptic way of living’ more broadly. Although each issue displays a well-structured thematic composition, its variety of topics and genres, combined with diversity of the contributors result in a high literary hybridity. This hybridity, as I interpret it, operates on two distinct levels.

Firstly, the magazine caters simultaneously to different generations within the community. It often exhibits a clear distinction in content and presentation that aligns with the needs and expectations of its varied readership. Some sections are evidently tailored for adults, with a more sophisticated use of language, comprehensive coverage of topics (like parenting), and a detailed exploration of subjects like Coptic history, often presented in Arabic. Conversely, content intended for younger readers adopts a more accessible language, typically Dutch, with topics curated to engage and educate them about principal feasts and celebrations of the Coptic Church, and age-relevant issues such as navigating moral dilemmas (explored in more detail later in the chapter). This dual-target approach in content strategy not only broadens the appeal of the magazine but also enhances its role as an educational tool across age groups.

Secondly, the hybridity stems from the holistic vision upheld by the church leadership, which the magazine reflects. This approach encompasses the multifaceted role of the church in the lives of its community members, which through its official periodical covers divergent aspects of knowledge transmission ranging from biblical exegesis and church history to the practical and correct observance of religious feasts. Moreover, it extends to the shaping of moral stances and worldviews. In this regard, the church leadership perceives these diverse themes and topics as essential components of the knowledge that the church should not only possess but also actively disseminate among its members.

The most important themes treated by the magazine include theology, Bible studies and exegesis, history, hagiography, spirituality, education, family, marriage and other social matters. Moreover, one can find different types of informative texts, a Q&A section on topics primarily related to the Bible (e.g., explanation of various Biblical concepts and meanings of certain verses), commemorations of significant figures or events in the Egyptian Christian history, life coaching texts, short stories, news from the Diocese, feasts commemorated by the Church, and announcements (which serve as reminders) of fasting periods. We can see here that the attempt to

categorize the content of the magazine into somewhat fixed or standard genres is not an easy task, as the boundaries between such categories are rather ambiguous, ultimately not helping us to better understand the character and main aims of the publication overall. Returning to Miller's call to see 'genre' as social action, I first and foremost read such categories (and the texts themselves) in direct connection with the idea of what such texts are trying to (or are supposed to) accomplish and who they are directed to. This thematic diversity, written in the two main languages of communication in the community, suggests that the Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Netherlands (i.e. the Bishop, as the magazine's editor, along with the rest of the editorial team) aims at creating an inclusive, overarching literary body that serves multiple purposes, for instance educational, spiritual, informative, or recreational, and reach out to different types of (Coptic) readers.

The magazine abounds in illustrations that accompany the texts, ranging from images of icons (of different origins and styles), illustrations of scenes from the Old and New Testaments, and photographs of different Coptic churches and monasteries (both in the Netherlands and Egypt), important Coptic clerical figures (such as Pope Shenouda, Pope Tawadros, or Bishop Arseny), and from various events organized by the diocese.⁴⁰⁴

Here, I will present and discuss some sections and topics that have featured more or less regularly in the magazine (at least since 2010) in more detail.⁴⁰⁵ I will first examine the Arabic content of the magazine and then move to the sections written in Dutch. There are several Arabic language sections that examine and focus on Scriptures, including both the Old and New testaments, such as the sections *Kunuz Kitabina al-Muqaddas* ("Treasures of our Holy Bible"), *Ru'ya min Qarib* ("An up-close vision"), and *Jawla laha Ma'na* ("A trip with a meaning"). These sections are authored by both local Coptic clergy members and lay (usually senior) members of the community. Moreover, some sections, such as *al-Kanisa Sifarat al-Sama'* ("The Church is the Embassy of Heaven") *Khawatir* ("Thoughts"), and *Durus fi al-'Aqida* ("Lessons on the dogma") can be described as more theological, exploring various theological concepts, such as

^{404.} Although illustrations play a very important role in the overall publishing and textual practices, as they can help us better understand the contents of the magazine and of other diocesan publications, as well as various internal dynamics in the community (e.g. the meanings behind choices of certain styles or traditions of iconography), a deeper and more detailed analysis of illustrations of *al-Tariq* and *Eccliseia* are out of scope of this study due to the constraints of space and limited time of research.

^{405.} Although early issues of the magazine were not available to the researcher, in conversations with different members of the Dutch Coptic community I learned that a large part of the more recent issues is to a great extent a reflection and continuation of the content, composition, and the overall character of the magazine since its foundation.

repentance or salvation, and explaining the meanings of various practices and rituals performed in the church, including the Holy liturgy and the sacraments. Until his passing in 2012, Pope Shenouda III regularly contributed to the Arabic portion of the magazine, primarily with texts in Bible studies, theology, and spirituality.⁴⁰⁶ Besides aiming to increase the legitimacy and status of the magazine, Pope Shenouda's texts also served to uphold a continuous connection with the Coptic Church in Egypt. Additionally, the presence of these writings in the communal magazine reflects the popularity and the widespread use (even symbolic) of Pope Shenouda's publications within the broader textual practices of the Coptic community in the Netherlands. After Pope Shenouda's death, the magazine has not featured any contributions of the current pope, Pope Tawadros.⁴⁰⁷

Many texts in the magazine fall under the category of history. A prominent example is the section *Min Kunuz al-Aqbat* (“From the treasures of the Copts”) authored by a deacon in one of the Coptic churches in the Netherlands. These pieces examine the history of the Copts and the Coptic Church in Egypt through different periods of Islamic rule of the country. Closely related to and intersecting with the genre of history (particularly Church history) are hagiographic texts in the magazine. One of the long-standing sections in the Arabic part of the magazine is devoted to the Lives of the Saints. This is authored by Samuel Moawad, a lay Copt living in Germany who is a scholar of New Testament and early Christian literature. The texts tell stories of both early Egyptian and other non-Egyptian saints, written as simple historical accounts.⁴⁰⁸ In earlier issues of the magazine, Moawad was the author of the regular section titled *Min Aqwal al-Aba' al-Aqbat* (“From the sayings of the Coptic fathers”), which, as suggested by its name, focused on sayings and lessons from various Coptic saints' lives. The focus on the early phases of Coptic Christianity is not only to elucidate and disseminate the teachings of the Early Church Fathers and the narratives of early saints but also to affirm Egypt's significant contributions to Christianity and its deep-rooted Christian heritage. These narratives underscore the historical depth of the apostolic identity of

^{406.} It is not clear when Pope Shenouda's contributions first appeared in *al-Tariq*. Since several of the pope's texts available to me do not have any explicit references to the Netherlands and considering the fact that Pope Shenouda, like any other high-profile clerical figure, had numerous tasks during his position, we can assume that the texts that appeared in *al-Tariq* were most probably generic and were not written specifically for the needs of the Dutch Coptic magazine.

^{407.} The Arabic cover of the October 2014 issue of *al-Tariq* featured Pope Tawadros, celebrating the pope's visit to the Netherlands for the occasion of the annual European Youth Conference held in the summer of 2014. For more about the event, see <https://en.wataninet.com/coptic-affairs-coptic-affairs/church-affairs/pope-tawadros-meets-coptic-youth-in-the-netherlands/11698/>.

^{408.} Although a list of used sources is never given in these texts, it can be assumed that the author uses a combination of sources, of which some are in Arabic.

the Coptic Church and its foundational role in shaping Christian doctrine. Moreover, the emphasis on the antiquity of Egyptian Christianity is crucial for highlighting the enduring connection of today's communities to a (claimed) Christian authenticity that has withstood challenges, including long periods of Islamic rule characterized by oppression and persecution.⁴⁰⁹

One portion of the magazine is reserved for texts that deal with everyday issues, providing advice, guidelines, and instructions according to and within the framework of the teachings of the Church. This type of texts usually have a clear relational style of writing as they directly address the readers (for example, a common use of second person pronouns). One of the regular sections that deals with different social and moral issues is *Fikr Masihi*, authored by Father Youssef Mansour, a senior priest serving in the church in Eindhoven. The texts that feature in this section explore topics related to family, such as (proper) upbringing of children, relations between parents and their children, how to deal with various family issues, marriage, relationship between faith and human rights, and how to deal with 'others' in our lives.⁴¹⁰ These texts serve to provide a Christian perspective (hence the name of the section, "Christian thought") on various everyday life topics and, more specifically, the official Church stances on such issues. As many of the texts in this section deal with family, parenting, and upbringing of children, it is clear that they are primarily geared towards adults, most of whom are first (or 1.5) generation church members. Here, we also have the Q&A section ("Readers' mail"), in which a priest serving one of the local Coptic churches answers various questions from community members, most often related to the Bible. It is not clear whether the questions in these sections actually come from the readers and community members.

The last section containing this type of texts is the long standing section *Bukra Ahla*. This section contains texts that can be described as life coaching, counseling, and advice texts. Advice or counseling literature, known as *al-mashūra* (counseling) or *kutub al-mashūra* (counseling books), is a popular and growing literary genre in contemporary Coptic religious literary production, and more broadly in other Arabic-

^{409.} Such texts, for example, appear in the section *Min Kunuz al-Aqbat*, where texts often discuss persecution and difficulties Copts endured under different Islamic dynasties and, like some texts in the section *Min Aqwal al-Aba' al-Aqbat*, write about early Egyptian Christian martyrs. See two examples from the section *Min Kunuz al-Aqbat*: Deacon Ehab Wadie, "al-Shahid Girgis al-Muzahim," *Majallat al-Tariq* no. 3 (2018): 10-11 and idem., "al-Aqbat taht hukm al-Dawla al-'Abbasiyya," *Majallat al-Tariq* no. 5 (2017): 13.

^{410.} The priest does not explicitly mention who the 'others' are, thus this might refer more broadly to anyone who does not think, believe, or act like 'us,' including those who do not belong to the Coptic Church more specifically.

speaking churches.⁴¹¹ *Mashūra* literature aims to offer direct advice and psychological help to its readers on a variety of matters, often not directly related to religion or faith. The point is, then, to approach the topics of friendship, interpersonal relationships, money, success/failure, work, or happiness through a Christian lens, which led to the genre also being known as “Christian psychology.”⁴¹² In *al-Tariq*, *mashūra* texts slightly differ from the mainstream *mashūra* literature in Egypt; firstly, those featuring in the magazine have a more ‘secular’ character and rely less heavily on the Bible and Christian teachings (although they clearly do connect various everyday issues with faith), and secondly, their author is a highly educated lay Dutch Copt with a secular educational background (Milad Moussa), compared to the predominance of clerical authors in the mainstream *mashūra* literature.⁴¹³

Lastly, there are several types of what could be called ‘communal’ texts. These texts focus on the events and developments in the Coptic community in the Netherlands and are often accompanied by photos from diocesan or parish celebrations, of members of the community, and of diocesan clerical figures. This type of texts is not very common in periodical publishing among individual Coptic churches or dioceses in Egypt, pointing to the strong communal character of *al-Tariq* magazine. Some prominent examples of sections and texts that can be categorized as communal (and ‘locally Coptic’) include texts about important events celebrated in the Coptic churches in the Netherlands, such as anniversaries of the establishment of the diocese or of particular churches or the ordination of new priests and deacons.⁴¹⁴ One

^{411.} See for example the collection of *mashūra* books in Arabic of two popular online Middle Eastern Christian databases, Maktabat al-Kutub al-Masihiyya, <https://www.christianlib.com/category/%D9%81%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%81%D8%A9-%D9%88-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%85-%D9%86%D9%81%D8%B3/%D9%83%D8%AA%D8%A8-%D9%85%D8%B4%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D9%85%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%AD%D9%8A%D8%A9-pdf, and Maktabat al-Nur, https://www.noor-book.com/tag/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B4%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%AD%D9%8A%D8%A9>.

^{412.} It has become increasingly popular for priests, as well as for lay church members, to take counseling courses at various Christian institutes or universities in order to be able to publish *mashūra* books and serve as church counselors in their parishes or dioceses. It must be noted that many of these books in a way claim expertise (or they are written in such a way) in offering professional and reliable psychological advice, although it is most often the case that authors only received certificates for completing short (often online) counseling courses.

^{413.} Moussa serves as a lecturer at the Faculty of Counseling at the online Holy Sophia Coptic Orthodox school of Theology.

^{414.} This is a practice that originated in *Al Kiraza*, where the authors present a list of newly ordained priests and bishops (including in the diaspora), often with photos from the ordination. An example includes the story and report about the ordination of the most junior priest in the Netherlands, Father Mina Habib, who serves the parish in Eindhoven, published in January 2018. The text was published in both Arabic and Dutch. See Anonymous author, “Siyamat Kahin Jadid fi Ibarshiyat Hulanda,” *Majallat al-Tariq*, no. 1, 2018: 15-17.

might also include here the bilingual section on church news and updates, containing lists of upcoming church feasts and celebrations and bank accounts of individual diocesan churches to which church members can donate. An interesting example of a text that falls into this category is a 2018 Arabic text about the establishment of a new church – St. Verena Coptic Orthodox Church in Bussum.⁴¹⁵ The unknown author explains the need to establish a new church in the diocese and describes the process of purchasing an old Catholic church. In addition, the author provides an introduction to the patron saint, in this case St. Verena, and attaches a short hagiographical account to the news about a new Coptic church in the country. Additionally, an illustration of St. Verena, almost the exact same as her icon shown on Image 1, features on the cover of the issue. The Diocese also published several special issues that revolved around important communal events and celebrations, such as the issue published on the occasion of Pope Shenouda's third visit to the Netherlands in October 2010.⁴¹⁶

When it comes to the Dutch language portion of the magazine, several topics and genres stand out. One of the most prominent genres that has featured throughout all the studied issues is Biblical exegesis and Bible studies. This reflects the emphasis on organizing Bible studies groups for the second and third generations, present in all Coptic churches in the Netherlands. An example of texts in this group is the section *Inleiding tot Het Nieuwe Testament* (not active anymore), which provides basic information and explanation of the New Testament. Another prominent topic is religious practice, more precisely the explanations of various elements of Coptic traditions related to the performance of religious practices. Within this group of texts, we find topics such as the sacraments of the Coptic Orthodox Church (an active section until 2023), explanations of the Liturgy (for example, in the section named *Hoe kunnen wij van de heilige Liturgie profiteren*, “How can we benefit from the Holy liturgy,” authored by a first-generation lay member of the community), characteristics of Coptic icons, texts about *alḥān*⁴¹⁷ (focusing on the question of “why we sing [them] in the church”), to name only a few.⁴¹⁸

^{415.} Anonymous author, “Kanisat Sant Firina al-Qibtiyya al-Urthudhuksiyya: Bussum,” *Majallat al-Tariq*, no. 2, (2018): 3.

^{416.} See *Majallat al-Tariq*, no. 5 & 6, 2010.

^{417.} This term, like many other widely familiar terms related to Coptic religious practices, is usually never translated into other languages in speech and writings. For example, a text in the children's magazine *Het Licht* features the word within the text in Dutch, transliterated as *alḥān*, reflecting the common way of writing Arabic in the Latin script among most Arabic speakers today, especially on the Internet and when texting. Here, the digit 7 is used to represent the letter ‘ḥ’ (ح) because of the resemblance of the two symbols.

^{418.} See, for example, Magdy Ramzy, “Hoe kunnen wij van de heilige Liturgie profiteren: Het Verzoeningsgebed,” no. 2 (2013): 27.; unknown author, “De Lofzangen van de Kerk in de maand Kiahk,” no. 6 (2019): 18–20.; and unknown author, “Sacramenten in de koptisch Orthodox kerk: Lezing 2: Het sacrament van het priesterschap,” no. 2 (2021): 18–20.

Since the late 2010s, a permanent portion of the Dutch section of the magazine has been reserved for saints' lives, Egyptian Christian material culture, and more generally for texts discussing contributions of Egyptian Christianity to world Christianity. In this part, organized either as one or two separate sections, two authors stand out, Rachel Youssef and Clara ten Hacken. Over the years, Youssef has been particularly prominent in translating hagiographic texts into Dutch.⁴¹⁹ Ten Hacken, a local Dutch scholar of Egyptian and Coptic studies and the translator of several books published by the Dutch Coptic diocese (among them, the Liturgy and Pope Shenouda's books), has been a contributor to the magazine for many years. She has written several long standing series, for example on Coptic monasteries, saints venerated in the Coptic Church (*Heilige personen*, "Holy people"), and the journey of the Holy Family in Egypt (*Reis van de heilige Familie in Egypte*).⁴²⁰

The section on the Holy Family in Egypt, for example, was part of the magazine for several years, specifically from 2019 to 2022. The texts are written in a way to follow the story of the flight as the Holy family moved from one place to another during their journey (i.e. from Sinai across Lower Egypt to the south and then back to the north). The author uses various scholarly resources to follow the route and each place that was, according to the tradition, visited by the Virgin Mary, Jesus and Saint Joseph. This way, ten Hacken (re-)creates a map of the journey that plays a vital role in Egyptian Christianity, ultimately placing the Copts, including the Dutch Coptic community, and Egypt at the center or even at the foundation of the wider Christian traditions. During one of our conversations, Ten Hacken shared that due to her expertise on early Egyptian Christian history and her previous involvement in the translation and correction of several Dutch language books published by the Diocese, the bishop asked her to write a series of texts on the Holy Family in Egypt in Dutch, proving its significance for the Coptic Church and the importance of retelling the story to the future generations. The author further explained that in the process of writing these texts, she balanced between a scholarly approach, seeking to add a historically founded base for the story of the journey (which, according to ten Hacken, often lacks in Coptic historiography) and a more informal and popular style of writing since the texts are geared towards a wide audience of Coptic readers. In general, ten Hacken explained that in her texts on the Holy Family and Egyptian (and other Christian) saints, she strived to teach (young) Dutch Copts about their rich history and to strengthen their faith.⁴²¹

^{419.} It is not known to the author whether Youssef is a member of the Dutch Coptic community.

^{420.} See, for example, Clara ten Hacken, "De reis van de heilige Familie in de Nijldelta," *Majallat al-Tariq* no. 6 (2019): 21-23. and Rachel Youssef (translator), "Sint Mozes de Sterke," *Majallat al-Tariq* no. no. 2 (2020): 20.

^{421.} Interview with Clara ten Hacken, March 10, 2023, in Haarlem.

The last section in the Dutch part of *al-Tariq* that is important for this research is a section focusing on various social and moral issues and dilemmas that are on the agenda of the Coptic Orthodox Church, both in Egypt and in the diaspora. Issues such as LGBTQI rights, sexual liberties or atheism are seen by Coptic and other religious communities as a direct result of secularization, globalization, and individualization and liberalization of human action and behavior. Due to migration, such contested issues become an even more prominent part of social realities for many diasporic Coptic communities in the West, where gay marriage, abortion, euthanasia, and women's issues more generally are widely accepted. This is often perceived as a threat to the proper upbringing of the second and third generations. Until 2018, these topics were part of a section particularly geared towards youth named *Jeugdcorner* ("Youth corner"), which featured texts translated by a second-generation church member.⁴²² In these texts, a spiritual and Christian (more so than particularly Coptic Egyptian) perspective is given in order to underline the wrongness and discredit the acceptance of such contested moral questions. These will be discussed later in this chapter.

As noted above, today the official magazine of the Diocese of the Netherlands is published in Arabic and Dutch, the daily languages of communication of the majority of the members of the diocese.⁴²³ However, for a long time (not known for how long exactly), the magazine was published solely in Arabic. According to different accounts from several of my interlocutors, Dutch texts were introduced sometime around 2010. Therefore, this means that the main audience of the magazine were primarily first-generation community members. Although the majority of the contributors in *al-Tariq* since 2010 have been mostly Arabic-speaking first-generation migrants (including the bishop, priests and deacons, and several highly-educated lay members of the community), the inclusion of Dutch signifies the widening of the scope of the magazine. The main reason to publish parts of the content in Dutch is to cater to the needs of the younger generations. The texts written and published in Dutch are meant to familiarize and educate second- and third-generation Copts about their Church, its history, and crucial elements of its traditions (like explaining the meanings of certain religious practices and theological concepts). The focus on various social and moral debates, such as those on atheism and euthanasia, which have been published in Dutch, is meant to directly place and include Coptic youth in such debates in order to set them 'on the right path' and complement the discussions on those issues that occur during Friday evening youth meetings. Furthermore, some Dutch language texts in *al-Tariq* have youth members as authors and translators,

^{422.} Authors and titles of the original texts are often not mentioned.

^{423.} Arabic text is written in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), also known as and occasionally equated with *al-fuṣḥā*.

who are given a higher agency by the church leadership (primarily by the bishop who acts as the editor of the magazine) and an active role in the process of knowledge production in a publication produced *by* and *for* the community.

While it is not clear why certain linguistic choices have been made regarding particular sections in the magazine (for example, the Arabic section *Bukra Ahla* might as well have been published in Dutch considering the relevance of its central topics for the youth), it is evident that the bilingual nature of the magazine reflects broader textual practices of the Dutch Coptic community and the ongoing negotiation of linguistic roles in various communal practices and activities. For the most part, however, the language choices in the magazine seem to be practical, reflecting both the authors of the texts and the intended readers, which vary based on the topic. Additionally, such choices ultimately symbolize the church leaders' aspiration to preserve Arabic as an important cultural element of the community's Egyptianness as well as an aspiration to root itself and belong to the local society by accepting adaptations as part of their daily realities and as a major precondition for the growth of the community.

Eccliseia

Eccliseia (from the Coptic loan of the Greek *Ekklesiá*, “church”⁴²⁴) is the official messenger of the Coptic Orthodox diocese of Milan and the surroundings (*Diocesi Copta Ortodossa di Milano e dintorni*). It was established initially as a monthly magazine and is primarily directed towards the Coptic youth. Its beginnings go back to 2018 and the idea of establishing a youth magazine is attributed to the current Bishop of Milan, Anba Antonio. The first issue of the magazine was published in September 2018 and although originally envisaged as a monthly periodical, in some periods the magazine has been published bimonthly and during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic (most of 2020 and early 2021), the publishing was halted. Since the first issue, the Diocese has published around twenty issues.

The content of *Eccliseia* is wholly in Italian, reflecting the fact that its main target audience are second- and third-generation Copts. Like *al-Tariq*, *Eccliseia* incorporates a variety of sections and topics in each issue, and it has followed a somewhat fixed structure throughout the years, including its illustration and design. Although the magazine displays genre diversity, the majority of its texts focus on spirituality and Scriptures. Besides these, *Eccliseia* contains sections on early Egyptian (and Christian)

⁴²⁴. The term denotes membership of the faithful and belonging to the institution of the Church, in its overarching and total sense.

saints, Church history, Coptic language, as well as Church news, Synaxarion, and a Q&A section.

When it comes to the magazine's contributors, a large part of the texts are translations of different Coptic authors (both early and contemporary ones), such as Pope Shenouda III or the famous Coptic priest and historian Menassa Youhanna.⁴²⁵ Furthermore, *Eccliseia* contains fixed sections with texts by the leader of the Diocese Anba Antonio, as well as the writings of the former bishop Anba Kirolos. However, the majority of texts featured in the magazine are produced by a group of young individuals responsible for publishing-related activities, often being directly translated from various English and Arabic sources, including books and websites. These texts are selected collaboratively by this youth group in coordination with Father Shenouda, who oversees youth affairs. Not surprisingly, *Eccliseia* is often described as “la rivista dei e per i giovani” (the magazine by and for the youth, a phrase which often features on the back cover of the magazine and in the promotional videos shared on the official Facebook page of the diocese). The magazine is printed and distributed in churches across the diocese and is usually present in all church bookshops. Recently, the church decided to digitize early numbers of the magazines, which can now be found on the official website of the Coptic diocese of Milan.

The official website of the Coptic diocese of Milan writes that “[*Eccliseia*] ha lo scopo di insegnare la dottrina e rispondere ai diversi dubbi, ...” (*Eccliseia* has the purpose of teaching the doctrine and responding to different doubts, ...).⁴²⁶ More generally, the foundation of *Eccliseia* comes from the goal to teach young Italian Copts – mainly those born or raised in Italy – about their Church and its tradition, and to preserve spirituality within the youth. Supported by the Diocese and with the help of the youth, Anba Antonio has digitized early issues of the magazine.⁴²⁷ This is seen by many community members as an important step in keeping up with current developments related to an increased digitization of textual materials and making these materials available to wider audiences. Therefore, the foundation of *Eccliseia* can be understood as

^{425.} Fr. Menassa is particularly known for his work on the history of the Coptic Orthodox Church. In 1924, he authored a seminal work titled *Tarikh al-Kanisa al-Qibtiyya* (History of the Coptic Church), which is still used today as one of the most important sources on the history of the Coptic Orthodox Church written by a Coptic priest. A copy of the book was found by the researcher in St. Mark's Coptic church in The Hague. For more details, see the entry in the project database <https://fourcornersoftheworld.pters.ru.nl/publication/50/public/>.

^{426.} Diocesi Copta Milano - Comunicati Stampa, “Anba Antonio: tre anni dall'insediamento,” accessed June 6, 2024, <https://www.notiziediocesicoptamilano.it/2020/12/01/anba-antonio-tre-anni-dallinsediamento/>.

^{427.} Personal communication with a Coptic priest from Milan, November 7, 2021, in Milan. Fourteen issues so far have been digitized and uploaded on the official diocesan website. See <https://www.libreriadiocesicoptamilano.it/>.

a significant way of paying greater attention to the youth and actively involving them in different church projects, including its textual practices.

Eccliseia has a relatively stable structure. Each issue contains around forty pages, with a number of fixed sections that have featured throughout the years since the magazine's foundation in 2018. Like in *al-Tariq*, the most prominent genres are spirituality and Scriptures. Furthermore, the magazine features texts discussing various elements of the Coptic tradition and heritage more broadly, such as history of the Coptic Church, short and simple lessons in the Coptic language, introduction to Coptic icons, and sayings by early Egyptian saints. Thus, a large portion of the magazine's content centers on the preservation and transmission of what the church (i.e., the diocese, but arguably also the Coptic Church more broadly) considers to be part of the Coptic tradition, and – differently from *al-Tariq*, does so in the language that young Copts in Italy understand best – Italian.

In addition to maintaining and recreating links between the youth and their Christian and, more specifically, Coptic belonging, *Eccliseia* aims at strengthening the believers' communal belonging and establishing a closer link to the Church and their diocese through texts authored by the Diocese's leaders, the current bishop Anba Antonio and by the late Anba Kirolos, founder of the Diocese, as well as by Pope Tawadros II. Besides Anba Antonio's official approval and blessing for the work on the magazine (each number ends with a page featuring the bishop's photo with the Italian text “Con l'approvazione e la benedizione di S.E. Anba Antonio”), the bishop occasionally contributes to the magazine and its content. In the section titled *Dalle parole di S.E. Anba Antonio* (From H.E. Anba Antonio's words), the bishop has contributed several pieces on spirituality and Christianity in general (for instance, a text titled “Gesù l'autore della fede” – Jesus, the author of the faith).

More fixed and permanent sections are those featuring texts by H.H. Pope Tawadros II, current pope of the Coptic Orthodox Church, and by the former Bishop of Milan, late Anba Kirolos. Editors of the magazine created a section named *Dalle parole di Sua Santità* (From His Holiness' words), in which the faithful can read Pope Tawadros' texts on various topics related to spirituality, Bible or Coptic (and more generally Christian) feasts, some of which are taken from his homilies, different speeches or original writings. These include Pope's articles in *Al Kiraza* or parts from his books, such as “Questa è la mia fede” (translation of the Arabic original *Hadha Imani*, “This is my faith”).⁴²⁸ Anba Kirolos is highly venerated and celebrated in the Coptic community

^{428.} The Diocese of Milan has eventually published the Italian translation of Pope Tawadros' book (year of publication is unknown), which was originally published in 1990. The book is geared primarily towards the youth and seeks to answer potential doubts and questions about faith.

in northern Italy, and his original writings comprise the section *Parole d'oro* ("Golden words"). Anba Kirolos' spiritual legacy thus continues to be a part of the community's everyday life through an ongoing section which features pieces that mostly deal with spirituality, the genre for which he became well known in the Coptic Church and in his diocese. These texts are taken from Anba Kirolos' original texts published in *Al Kiraza*, which were subsequently published as part of the earlier mentioned two-part series in Arabic titled "Your lips, my bride, drip sweetness as the honeycomb: from articles by Anba Kirolos, Metropolitan of Milan."

In another permanent section of the magazine, *Versetto e riflessioni* ("Verse and reflections"), the Coptic youth of Milan and its surroundings have translated parts from Pope Shenouda's books and sermons. Some of the books whose parts have featured in *Eccliseia* since its foundation include *Riflessioni sulle beatitudini* ("Reflections on the beatitudes"), *Le guerre spirituali* (*Spiritual warfares*), *Riflessioni sul Natale* (*Questions about the Nativity*) and *Il discorso della montagna* (*Sermon on the Mount*).⁴²⁹ Most of these texts deal with spiritual matters, with Pope Shenouda's reflections, explanations and views on various concepts and topics related to living an active spiritual, Christian life. Topics such as praying, meanings of love, purity, self-doubt, and internal conflicts are supported by numerous verses from the Bible. The presence of a fixed section with Pope Shenouda's texts in *Eccliseia* reflects a broader trend in the textual practices of diasporic Copts in Europe, as we saw from the example of *al-Tariq* in the Netherlands.

Other sections of *Eccliseia*, of which some are ongoing and others featured only in earlier editions, include: *Perle dei Santi Padri* ("Pearls of the Holy Fathers"), *Feste e riflessioni* ("Feasts and reflections"), *I Sacramenti* ("The Sacraments"), *Contro il Cristianesimo* ("Against Christianity": a ten-part series on denouncing and rejecting Jehovah's Witnesses and their teachings), *Il Rito della Chiesa Copta* ("Rites of the Coptic Church"), *La lingua copta* ("The Coptic language"), *Il Buon Atleta* ("The good athlete": a section containing *mashūra* texts, connecting this-worldly matters with spirituality, and how to live according to true Christian values),⁴³⁰ *Perché no?* ("Why no(t)?"; section on contemporary discussions and debates on moral issues that mostly

^{429.} From these, "Reflections on the beatitudes" is a literal translation of the Italian title, as it is not clear to which original Arabic or English publication it corresponds. For more on the content of the above mentioned books by Pope Shenouda, see the digital library on the official website of St. Mark's Coptic church in Hamilton, Canada, <https://www.stminahamilton.ca/groups/servants/pope-shenouda-iii-books>.

^{430.} There are significant similarities between this section and *Bukra Ahla* from *al-Tariq* in terms of discussed topics and the style of writing, characterized by the reliance on spirituality, faith, and the Bible when presenting arguments and advice.

concern the youth), *La lampada per i miei passi* (“The lamp/light for my steps”), *Pillole di scienza* (“Small bits of science”; texts in this column focus on connecting religion and science), *Le feste della Chiesa* (“Feasts of the Church”), *Storia della Chiesa* (“History of the Church”), *Geografia della Bibbia* (“Geography of the Bible”), *Il Sinassario* (“The Synaxarion”), and *Storia di un santo* (“Story of a saint”).⁴³¹

Similar to *al-Tariq*, *Eccliseia* too, contains a section on church/diocese news as well as a Q&A section, where the readers send their questions via email or the official Instagram profile of the magazine. More broadly, this feature mirrors a prevalent trend in Pope Shenouda's writings, who authored numerous books in a Q&A format, particularly focusing on topics like the Bible and religious practices, including sacraments. The title of the section in *Eccliseia* is *Chiedete e vi sarà dato*, a reference to Matthew 7:7 – “Ask, and it will be given to you.” Furthermore, some editions of the magazine contain a quiz section, with questions often related to the Bible or Coptic feasts, as well as a crossword puzzle where young Copts can test their knowledge on different topics related to their faith and their Church. Additionally, editors of *Eccliseia* support participation of the youngest members of the community by presenting their drawings in the section titled *Dai vostri talenti* (“From your talents”), often of Jesus, Mary, different Coptic saints or church buildings. Some of them are, therefore, related specifically to the Coptic Church, others more generally to Christianity, or even to Egypt and its pharaonic history.

Although slightly less thematically diverse and perhaps more consistent in terms of structure compared to *al-Tariq*, *Eccliseia* still incorporates a wide range of genres and topics; from Church leaders and their original writings, across translated texts in Bible exegesis, spirituality, Church history, discussions on moral dilemmas and *mashūra* texts, to lessons in Coptic and quizzes for children. This thematic and genre diversity, with texts authored by a variety of authors (most of them are translated and not originally written in Italian – therefore, containing fewer original pieces compared to *al-Tariq*) and in different formats, reflects what the creators of the magazine understand as necessary, useful, and effective to enhance the level of spirituality among second- and third-generation Copts and strengthening their connection with the the Coptic Church in Egypt) and their own local diocese in Milan.

The content of *Eccliseia*, unlike *al-Tariq*, is entirely in the Italian language. The principal reason for this choice can be found in the description of the magazine – “la rivista dei e per i giovani” – the magazine *by* and *for* the youth. Young Italian Copts

⁴³¹. See for example issues published in May 2019 and in January-February 2020. The issues are available via <https://www.libreriadiocesicoptamilano.it/>.

(often teenagers and university students), most of them members of the second generation, are both contributors in this project and its main target audience. The choice to create a communal youth magazine in Italian is primarily linked to the practical fact that the main language of most second- and third-generation Copts in Milan (and in Italy) is the language of their country of birth, similarly to other diasporas. However, such a linguistic choice has more layers to it other than it being a merely practical decision. Unlike the Diocese of Rome, the Diocese of Milan has three young priests who grew up in Italy and are thus primarily Italian-speaking, and they work closely with youth groups on different kinds of projects, including the publishing of the magazine. These priests are often referred to by other senior priests and the youth as “the bridge between generations” as they are fluent in both Arabic and Italian and are understood to have an understanding of worldviews and needs of different generations. In this situation, with an older community and a large number of children born in Italy, priests who were raised and grew up outside of Egypt, and a generally good knowledge of the local language among the community’s members, it is not surprising that the Coptic diocese of Milan publishes a magazine in Italian, especially considering its main target readership.

In all of this, the endeavors and projects of the late Bishop Anba Kirolos have been crucial. As discussed in the previous chapter, Anba Kirolos strongly encouraged first-generation migrants to learn the language of their new country, because he saw adopting Italian within the community and in the Church as a sign of progress and prosperity. The late bishop believed that the linguistic integration of the faithful was the sign that the community was moving forward and that the Church should be ready to meet the needs of its evolving community.⁴³² It is interesting to note that many clergymen are known by Italian versions of their names, which is also followed during conversations in Arabic. Examples include the current bishop, Anba Antonio, Father Gabriele, and Anba Giovanni, the current Bishop of the Central European diocese, who used to be a monk in the monastery in Lacchiarella (belonging to the Diocese of Milan) and was ordained in Italy.

Ancient traditions, persevering communities

In this section, I aim to explore how the editors and contributors of *al-Tariq* and *Eccliseia* engage with and articulate the narratives surrounding Egypt, its history, the Coptic Church, and its traditions. This analysis will focus on how these narratives are discussed, framed, and incorporated into the publications. Central to this exploration

^{432.} Personal communication with a Coptic priest from Milan, October 31, 2021, in Milan.

is understanding what the early Egyptian Christian history and Egypt's contributions to Christianity signify for both the Church and the community. I will delve into how these dioceses in the Netherlands and Milan discuss and frame these narratives and the implications of their discussions on the notion of ‘preserving tradition.’

Merely looking at the official website of different European Coptic dioceses provides a sense of how the various Coptic dioceses in Europe view the history of the Coptic Church and how they define their Church's identity when presenting themselves to the outside world.⁴³³ For instance, the official website of the Diocese of London emphasizes that the Coptic Orthodox Church, as “one of the most ancient Churches in the world, ... has carefully preserved the Orthodox Christian faith in its earliest form.”⁴³⁴ The Coptic Diocese of Rome mentions that “in order to insist on the authenticity of its faith,” the Church “took the title of ‘Orthodox Church’ while at the same time preserving the precious proclamation of its universality expressed with the term ‘catholicon’ (Italian: *cattolico*) which appears in all its liturgical acts in the Coptic language.”⁴³⁵ The official website of the Coptic Orthodox Church in Denmark writes about the Coptic Church of Alexandria in a very vivid style, presenting it as “St. Mark's Church” that “has preserved so many ancient traditions and figures that contribute significantly to our understanding of the early centuries of the Christian Church.” The text continues with regarding the monasticism as “without a doubt the greatest gift of the Coptic Church to Christianity,”⁴³⁶ while the website of the Diocese of Milan adds the Coptic Church's “central role in Christian theology” which protected it “from Gnostic heresies.”⁴³⁷ The Dutch-language website of St. George and St. Demiana Coptic church in Utrecht presents the Coptic Church as the Church of martyrs in a section titled “Een rijk verleden” (“A rich past”), writing that the Church “has shown the world its deep spiritual faith, its understanding of eternity, and its understanding of martyrdom. She sees martyrdom not as death or something terrible, but rather as a new birth and an entrance to paradise.”⁴³⁸

^{433.} Similar trends are visible in North America and Australia, see, for example, the official websites of the Diocese of Ottawa, Montreal, and Eastern Canada: <https://eccopts.ca/our-orthodox-faith>, of the Diocese of Los Angeles, Southern California, and Hawaii: <https://www.lacopts.org/orthodoxy/coptic-orthodox-church/introduction-coptic-orthodox-church/>, and of St. Mark's Coptic church in Sydney: <https://www.stmark.com.au/copticchurch/>.

^{434.} Coptic Orthodox Diocese of London, “The Coptic Orthodox Church,” accessed May 24, 2023, <http://www.copticorthodox.london/the-coptic-orthodox-church/>.

^{435.} Diocesi Copta Ortodossa di Roma, “Chiesa Copta Ortodossa,” accessed February 5, 2022, <http://www.coptiortodossiroma.it/la-chiesa-copta.html>.

^{436.} Den koptiske ortodokse kirke i Danmark, “St Mark church,” accessed May 24, 2023, <https://koptisk.org/en/about-church/>.

^{437.} Diocesi Copta di Milano, “La Chiesa Copta di Alessandria,” accessed March 20, 2024, <https://www.diocesicoptamilano.com/la-chiesa-copta-di-alessandria.html>.

^{438.} Koptisch Orthodoxe Kerk – Utrecht, “Een rijk verleden,” accessed March 20, 2024, <https://koptischekerkutrecht.nl/een-rijk-verleden/>.

As indicated by these websites, there is a trend in presenting the Coptic Church as an ancient church of Egypt that preserved its original traditions, survived persecution, and at the same time contributed immensely to the Christian world. Although differences are visible and churches are independent when it comes to the content they create, there are numerous similarities when it comes to the style, word choice and story-telling. The concepts, ideas and narratives in the content of the dioceses' official websites, particularly in sections such as "About the Church" or "About us", reflect the ways these churches see themselves, how they present themselves to others as well to their own communities, and how they shape the knowledge of their Church, which is supposed to be transmitted to new generations. All of this permeates the textual production of the churches, and the Dioceses of the Netherlands and of Milan with their magazines are not exceptions. What is as important, however, is that these magazines, as well as other textual and literary forms produced by the two Dioceses, not only reflect church discourses and realities, but play an important role in constructing them. Periodicals such as *Eccliseia* and *al-Tariq*, given their main purposes and thematic diversity, thus offer insights into what the Coptic Orthodox Church, and in particular Dioceses of Milan and of the Netherlands consider to be part of that Coptic tradition⁴³⁹, or in other words, what is chosen to represent this tradition and, thus, needs to be preserved and transmitted in a diasporic context.

What are the main characteristics of this broader (historical) genre? First, the contributions related to the history and teachings of the Coptic Church, its practices and rites ('*ādāt wa ṭuqūs*), Coptic saints, and Egypt's contributions to Christianity in the issues of *al-Tariq* and *Eccliseia*, are often presented through the lens of an *ancient, intact tradition* that has been preserved throughout the centuries and that is now fragile due to many challenges of today's modern world. Usually, it assumes a time period, somehow seen as a 'golden age' when such principles, teachings and traditions were stable and normative, and were not doubted and hindered by various contemporary challenges (migration is certainly one of them). It is not made explicit, however, which 'golden age' that is and to what period of Egyptian history it relates to, though presumably it refers to the first centuries of Egyptian Christianity, including the birth and spread of Egyptian monasticism.

Second, it is important to pay attention to the style and wording of these writings. There are numerous ways how the contributors in *Eccliseia* and *al-Tariq* emphasize the greatness and significance of the legacy and heritage of the Church. For instance,

⁴³⁹. Arabic words used in *al-Tariq* that can be translated to 'tradition' include *taqlīd*, or its plural form *taqālīd*, '*ādāt*, and *turāth*, of which the last two are also used to denote 'customs,' 'practices' and 'heritage'.

there is the notion that the traditions of the Coptic Church are endangered and that they could be easily lost and deviated from. It is the task of the clergy task (from whose ranks the editors of both magazines and many contributors come) to remind the faithful (i.e. their readership audience) of this potential threat. This is illustrated by a piece in the third issue of *al-Tariq* published in 2017, in the section dedicated to the celebration of the fourth anniversary of the establishment of the Coptic Diocese in the Netherlands. Here, the author of an Arabic text titled "*al-'Amal al-Jadd al-Mustamirr*" ("The hard, continuous work") celebrates the work and efforts of Bishop Anba Arseny (accompanied by photos of the Bishop).⁴⁴⁰ The author connects the present and the past, and emphasizes the importance of what the church and the community in the Netherlands have built over the years, reminding the readers that "each one of us has to defend our church and our faith, for which our brothers are martyred at the hands of treachery and hatred." The bishop's "hard and continuous" work is further celebrated and affirmed with words and expressions that mirror a common church discourse, similar to those on the official church websites. The author of the same text writes that the bishop is "committed to preserving the Orthodox faith, respecting church canons, preserving the Church's traditions and teachings, as well as to leading the community in the path of holiness."⁴⁴¹ Such an archetype of the bishop as a 'defender of the faith' and the 'creator of the community' is visible in the 'testimony' publications of both Dutch and Milanese Coptic dioceses briefly discussed in the previous chapter, which emphasize the persevering character of the community founders. The author further warns the readers that the Church faces "actions of the enemy of good" and that "its attempts to undermine the Church and the works of Church fathers are continuous attempts to break the unity."⁴⁴² Here, it is not explicit who or what the enemy represents and whether the author refers to the 'universal Church' in general or the Coptic Church in particular. Thus, the choice of language and style in such texts in *al-Tariq*, often marked by explicit terms such as "danger," "enemy," or "defending [faith]," powerfully reinforces the discourse of the imperative of preserving Church teachings and traditions, reminding readers of the profound stakes involved in safeguarding their spiritual heritage.

In *Eccliseia's* section *Storia della Chiesa*, a text titled "L'Egitto – dal 600 in poi" ("Egypt – from 600 onwards") deals with the history of the Church and Egyptian Christianity

^{440.} The topic of the clergy's dedication and efforts in establishing communities in the diaspora (and the ways they embody the church and their readiness to face different types of challenges in this endeavor) has distinct, broader contexts and implications, meriting its own scholarly focus—though it cannot be explored in detail here due to space limitations.

^{441.} Ramez Elias, "al-'Amal al-Jadd al-Mustamirr," *Majallat al-Tariq* no. 3 (2017): 8. Translated from Arabic by the author.

^{442.} Ibid., 8. Translated from Arabic by the author.

in late antiquity and the Middle Ages, focusing on periods of different invasions and rules over Egypt, more specifically before, during, and after the Arab conquest. In the introduction of the article, an unknown author writes: “Our Coptic Orthodox Church has gone through difficult times in which it has demonstrated its solid faith by enduring many persecutions, in order to leave an untainted faith to its children and keep its dogma healthy.”⁴⁴³ In the text, the author stresses the fact that the inhabitants of Egypt, whom they synonymously denote as “Egyptians” and “Copts”⁴⁴⁴ refused propositions to become part of the Church of Rome and accept its teachings on the two natures of Christ, thus staying true to their faith. In addition, the text is accompanied by an image of children showing tattoos of Coptic crosses on their inner wrists, a symbol of resilience, perseverance and endurance of Coptic faith.

Many expressions and narratives emphasize the preservation of tradition from the homeland Church and the ancient character of the Coptic Church. These align with broader Orthodox narratives and are commonly shared among various Orthodox churches. Adjectives such as ‘ancient,’ ‘persevering,’ ‘unchanged,’ or ‘authentic,’ and phrases like ‘original teachings,’ ‘Orthodox faith,’⁴⁴⁵ ‘Apostolic church,’ and ‘apostolic tradition’ abound in texts on the history of Egyptian Christianity and of the Coptic Church, on explanations and overviews of its sacraments and rites, as well as in texts that focus on stories, events and developments in the Coptic dioceses of the Netherlands and of Milan. These word groups, which do not necessarily represent Coptic Christianity in particular, serve as forms of self-expression of the two respective dioceses, and as a tool for an ongoing affirmation of the importance of preserving tradition and heritage outside of the homeland. In addition, they perpetuate Church discourses and narratives that had been created and passed on for decades. Over the years, the Coptic Church, similarly to other Orthodox churches, has developed and maintained a discourse of being a church with a major role within global Christianity, which adheres to “unchanged traditions and teachings.”⁴⁴⁶ This omnipresent discourse which centers on the unchanging nature of Church traditions and faith is found in important speeches,

^{443.} Anonymous author, “L’Egitto – dal 600 in poi,” *Eccliseia* no. 11 (2019): 16. Translated from Italian by the author.

^{444.} For some reason (possibly due to influence of English), in many places, ‘Copts’ (Italian: *copti*) is written with a capital ‘C’ in Italian, contrary to its orthography rules (nouns denoting nationalities and ethnicities are written with lower cases in the Italian language).

^{445.} Based on the initial analysis of available issues, it became clear that words ‘Orthodoxy’ and ‘Orthodox’ are less common in *Eccliseia* compared to *al-Tariq*.

^{446.} Similar discourses on the ‘unchanging, traditional’ faith and tradition have been reported by Murre-van den Berg in her research on the Church of the East and the Syriac Orthodox Church. See Heleen Murre-van den Berg, “Apostasy or “a House Built on Sand”: Jews, Muslims and Christians in East-Syriac texts (1500-1850),” in *Contacts and Controversies between Muslims, Jews and Christians in the Ottoman Empire and Pre-Modern Iran*, eds. Sabine Schmidtke and Camilla Adang (Istanbuler Texte und Studien 21; Würzburg: Ergon-Verlag, 2010), 223-243.

writings, and other media formats created by Church leaders, and is further instilled in the minds and daily realities of many followers of the Coptic Orthodox Church. These speeches and writings are bolstered by different temporal and geographical references linked to the Bible or point to the connection of the Egyptian Church and the rest of the Christian world. These include Egypt, the foundation of desert monasticism; Egypt as the land of early saints and martyrs who died for their faith and are today venerated by different churches; the journey of the Holy Family; connections between Egypt and the Old and New Testaments; connections to Saint Mark and the first century A.D. as the start of Christianity; and Alexandria as a major capital of ancient Christianity with its legacy for the contemporary Church and Orthodox theology.

A further example of how church leaders and authors refer to their Church is found in *Eccliseia's* section on Church history, where the Coptic Church is sometimes referred to as “the ancient Church of Saint Mark.” Texts in this section are occasionally taken from the previously mentioned work by Fr. Menassa, “History of the Coptic Church,” and are then translated into Italian. The perpetual reference to St. Mark and his role in the foundation of the Egyptian Church enhances its ‘apostolic’ and ‘ancient’ character. Similarly, in the 2010 booklet published to celebrate the silver jubilee of the foundation of the first Coptic church in the Netherlands, Bishop Anba Arseny (at that time still a priest) wrote an introduction with a text on the beliefs and nature of the Coptic Orthodox Church. He reminds the readers of the first ecumenical council in Nicaea and the four basic characteristics of the Church established during the council. The Bishop affirms that, according to the Nicene creed, the Copts believe in the “one, holy, universal, and apostolic” Church, underlining that “Our Coptic Orthodox Church can rightly be called an Apostolic Church, because it was founded by St. Mark the Evangelist and has known a continuous chain of popes ever since.”⁴⁴⁷

Since the late nineteenth century, the Coptic Orthodox Church has cultivated the narrative of a persecuted church, beginning with Roman persecutions (culminated during Diocletian's reign in 284 AD), through the Arab invasion of the seventh century, until more recent Islamist attacks on Coptic churches in Egypt in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. These persecutions, both ancient and more recent ones, yielded numerous martyrs (i.e. martyr saints), which led to the institutionalization of martyrdom as an essential element of Coptic tradition and heritage. As Alastair Hamilton notes, the rhetoric of martyrdom became, and remained, a significant element in the historiography of the Coptic Church, which began flourishing in the late nineteenth century.⁴⁴⁸

⁴⁴⁷. Bishop Anba Arseny, *Zilveren Jubileum*, 3. Translated from Dutch by the author.

⁴⁴⁸. Alastair Hamilton, *The Copts and the West: 1439-1822. The European Discovery of the Egyptian Church* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006), 1.

Coptic historiography and evolving historical and hagiographic literary genres within the Church have emphasized and relied on stories of martyrdom and persecution, thereby establishing a stable trend within its literary and publishing tradition. A significant indicator of the growing prominence of such narratives is the rise in hagiographic literature, evidenced by an increase in publications by various Church-related publishing houses in Egypt since the mid-twentieth century, such as Maktabat al-Mahabba.⁴⁴⁹ This contributed to the development of a narrative of the perseverance of the Coptic Church, a church that survived centuries of persecutions and invasions, and defied foreign influences (mainly from the Catholic and Protestant missionaries), as well as Islamic rule. Thus, taking pride in ancient Egyptian and early Christian history, together with the emphasis on martyrdom stories and early saints' legacies, allows the Church to foster the persevering aspect of its people, of the Coptic tradition and Coptic faith. Although the Church has used and developed other narratives besides persecution and martyrdom to shape its history and the Coptic community, as well as to present itself to the outside world, Lukasik argues that it is the imaginary of the "Persecuted Church" that has made Egypt's Copts (and especially attacks on and discrimination of the Copts) visible to American audiences since the 1990s.⁴⁵⁰

Various texts in different sections of *al-Tariq* and *Eccliseia* discuss and place the Coptic Church within this framework of martyrdom and persecution. In general, publications by Coptic churches in the Netherlands and Italy, including *al-Tariq* and *Eccliseia*, frequently address themes of persecution and martyrdom, portraying Copts as a historically persecuted community. For instance, Elham Khalil's book *De Kopten, Twintig Eeuwen: onder Griekse, Romeinse, Byzantijnse, Arabische en Islamitische Heersers*, sold in some churches in the Netherlands, frames various periods of Egyptian Christian history as marked by persecution and violence against the Copts, such as those perpetrated by Romans and Arabs.⁴⁵¹ This narrative aligns with broader church discourses that depict the Church as the "Persecuted Church." Furthermore, in a 2019 text of *Eccliseia* titled "The Feast of Nayruz (the start of the Coptic year), martyrdom and Christianity,"⁴⁵² an unknown author writes about martyrdom in Christianity. The author affirms the solidity of the Church and emphasizes the importance of remembering the martyrs by quoting Tertullian who wrote that "the blood of the

^{449.} See Voile, *Les coptes d'Égypte sous Nasser*.

^{450.} See Lukasik, "Economy of Blood."

^{451.} Elham Khalil, *De Kopten, Twintig Eeuwen: onder Griekse, Romeinse, Byzantijnse, Arabische en Islamitische Heersers* (United States: self-published, 2016).

^{452.} This issue was published in September, linked to the Feast of Nayruz (Nairouz), which is celebrated every year on September 11, marking the beginning of the Coptic new year.

martyrs is the seed of the Church.”⁴⁵³ Once again, the Church is directly linked to martyrdom, which, according to the author, represents a major pillar of Christianity. The text does not speak specifically about the Coptic Church, but rather about Christianity and the ‘universal Church’ more broadly, hence the text does not feature the word ‘Coptic’ or any other related word. This might indicate that according to the author, wider Christianity (perhaps particularly in the Middle East) is facing (or has faced) persecution, and not only the Coptic Church. Additionally, it directly places Coptic Christianity and Coptic martyrdom within the theme and significance of martyrdom in broader Christianity.

Both magazines primarily write about Egypt from antiquity to the Middle ages. A great emphasis is therefore placed on the early history of Egyptian Christianity, highlighting the periods during which the Church established its dogma, yielded numerous martyrs and endured various persecutions, whereas, the magazines feature few texts on contemporary Egypt and more recent history of the Coptic Orthodox Church. Focusing primarily on the early history of the Coptic Church allows church leaders to underline the ancient and persevering character of the Coptic tradition, that is, the perceived ‘golden age’ of the Church, as well as to avoid entering the discussions on the status of Christians in contemporary Egypt and more recent Islamist attacks on Coptic churches, thus remaining politically neutral.⁴⁵⁴

Between *Eccliseia* and *al-Tariq*, the Milanese publication is certainly less political. It has not featured any text on more recent developments in Egypt (e.g. the latest period covered in the section *Storia della chiesa* is the Umayyad Caliphate). *Al-Tariq*, on the other hand, has shown several exceptions within the more prevalent trend of not writing about contemporary Egypt. Several pieces discuss specific contemporary events or developments in Egypt, consistently framing them within the context of the longstanding and persevering character of the Coptic community and their Church.

⁴⁵³. Anonymous author, “La festa di Nayruz (l’inizio dell’anno copto), martirio e cristianesimo,” *Eccliseia* no. 11 (2019): 9. Translated from Italian by the author.

⁴⁵⁴. Although the decision not to take a certain (negative, explicit) stance regarding the contemporary sociopolitical status of Egyptian Copts and against the current political order can be considered in itself as political, here I use ‘politically neutral’ to describe the editors’ deliberate choice to turn away from writing about contentious issues in their magazines and, thus, strive towards remaining ‘neutral.’ This is in line with the official stances of the Coptic Church regarding political activism or public discussions on sectarian strife in Egypt (although it must be noted that during the short-lived rule of Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in 2011 and 2012, Coptic Church leaders were active in opposing the Islamist rule in the country). In fact, Pope Shenouda explicitly mentioned that diasporic Copts should not criticize or “attack” (to use Pope Shenouda’s words) Egypt and the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt in their publications and activities. See al-Banna, *al-Aqbat fi Misr wa-l-Mahjar*, 202–204.

Among them is a text in Dutch on Pope Francis' 2017 visit to Egypt. The anonymous author conveys that the Roman Catholic Pope spoke about "the great and glorious history of Egypt as a land of civilization, wisdom and faith," while Pope Tawadros II reflected on the more recent developments concerning the position of the Copts in Egypt. In his speech, the Coptic pope declared that "despite Christianity's deep roots in Egypt, ...Christians in Egypt have gone through difficult times," however, "the criminal minds behind all this violence and these threats that are now attacking Egypt will never be able to break the hearts of its inhabitants..."⁴⁵⁵

The September-October issue of *al-Tariq* published in 2013 was marked by what was happening during that period in Egypt. The issue contained a large number of articles which, implicitly or explicitly, touched upon the status of the Copts in Egypt and reflected on the Islamist attacks on various Coptic churches that occurred in 2013. One of the articles dealing with these topics that stands out includes an Arabic text titled "*al-Kanisa tadtahid wa lakin tantasir*" ("The Church is persecuted but it triumphs"). In this text, by Father Bavlos Said, he writes about the Coptic Church as "the persecuted church" (*al-kanisa al-muḏṭahida*; aligning with Lukasić's findings), which has undergone persecution since the first century until today. Father Bavlos asserts that the suffering cannot break the Church, but it only helps it be victorious with its continuity and persistence.⁴⁵⁶

Discussions on the meanings and definitions of the 'Coptic (and more generally Egyptian) identity,' ideologies of Copts' origins and how they relate to the Egyptian state and contemporary socio-political realities, and on the importance of ancient Egyptian and early Christian legacy for the contemporary Coptic Church and its followers, have occupied both public and communal (i.e. Coptic) spaces in Egypt (and later in diaspora too) since the early twentieth century. Pharaonism and the belief that Copts are direct descendants of ancient Egyptians became increasingly popular at the beginning of the twentieth century, and is, to an extent, still prevalent today among some Copts.⁴⁵⁷

^{455.} Anonymous author, "Paus Franciscus' bezoek naar Egypte," *Majallat al-Tariq* no. 3 (2017): 20 . Translated from Dutch by the author.

^{456.} Father Bavlos Said, "al-Kanisa tadtahid wa lakin tantasir," *Majallat al-Tariq*, no. 5 (2013): 10. Translated from Arabic by the author.

^{457.} Largely shaped by western Orientalism and by the rise of Egyptology, Pharaonism was adopted by both Muslims and Christians in Egypt, as a national ideology that aimed at transcending religious differences and taking pride in Egypt's ancient heritage. The ideology, however, found more solid support from the Copts and is still, although to a much lesser extent, followed by some Coptic intellectuals, as well as within the Church. For insights into the historical and contemporary developments concerning Pharaonism, see, e.g., Michael Wood, "The Use of the Pharaonic Past in Modern Egyptian Nationalism," *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 35 (1998): 179-196; and van der Vliet, "The Copts: 'Modern Sons of the Pharaohs'?" Some scholars have argued that Pharaonism has returned to the center of political discourse and nationalistic ideology in Egypt in recent years. See Mozes Adiguna Setiyono, "From Pan-Arabism to Pharaonism: Egypt's Gradual Change of National Identity during the Sisi Era," *Global Strategies* no. 2 (2023): 307-326.

Many Copts, including the Coptic Church leadership, have since established a strong and direct connection between the land of Egypt and its ancient history, on the one hand, and their religious belonging and early Christian heritage on the other. Egypt as a cradle of an ancient civilization and an important center of early Christianity, the birthplace of monasticism, the site of the Holy Family’s journey, as well as the land of the Coptic language (which is the continuation of the ancient Egyptian language), all serve as sources for strengthening the connection between the territory of Egypt and the community’s religious ‘identity.’⁴⁵⁸

The usage of various elements and symbols related to Egypt, and in particular references to its ancient, pre-Christian civilization and pre-Islamic history, serve to emphasize the ancient and apostolic character of the Coptic Church, and thus perpetuate the ‘perseverance and longevity’ discourse. In addition, taking pride in the ancient Egyptian civilization and directly linking it to Egyptian Christianity serves the Church and many of its members (both clergy and lay Copts) in differentiating and distancing themselves from their Muslim compatriots. As mentioned earlier, the ideology that the Copts are “true Egyptians” is still present within the community. This belief has contributed to many Copts strongly embracing, popularizing and actively promoting ancient Egyptian heritage as the community’s national treasure, as well as to creating and re-inventing connections between the Coptic tradition and pre-Christian Egyptian heritage (e.g. claims that many Coptic *alḥān* have ancient Egyptian roots). The deployment and reproduction of these narratives by the Coptic dioceses of the Netherlands and Milan is evident in their visual and material cultures. In the Netherlands, different Coptic churches often display neo-Coptic icons that incorporate elements of ancient Egyptian civilization, such as images of the Great Pyramids behind St. Mark (as well as the icon of St. Verena shown at the beginning of this dissertation). Additionally, during the 2021 exhibition in Paderno Dugnano organized by the Coptic Diocese of Milan (discussed in the previous chapter), community members showcased panels, objects, and visuals that connected to ancient Egypt and included Bible verses referencing Egypt, such as boxes arranged to form a pyramid with texts like “Blessed be Egypt, my people.” (see Image 10).⁴⁵⁹

^{458.} Iskander, *Sectarian Conflict in Egypt*, 12–13.

^{459.} The exhibition was inaugurated in a Catholic church in Cinisello Balsamo, near Milan, in October 2021.



Image 10. Ancient Egyptian installations at the exhibition of the Coptic Orthodox diocese of Milan in Paderno Dugnano, 2021.

In addition, a potential purpose behind this type of self-presentation by the two migrant Coptic churches' is to familiarize the local inhabitants (i.e. the Dutch and Italians) with the origins of their Church and its tradition by implementing elements of an ancient civilization that has long intrigued the West. Although much of what the churches produce (both in discursive and material ways) is usually only available to the communities themselves (including *al-Tariq* and *Eccliseia*), many church activities include local non-Copts (as was the case with the afore-mentioned exhibition in Milan), and their churches influence the landscapes of streets, neighborhoods or even cities with different visual and architectural elements that attract the attention of the 'outsiders'. One such example is the large mosaic icon on the façade of the Virgin Mary Coptic Orthodox Church in north Amsterdam which shows the Holy Family on the Nile with palm trees, the pyramids and the Egyptian goddess Isis seen in the

background (see Image 11).⁴⁶⁰ Therefore, both dioceses show tendencies to merge ancient Egyptian with early Christian elements when expressing their heritage in the diaspora and presenting it to the outside world, thus mixing rather secular, pre-Christian Egyptian (the ankh, pyramids, and Egyptian gods) and more explicitly ‘religious’ Christian symbols (crosses) in their public visual and material expressions.



Image 11. Façade of the Coptic church in Amsterdam.

When it comes to *al-Tariq* and *Eccliseia*, such narratives are present throughout different sections of the two magazines, but two stand out: *De reis van de heilige Familie* (“The journey of the Holy Family”) in *al-Tariq*, and *Geografia della Bibbia* (“Geography of the Bible”) in *Eccliseia*. In the section on the Holy Family’s flight into Egypt, a lay

^{460.} The icon, as well as many others in different Coptic churches in the Netherlands, was done by the famous Egyptian painter and iconographer Adel Nassief (1962 – 2021).

educated Dutch author referred to above, connected to the Coptic Church, describes the route believed to be taken by the Holy Family on their journey throughout Egypt. The author, who has also written on the Coptic monasteries in Egypt, recreates the map of all the places visited by St. Mary, Joseph and Jesus, from the north all the way to the south, and back to Nazareth. The story with all its reconstructed details, widely celebrated within the Coptic Church but contested by many historians, is now narrated and explained by a local, Dutch expert on early Egyptian Christianity, thus giving a higher level of legitimacy and cohesion to the story whose accuracy has been questioned by many scholars. Texts in this section, which featured in the magazine between 2019 and 2022, are primarily directed towards the youth who are supposed to become more familiar with the story that many Copts take pride in and that has become an important marker of the Coptic Church. In addition, the texts are accompanied by numerous images and illustrations of the places described in the story, which now, at least symbolically, bring many young Copts born in the Netherlands closer to the country of their origin.

Eccliseia's section *Geografia della Bibbia*, modeled on a section of the same name featured in *Al-Kiraza*, provides an overview of important geographical areas that are mentioned in the Scriptures, mostly focusing on the Old Testament. Once again, the editors remind their readers of direct links between Egypt (and the whole region) and universal Christianity, in particular analyzing and recreating links between significant figures from the Scriptures and different places in the Middle East. Some of the texts in the section focus primarily on Egypt (such as the text entitled "Our father Abram in Egypt") and others often mention Egypt as an indispensable element of the Geography of the Bible.

The Coptic language is another important subject that is related to the 'identity' of the Coptic Orthodox Church and its tradition, and which serves as a tool for underlining the ancient character of the Church as well as for expressing a strong connection to the land of Egypt. Only *Eccliseia* contains a fixed section related to the Coptic language, entitled *La lingua copta* ("the Coptic language"). The section has featured in the magazine since March 2019 and has been slightly modified since its inception. Texts in the early issues contain information on the history of the Coptic language, Coptic alphabet and examples of some Coptic words and their meanings. In the introduction to the newly-added section in the March 2019 issue of the magazine, the unknown author writes that "the Coptic language has a grand and exemplary history, dating back seven thousand years" and that it is "the origin of Egyptian culture." Moreover, the author affirms that "despite persecutions, the Coptic language survived and remained an established and practiced language by many." The author adds that

even today the Church is committed to teaching the language to its children and that the purpose of this magazine section is to present Coptic in a simple and effective method to its readers.⁴⁶¹

In more recent numbers, the section has been divided into two parts, namely *Le icone dei santi* (“Icons of saints”) and *Impariamo il copto* (“Let’s learn Coptic”), where the editors of the magazine present neo-Coptic style icons with Coptic texts on them, accompanied by a short background of the icon’s content, together with several Coptic sentences with the transcription and their meanings in Italian. Thus, next to the language itself, young Italian Copts can become more familiar with the neo-Coptic style of iconography,⁴⁶² learn more about different saints, and test their knowledge of Bible verses.

Although *Eccliseia* features a regular section on the Coptic language, whose editors emphasize the great importance of the language for the Church, the Dioceses of Milan and of the Netherlands do not have systematic and organized instruction of Coptic for its children. In the past, some parishes in the Netherlands organized independent Coptic lessons for adults, taught by local, non-Coptic instructors. Occasionally they also teach Coptic letters to children in the Sunday schools. However, both dioceses lack resources (principally members of the community who have an expertise in the Coptic language) for this type of arrangement, and possibly have other priorities, underlining a rather ambiguous attitude towards the issue of the preservation of the language.⁴⁶³ An additional effort to promote Coptic among the youth born in Milan was made by creating several smartphone apps for learning Coptic, developed by a second-generation community member.

Stances towards the status of Coptic and its importance for the community vary, as discussed in the previous chapter. However, many Copts, including a senior Coptic clergy member in the Netherlands, believe that learning some Coptic is essential for preserving the tradition of the ‘mother church’ and consider it a fundamental element of “Coptic identity”.⁴⁶⁴ As illustrated in Chapter 3, some of my interlocutors

^{461.} Anonymous author, “La lingua copta,” *Eccliseia* March 2019: 20. Translated from Italian by the author.

^{462.} It is not explicitly mentioned that this style is the ‘main’ or ‘official’ iconographic style of the Coptic Church. Rather, only ‘icons of saints’ (*le icone dei santi*) are mentioned and in every case neo-Coptic style icons are presented as examples.

^{463.} This is certainly not unique to the Coptic churches in diaspora. The Church in Egypt tries to appropriately address this matter and find ways to preserve the language, at least symbolically. However, as we could see in Chapter 3, some communities in diaspora are even removing Coptic from the Liturgy.

^{464.} Interview with a senior Coptic clergy member in the Netherlands, on December 6, 2020, online.

across different Coptic churches in the Netherlands, Italy and Egypt, both clergy and lay Copts, expressed their connectedness to the Coptic language as the language of their ancestors. Even though very few Copts in the Netherlands and Italy (as well as in many other diasporas and in Egypt) today know some Coptic, the language is still alive through the liturgy and remains an integral part of the first-generation Copts' recollection of their homeland's heritage. Many Copts hold on to the narratives of an ancient language once spoken by the Egyptian Christian community, [or is this a quote?] still used by the Church today, thus proving its perseverance. Mostly symbolically, even via occasional texts on the history of the Coptic language in *al-Tariq*, simple Coptic lessons in *Eccliseia*, or by incorporating Coptic text in different liturgical books (like *Kholagy* or *Agbeya*), the churches want to remind themselves and their members that Coptic still matters. This is further illustrated by the insistence on displaying Coptic text in many parts of the visual and material culture inside the churches, such as on iconostasis and icons. Although the status of Coptic has become highly uncertain, particularly in many *mahgar* churches, it seems that Coptic text remains an emblematic representation of belonging to the Coptic Church and to the Coptic community.

Guiding morality – navigating Christian life in the modern world

A significant portion of both *Eccliseia* and *al-Tariq* magazines is reserved for what I will refer to as “social and moral debates.” The need to address and discuss various social and moral issues in the communal magazines, but also in other spheres of communal church life more broadly, comes from the concern about how to live one's daily life according to Christian teachings and values (or even more generally according to one's religious principles) in an environment (and time) where religion has lost its primal influence in wider society. This question has been explored by other scholars, including Murre-van den Berg, who has shown that concerns over preserving traditional moral values and upholding “Christian morality” in diaspora has been an important aspect of a transnational magazine of the Assyrian Church of the East.⁴⁶⁵

⁴⁶⁵ Heleen Murre-van den Berg, “Voice of the East: The Transnational Messenger of the Assyrian Church of the East”, in *Diaspore nel vicino oriente. Melodie Ebraiche in Benedetto Marcello*, eds. Mirella Cassarino, Lydia Cevdalli, Rosa Bianca Finazzi, Claudia Milani, Marco Moriggi (Milan: Veneranda Biblioteca Ambrosiana 2022), 59-89.

In today's Coptic Church, both in Egypt and across the diaspora, there exists a vibrant and ongoing discourse on various social and moral issues. These debates, which often include topics such as women's rights and their roles within the church, homosexuality, and the conditions surrounding divorce, highlight the church's engagement with changing societal norms and ethical challenges. While such discussions are not absent in Egypt, they are notably more prevalent and carry a sense of urgency within diaspora communities. This is particularly true in Western countries, where many of these issues are broadly accepted or openly discussed not only by society at large but also in many of the mainline churches.

The urgency in the diaspora often stems from the need to reconcile traditional religious teachings with the more liberal societal values surrounding them. As a result, individual churches or dioceses frequently find themselves in positions where they must clearly articulate their stances. This is typically done through various channels such as newsletters, official websites, sermons, periodicals, and other publications.⁴⁶⁶ This aligns with one of the principal goals of *Eccliseia*, which is meant to "respond to various doubts" (related to, among other things, social and moral values), while *al-Tariq*, as Bishop Arseny writes, covers a wide range of topics related to practical everyday life ("*het praktische dagelijkse leven*").⁴⁶⁷ Although these announcements and discussions allow for some degree of local interpretation and response to immediate community concerns, they predominantly adhere to the official positions and guidelines issued by the Coptic Patriarchate in Cairo and are thus in line with other Coptic churches in *mahgar*. This approach ensures that, despite geographical distances and cultural differences, a degree of unity and uniformity within the global Coptic community is maintained, allowing diaspora churches to maintain links with the central Church leadership in Egypt, as well as with one another.

The editors of the magazines direct these social and moral debates towards different generations, for instance to first-generation Copts who are married and have children, which is more the case in *al-Tariq*, or to the youth who "shall be set on the right path," as stated in *Eccliseia*. Many of these texts have an informative and even educational purpose, while others explicitly show instructive and guiding characteristics. Such discussions provide a framework for the right communal conduct and moral reference system and guidelines on how to experience the world

^{466.} A prominent example is the Diocese of Los Angeles, whose leaders write and publish short articles on numerous contentious social issues. These short articles, in a way, represent official stances of the diocese on these issues and align more broadly with the teachings of the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt, although clearly showing the diasporic context in which they were written. For more, see <https://www.lacopts.org/resources/articles/social-issues/>.

^{467.} Bishop Anba Arseny, *Zilveren Jubileum*, 22.

according to (Orthodox) Christian norms as well as particular cultural (Egyptian, Middle Eastern) configurations that largely differ from those of the 'host' society.

The Coptic Church, as an institution, holds immense influence, acting as a social, moral, and political leader for many Copts in Egypt. As briefly discussed in the earlier chapters, historically, the Church championed the community's interests, particularly during periods of heightened sociopolitical crises in the country. This role has solidified under recent popes, who fostered a close relationship with the state. Thus, the Church remains a powerful force, shaping its believers' lives through religious activities, social gatherings, and charitable works, and acting as a principal reference of group belonging for many Copts. Parish life extends far beyond attending Sunday services, as illustrated in the previous chapter, offering a vibrant network that extends far beyond the walls of the church itself. Many of these traditions have been actively replicated by Coptic communities abroad, where the Church seeks to maintain its strong influence in the diaspora and act as the principal social and moral guide for its members.

Given the significant role that the Church, or more specifically particular dioceses, parishes, and their clerical leaders (intend to) play in shaping the daily lives, knowledge, values, and behavior of believers, it is unsurprising that churches publish various materials that have a guiding character. These publications focus on explaining contentious social issues within the community and providing guidance on what it means to be a 'true Christian'—specifically, a 'true Coptic believer'—and how to uphold proper Christian conduct. Addressing these 'social and moral debates' and shaping the group's collective morality is also done through sermons and other kinds of public communal speeches by priests and bishops. Such guidance of the community through church publications and sermons can be traced back to eighteenth-century Ottoman Egypt, specifically to Pope Yuannis XVIII and Bishop Yusab. Febe Armanios shows how in order to counter the increasing influence of Catholic missionaries and to offer an alternative vision for a 'proper' behavior for Orthodox Copts, which was based on denouncing foreign influences and customs, Pope Yuannis and Bishop Yousab turned to an extensive use of sermons. Pope Yuannis used a new genre called *adrāj* (decrees, letters)⁴⁶⁸ to guide the congregation in proper conduct and to explicate various theological dilemmas in a simple manner. Written

^{468.} *Adrāj* can to some extent be compared with fatwas in the Islamic judiciary tradition. Although fatwa is an official legal ruling made by a trained Islamic jurist, unlike *adrāj* which are (unofficial) written sermons meant to guide the congregation, in modern times, fatwas have increasingly adopted the role of guiding the general public on various aspects of sharia, particularly in matters related to religious practices and everyday life. However, essentially, fatwas do not have their counterpart in today's Coptic Orthodox Church tradition.

in a fatherly (i.e., parental) tone, these sermons served to discuss basic principles of proper belief and to reprimand those who engaged in sinful activities (like drinking alcohol). Armanios notes that *adrāj* were indicators of the pope's concerns since all important issues that arose during his reign of nearly thirty years regularly appeared in these decrees/letters. Bishop Yusab's sermons were called *Silāḥ al-Mu'minīn* ("the Weapon of the Faithful") primarily addressed the "loose" morals of the lay community and sought to teach the congregants about "true" beliefs of the Church.⁴⁶⁹

Pope Shenouda's writings and sermons have become a contemporary equivalent to the eighteenth-century *adrāj* and *silāḥ* genres. In addition to the Pope, many Coptic clerical figures, as well as lay community members, have adopted such genres to communicate with the faithful regarding the maintenance of a "proper" conduct and "true" beliefs, especially since the late twentieth century. Although directed at all generations, a significantly large part of these publications today is geared towards the youth. This reflects the fact that many parish activities and programs of the Church are geared towards younger generations, seen as future leaders of the Coptic Church. These activities are aimed at educating the youth, keeping them within the church, as well as at preparing them for *khidma* or their potential future careers as priests (see Chapter 6). This increased focus on youth began during Pope Shenouda's reign and was institutionalized in 1980 by the appointment of Anba Moussa as the Bishop of Youth. Besides numerous programs and initiatives developed by the bishopric over the years, Bishop Anba Moussa has been active in writing and publishing textual materials (predominantly simple books and booklets) on various issues that concern younger generations and that have increasingly been discussed in public spaces, such as dating, premarital relationships, and homosexuality. Many of these books were translated from Arabic into different languages (mainly into English), aimed at being used as well outside of Egypt.⁴⁷⁰

When settling in their new countries, church leaders and migrants face expectations to integrate and assimilate into the host countries and thus need to balance their own cultural and social (including religious) values with those of the local society

⁴⁶⁹. Armanios, *Coptic Christianity in Ottoman Egypt*, 131.

⁴⁷⁰. Van Doorn-Harder, *The Emergence of the Modern Coptic Papacy, 177-180*. Some examples of Anba Moussa's books include *Youth and Pure Living*, *Youth Concerns*, *Resurrection and Contemporary Issues*, etc. Some of the bishop's books are geared towards adults and clergy and are meant to 'train' them in their endeavors and relations with children and youth. Examples include the English language booklet titled *How to Speak to the Youth* and the Arabic publication *Kayfa Nakhdīm al-Shabab?* ("How do we serve the youth?"), available in the project's Four Corners of the World Library (see <https://fourcornersoftheworld.pters.ru.nl/publication/676/public/>). For more books by Bishop Moussa, see the digital library Orthodox Bookstore, <https://www.orthodoxbookstore.org/search?q=bishop+moussa>.

while trying to preserve social and cultural norms and traditions from their country of origin.⁴⁷¹ These challenges, therefore, play a central role in how migrant churches organize their church education, and other practices in their new lands. Consequently, this reflects on what churches choose to teach to their children, what elements of their traditions they take as the most important ones to be further transmitted to future generations, what discussions they take up, what compromises need to be made in these processes, how to ‘properly’ guide their communities in newly-created circumstances, and how to cater to different generations within the communities.⁴⁷² All these issues, concerns, and goals are further reflected in various aspects of textual practices of many diasporic churches, either explicitly or implicitly.

When looking at *al-Tariq* and *Eccliseia*, we can notice two types of texts that discuss social and moral issues. The first type are the texts which deal with topics considered contentious or even controversial in the Church and are seen as a threat to living a ‘proper’ Christian life, especially to its children. There is usually a consensus on the idea that these are products of the modern, liberal world, which contradict traditional Christian values. These include homosexuality, premarital sex, and the use of alcohol. The second type of texts are the texts dealing with a variety of less controversial issues through the lens of what is desired and accepted in the Church, and what is not. The authors, mostly members of the clergy, give instructions and advice for practices, such as dressing, raising children, or family relations. The first type has been more common in *Eccliseia* and is, therefore, mainly directed towards the youth, while the texts of the second type are largely found in *al-Tariq*, written in Arabic and therefore often geared towards adults (or first-generation Copts more broadly), who are expected to transmit those values to their children.

Modeled on similar publications and texts by different Coptic leaders, such as Pope Shenouda III and the afore-mentioned Anba Moussa, texts which deal with various pressing social and moral issues are also found in the official magazine of the Coptic diocese of Milan, *Eccliseia*. These texts are part of the magazine’s section titled *Perché no?*, which was in recent issues changed to *Attualità* (Actualities). It is not explicitly noted who the authors of the texts are, but based on other texts and the overall setup

^{471.} An interesting example of the depiction of this type of struggles and challenges is the dramedy television series *Ramy* (2019 – 2022). The series centers on a first-generation millennial American Muslim of Egyptian descent living in New Jersey, who constantly navigates cultural and moral dilemmas in his daily life shaped by his ‘dual’ belonging to the local Egyptian community and the wider American society.

^{472.} Similar questions have been discussed in the case of Middle Eastern Christian communities in the UK, focusing chiefly on the issues of (equal) citizenship and inclusion in the host society. See Huner and McCallum Guiney, “The Quest for Equal Citizenship.”

of the magazine, it is possible that they are taken from other publications (such as those by Pope Shenouda) and then edited and translated into Italian. The main point of the texts is to draw attention to and underline why ‘we’ should say no (alluding to the title of the section) to the things discussed in the articles. Since its inception, the magazine has featured texts on atheism (four-part series), premarital relationships, homosexuality, abortion, alcohol, smoking, and pornography. It is important to note that the very need to publish such debates and explicate (and even justify) official Church stances regarding these contentious issues, illustrated by the “*perché*” (“why”) in the section’s name, shows that the Church (or in this case, the diocese) does not take the acceptance and retention of its teachings among church members as something given.

For instance, the first and the seventeenth issues of *Eccliseia* feature texts on homosexuality. In these texts, the authors present what the Scriptures say about homosexuality, basing their arguments on a traditional exegesis which fiercely and explicitly condemns same-sex relationships, but without providing the readers with any references as to from which authors these arguments were taken.⁴⁷³ The author underlines that “we do not despise the sinner, but the sin itself.”⁴⁷⁴ Interestingly, such an argumentation with identical wording was shared with me by a second-generation church member in Utrecht, during a conversation about various ongoing debates inside the Coptic Church.⁴⁷⁵ In these instances, the use of the collective “we” places the individual (reader, author, or any church member for that matter) within a larger group of people who (are supposed to) share beliefs and same core values, thus solidifying the sense of groupness. In addition to numerous Bible verses and references to Sodom and Gomorrah in *Eccliseia*’s texts on homosexuality, the texts contain psychologists’ views on the subject, aiming to provide a more nuanced and complete argument by including a scientific perspective.⁴⁷⁶

It is certainly not the first time that this and similarly contentious topics are addressed in church publications, however, it seems that the need to address them becomes even more salient in the diaspora, where more conservative values of many

^{473.} It is very likely that parts of the two articles in two *Eccliseia* issues were taken from Pope Shenouda’s book titled *Homosexuality and Ordination of Women*, first published in 1993. This book was translated into Italian and published by the Diocese of Rome under the title *Omosessualità e ordinazione delle donne* (year of publication unknown).

^{474.} Anonymous author, “Perché no? Omossessualità,” *Eccliseia*, no. 1 (2018): 32. Emphasis added.

^{475.} Personal communication with a second-generation church member in the Netherlands, on September 23, 2022, in Utrecht.

^{476.} Anonymous author, “Perché no? Omossessualità,” *Eccliseia*, no. 1 (2018): 32-35. It is not clear, however, which sources and experts were considered in this text.

Copts are suddenly tested in more liberal environments. In fact, it has been shown that acceptance of homosexuality has served in some Western countries as a political tool to promote a stronger and more lenient integration of immigrants and as a ‘test’ of their loyalty and belonging in host societies. Stefan Dudink shows how, starting in the 1990s, homosexuality became a key component in the critique of multiculturalism and “consociational democracy” of the Dutch political culture, which, according to their critics, had prevented the Dutch people to defend their cultural and moral values in the midst of immigration. This way, homosexuality became a metonym of moral soundness and transparency that sought to highlight and prove the incompatibility of ‘Dutch’ and ‘immigrant,’ particularly Muslim, norms and values.⁴⁷⁷ Consequently, in the Netherlands, and to a lesser extent in Italy too, the emphasis on modern, secular morality based on the acceptance of homosexuality, gender equality, sexual liberties, and the separation of church and state has served to forge and shape public political discourses of inclusion and exclusion, primarily surrounding the issue of immigration.

In such political and social cultures, the Coptic churches in the Netherlands and Italy have, therefore, often felt an even stronger need to address issues like homosexuality in relation to Church teachings, creating a boundary between the Coptic community and the moral values of the ‘outside’ majority culture, ultimately redefining official Church teachings and negotiating belonging of its members in the host society (this issue is further discussed in the following chapter). Although homosexuality does not feature as the principal topic in any of the studied issues of *al-Tariq* published between 2010 and 2023, the topic was addressed in various youth meetings across the diocese.⁴⁷⁸ While it is not clear whether the topic was discussed in earlier issues (or those not available to me), the possible absence of the topic might point to hesitancy to write about such a contentious issue in the official diocesan periodical, especially considering the church’s perceived need for integration. This illustrates that while diasporic churches may feel a compelling need to address contentious

^{477.} See Stefan Dudink, “A queer nodal point: Homosexuality in Dutch debates on Islam and multiculturalism,” *Sexualities* 20, no. 1-2 (2017): 3-23.

^{478.} This was told to me during different personal communications with several second-generation church members during my fieldwork in Sunday schools between September and December 2022. In addition, during an ecumenical encounter between the Catholic church in ‘s-Hertogenbosch and the Coptic Church in Eindhoven in 2001, Father Youssef, the main priest of the Eindhoven parish, mentioned that the diocese organizes large youth meetings where a bishop discusses issues like homosexuality or drugs with young church members. Kees J.G. van Hasselt, “Koptisch-orthodoxe gemeenschap in Eindhoven wil contact met katholieken,” accessed June 12, 2024, https://www.koptischekerkeindhoven.nl/Hooftnieuws/Koptisch_orthodoxe.htm.

issues, engaging in such discussions publicly rather than behind closed doors presents significant challenges.

Considering the Church's official position on various social issues, it is not surprising that such texts in both *Eccliseia* and *al-Tariq* follow the mainstream lines of argumentation, shared by most of the Coptic leadership. During my field trip to Egypt in early 2022, in a conversation with a highly-educated Coptic Orthodox priest serving in Cairo, I was informed that such discussions are problematic and indeed contentious within the Church. The priest criticized the tendency of many priests, as well as lay Copts, to solely rely on the Bible when addressing issues such as homosexuality, calling the approach “too Protestant,” adding that, in many cases, those who heavily use the Bible for such purposes do not have required training to do so.⁴⁷⁹ Consequently, the priest considers current discussions on various social issues rather superficial and expressed the need to find new ways to discuss issues that increasingly occupy public spaces and resonate with many members of the community.⁴⁸⁰

Taking this line of thought into consideration (even though it possibly represents a minority within the Church), one might rethink the purpose of such texts in *Eccliseia* and *al-Tariq* and what their authors intend to achieve with them. As mentioned, these texts are meant to emphasize Church teachings regarding these controversial topics and certainly reflect what is being taught to the youth inside the church (e.g. in Sunday schools). However, in a lot of cases, the authors seem to take a distance from such social phenomena and approach them as external issues that do not (or at least hardly) affect the community. Thus, these topics are addressed rather normatively and symbolically, often without providing any practical explanations or advice for those who might have doubts or insecurities. Texts on abortion, homosexuality, atheism, or euthanasia, therefore, primarily serve as (official) church proclamations rather than discussions or deeper studies into these topics, allowing church leaders (who edit and/or write these texts) to proclaim and define what “we” (should) believe in.

Other examples of texts that deal with controversial moral debates and reflect discussions within broader circles (thus, not only in the Coptic Church) include texts on euthanasia in a 2012 issue of *al-Tariq* and in a 2020 issue of *Eccliseia*, on addiction in a 2017 issue of *al-Tariq*, and *Eccliseia*'s text on abortion, published in 2019. The texts

⁴⁷⁹. The heavy reliance on the Bible for strategies of argumentation around such contested issues is one of the prominent characteristics of Pope Shenouda's writings.

⁴⁸⁰. Personal communication with a Coptic Orthodox priest in Egypt, on February 10, 2022, in Cairo.

on euthanasia and addiction in *al-Tariq* were published in sections “Modern social topics from an Orthodox Christian perspective” and “Youth Corner” respectively. They are both texts originally published by the Coptic diocese of Los Angeles, Southern California, and Hawaii, published on the diocese’s official website in 2009.⁴⁸¹ Originally written in English, they were translated into Dutch by second-generation church members, and are thus meant for a transgenerational audience. The author of the texts takes a ‘light’ stance towards the contested subject, particularly in terms of writing style, at least compared to other texts on similar issues published in *al-Tariq*. In the text on euthanasia, the author offers both views on the subject, i.e. reasons and arguments by both supporters and opponents of this practice. Although the author does not explicitly mention the official stance of the Coptic Church on this issue, the arguments listed under why euthanasia is rejected by many groups include beliefs that “human life is a gift from God” and that “we leave the matter of the life and death of the sick, in faith and total submission to our Good Lord.”⁴⁸² Aimed at young people, the text on addiction combines biblical references with a scientific perspective to warn them about the consequences of drug use on faith and well-being. Additionally, the text underscores the central role of the church and faith in helping those in need to overcome their problem. As is the case with other texts in *al-Tariq* and *Eccliseia*, no sources (other than Bible verses) are provided to corroborate the argument.⁴⁸³

The inclusion of articles authored by clerical figures from other notable dioceses such as that of Los Angeles highlights a significant trend within the Coptic Church. The selection of these articles underscores a tacit recognition of these dioceses and their leaders as legitimate sources of doctrinal guidance and knowledge, understood as applicable in local, in this case Dutch and Italian, contexts. This strategic inclusion not only acknowledges clerical legitimacy, it also reinforces the transnational bonds among different diasporic churches and dioceses and promotes a more standardized and uniform production and transmission of knowledge across the global Coptic community.

Moreover, the central role played by clerical figures and church leadership in crafting these texts points to a broader institutional strategy. By regularly contributing to discussions on complex social and moral issues, these leaders assert their

^{481.} In the article on euthanasia in *al-Tariq* it is mentioned that the author is Bishop Serapion, although such information is missing in the original text on the diocese’s website.

^{482.} The Coptic diocese of Los Angeles, Southern California, and Hawaii, “Euthanasia,” accessed March 23, 2024, <https://www.lacopts.org/story/euthanasia/>.

^{483.} Anonymous author, “Verslaving - Een spiritueel perspectief,” translated by Michael Martijn, *al-Tariq* no. 1 (2017): 19-20. For the original article in English, see <https://www.lacopts.org/story/addiction-a-spiritual-perspective/>.

authority and actively shape the moral and social norms within their communities. This dynamic illustrates the church's integral role not only in guiding spiritual life but also in influencing broader social values and ethical standards. Through such publications, the church not only seeks to educate its members on contentious issues like euthanasia and addiction, but also firmly positions itself as a moral compass, navigating the challenges of modernity while adhering to its doctrinal roots. This active engagement in the production and dissemination of knowledge showcases the commitment of these churches to maintaining their relevance and authoritative voice in an ever-evolving world.

Another prominent topic that has generated various dilemmas and discussions within the Coptic Orthodox Church is the role of women in the church. These discussions have been held both inside the Church and in scholarly circles, now already for several decades.⁴⁸⁴ With an increased number of feminist discussions in the public sphere in recent years, which have addressed, among others, the issues of equality and the role of women in contemporary societies, the topic of women's role in the Church became inevitable within the transnational Coptic community. Many Copts in the diaspora, mainly women, have opened discussions and expressed the need to actively include women in various church practices, questioning at the same time the traditional gender roles and social dynamics within the church.⁴⁸⁵ This, in turn, led to sporadic reactions by various Coptic leaders across the globe who addressed the issue in many different ways. A recent example includes an article on the famous transnational Coptic website Saint Takla as part of a Q&A Arabic series. The text, entitled “You Christians do not give women their rights and consider them inferior to men,” was written in an apologetic style and aimed to respond to assumed societal accusations of maltreatment and discrimination of women in Christianity.⁴⁸⁶

^{484.} For more on contemporary Coptic women and their roles in the Coptic Church, see van Doorn-Harder, *Contemporary Coptic Nuns*; Armanios, “The ‘Virtuous Woman’;” and Lois Farag, “Beyond Their Gender: Contemporary Coptic Female Monasticism,” *Journal of World Christianity* 2, no. 1 (2009): 111-144. For the official Church leadership views on this issue, see the above-mentioned book by Pope Shenouda.

^{485.} Carolyn Ramzy's work on Coptic women, singing, and activism in North America represents the largest contribution to the research on Coptic women in *mahgar*. See for example, Carolyn Ramzy, “Repatriating an Egyptian Modernity; Transcriptions and the Rise of Coptic Women's Song Activism,” *Oxford Handbook of Musical Repatriation*, eds. Robert Lancefield, Bret Woods and Frank Gunderson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019): 403 – 419; and Idem, “Coptic Orthodox Feminism.”

^{486.} The text does not mention the Coptic Church or Coptic beliefs in particular, but rather speaks from a broader Christian perspective. Therefore, the article can be understood primarily as a reaction to secular views on the topic. For the whole text, see Father Salib Hakim, “Antum al-Masihyyun la Ta'tun al-Mar'a Huquqaha wa Ta'tabirunaha dun al-Rajul,” accessed June 12, 2024, <https://st-takla.org/books/fr-salaib-hakim/question-answer/woman.html>.

An example of a text discussing this topic is an article published in a 2019 issue of *al-Tariq* in the section “Close up view.” The article titled “*Dawr al-Mar’a fi al-Kanisa*” (The role of women in the church), written by Father Bavlos Said, an earlier mentioned local parish priest, discusses what is and what is not allowed for women in the church, based on the writings of St. Paul. The priest explains that, based on the examples in Scriptures, the Tradition can recognize a woman as a deaconess (*shammāsa*) or a church servant (*khādima*), as well as a prophetess (*nabiyya*). However, the author does not further explain what these terms mean in the contemporary Coptic Church. Besides permitted roles for women, the author lists a number of activities and duties that a woman cannot have in the church. According to the priest’s sources and his interpretation of Scriptures, mainly relying on the letters of St. Paul, women are not allowed to “talk,” “teach men” or “have power over them” in the church. Moreover, the priest underlines the fact that women cannot be ordained as priests. Quoting St. Paul, the priest writes that “women are supposed to be quiet, because they are not authorized to speak but to submit,” clarifying that the rule comes from “God’s commandments” which we received through the Apostles. The priest concludes the article by stating that women are still equal to men in the gifts of the Holy Spirit and God’s kingdom.⁴⁸⁷

Father Bavlos’s article reflects a conservative stance amidst global discussions on the evolving roles of women within the Coptic Church. Despite assertions that women cannot “talk in the church” for example through teaching or having leading roles in liturgical practices, in the Netherlands, women teach in Sunday schools and participate in non-liturgical choirs, for example by singing *tarānīm*. The controversy, then, extends to more prominent roles such as preaching or conducting the liturgy, with the worldwide Coptic Church showing reluctance toward such changes.

An anecdote from a second-generation Copt teaching in Sunday schools in Amsterdam highlights this issue; my interlocutor has shared that small girls occasionally ask their Sunday school teachers why they cannot sing in the liturgy like their male peers. In these situations, according to my interlocutor, it is important for girls to understand and learn about “the tradition” and why there is such a rule in the first place, emphasizing that this does not make them inferior to their male friends.⁴⁸⁸ Although there have been some discussions regarding introducing Coptic girls’ choirs, the topic is still considered controversial, unlike in the Syriac Orthodox

⁴⁸⁷. Father Bavlos Said, “*Dawr al-Mar’a fi al-Kanisa*”, *Majallat al-Tariq*, no. 2 (2019): 11.

⁴⁸⁸. Personal communication with a Sunday school teacher serving in the Coptic church in Amsterdam, on July 25, 2021, in Amsterdam.

Church in which this practice has been firmly established.⁴⁸⁹ Ultimately, the article in *al-Tariq* underscores the adherence of church leadership, both in Egypt and in *mahgar*, to traditional scriptural interpretations, marking a clear boundary against practices considered too innovative, such as women's ordination seen in some Protestant churches. Despite this, it reaffirms that women are equally valued in spiritual gifts and God's kingdom, as per church teachings.

The second type of texts shows a slightly different approach and style of writing, with clear guidance, advice and instructions given by the Church (particularly by the contributors in the two magazines) on different topics. Accordingly, topics in this type of texts follow the editors' and contributors' intentions to present the Diocese's views on certain issues, at the same time implicitly or explicitly providing the community with advice or guidance. Both *al-Tariq* and *Eccliseia* contain articles that fit into this description, however, differing considerably in topics, their style of writing and approach. Such texts, as well as the first type described above, have become widespread within Coptic publishing and often constitute a genre on its own, known as *mashūra* (advice, counseling, opinion), as mentioned earlier. While there is no clear consensus on what this genre comprises exactly, *kutub al-mashūra* ('advice books') usually deal with various social and moral matters, where the author, often a priest, provides their readers with advice, instructions and guidelines for various practices (related to marriage, interpersonal relationships, or even work) or even psychological help and a Christian kind of life coaching.⁴⁹⁰

Besides "lifting up the community's spirituality" (as described by one of the Coptic priests in the Netherlands) and preserving the tradition of the Church in Egypt, *al-Tariq* is intended as a publication that creates strong communal connectedness among its members, as well as between the Church and the faithful. Partly, this is

^{489.} See Susan Ashbrook Harvey, "Performance as Exegesis: Women's Liturgical Choirs in Syriac Tradition," in *Inquiries into Eastern Christian Worship: Selected Papers of the Second International Congress of the Society of Oriental Liturgy*, eds. Bert Groen, Steven Hawkes-Teeples and Stefanos Alexopoulos (Leuven, Paris, Walpole: Peeters, 2012), 47-64; and Sarah Bakker Kellogg, "Ritual sounds, political echoes: Vocal agency and the sensory cultures of secularism in the Dutch Syriac diaspora," *American Ethnologist* 42, no. 3 (August 2015): 431-445.

^{490.} Besides Pope Shenouda who developed and popularized this genre, another prominent example is Father Daoud Lamei who has become a popular figure in publishing simple books, booklets, and online blogs, often published in English, especially geared towards youth in which he provides advice and help regarding a large variety of daily life matters, such as marriage, relationships, overcoming negative feelings, finding peace in difficult times, suffering, to name a few. Father Daoud, a leading figure in Coptic missionary work in Africa and Asia, has also become popular outside of strictly Coptic circles. See for example Father Daoud's official website and the section on "Life teachings," <https://frdaoudlamei.blog/category/life-teachings/>.

achieved through numerous contributions written by the bishop and local parish priests who take on topics that deal with different aspects of every-day life, including family, interpersonal relationships, upbringing of children, and desired modes of behavior. Such texts often contain entries such as “Christian family,” “Christian upbringing,” “spiritual values,” “piety,” “modesty/decency,” and those of more negative connotations such as “deviation” or “profligacy.” These titles, with such word combinations (usually in Arabic) and the topics they discuss, are often used to define how a true Christian should live; for instance, how one should raise their children in a Christian way and what to pay special attention to, how one should dress, how to improve interpersonal relationships, what types of behavior are desired and accepted, and which habits are not.

Most of these texts are written in Arabic, thus their primary target audience are first-generation Copts (whose first language is Arabic). Furthermore, the choice to write and publish such texts in Arabic seems to match the suitability of writing about morals, ‘true’ values, and culture in this language and its capacity to properly convey the intended message which carries a heavy Egyptian Christian grounding. They appear mainly in three regular sections, namely in “The editor’s word,” authored by Bishop Anba Arseny, *Fikr Masihi*, authored by Father Youssef (serving in Eindhoven), and in *Khawatir*, a section with an unknown author. In “The editor’s word,” the bishop presents his views on different topics, ranging from various historical events (in Egypt and in the world), across different social and cultural phenomena, to topics specifically relevant for the Coptic community. A large part of these texts cover themes related to living ‘a true Christian life,’ by describing desirable and undesirable behaviors and practices. For example, the bishop writes about smoking, how to properly celebrate different Christian feasts, marriage and common causes for problems between spouses, about respect in a Christian family, or how Christian weddings differ from other ones. In the text on Christian and non-Christian weddings, the bishop explains that in non-Christian weddings, newlyweds are the center of the occasion, while in truly Christian weddings, Jesus is the core of the celebration and the union between a man and a woman.⁴⁹¹ In another text, the bishop warns of the dangers of smoking, calling it “the incense of the devil.”⁴⁹² With his authority and the important role he holds within the community, Anba Arseny’s words of advice and guidance certainly

^{491.} Bishop Anba Arseny, “Kayfa Yajib an Takhtalif Ḥafalat al-Zifaf fi al-Masihiyya ‘an ghayriha,” *Majallat al-Tariq* no. 1 (2018): 2.

^{492.} Idem, “Al-Tadkhin...Bukhur li-l-Shaytan,” *Majallat al-Tariq* no. 3 (2018): 2. Such argumentation and description illustrate a broader Egyptian cultural outlook on smoking. It is interesting to note that smoking is prohibited inside the premises of Coptic churches and monasteries in Egypt (thus, not only inside the buildings, but also within the entire complex), and it is frowned upon even in front of the church gates and entrances.

have a special weight to readers. Even if we assume that not many people actively read the magazine at home and seek for practical advice from the texts published in *al-Tariq*, the ideas presented in those texts reflect the moral sphere within the Diocese through its official discourses, which are created and propagated by its leaders, and communicated during sermons or personal communication with the faithful.

In the November-December 2019 issue of *al-Tariq*, the editors published a text under the title “*Malabis al-Hishma*” (“Decent/modest clothes”). The author opens the article with 1 Timothy 2:9, quoting “I want the women to dress modestly...”⁴⁹³ The anonymous article takes women’s dress requirements as its central topic. The author refers to St. Paul regarding requirements and instructions for women when it comes to their appearance and explains what “decent clothes” are and what they mean for the Church. The author clarifies that although there are certain requirements for women related to how they dress, “the Church does not determine precisely what we should wear...the matter is left to the believer’s feeling, his conscience and taste.”⁴⁹³ However, the author adds that “we have to understand that indecent behavior means profligacy, which causes lust.”⁴⁹⁴ Although the author does not explicitly mention women in this sentence, one might assume that such prescriptions are indeed directed at women, not only based on the beginning of the article, but, more broadly, on the basis of ascribed traditional gender roles in Egypt and in the Coptic Church more specifically, according to which Coptic women are directly linked with ideals of modesty, decency, and purity. Armanios analyzes the development and dissemination of such discourses on gender roles, specifically the role of women within the Coptic community in Egypt on the basis of popular writings of various Coptic clergymen. She discusses how Pope Shenouda’s writings, for instance, construe and depict an ideal modern Coptic woman as “virtuous” (*fāḍila*), and how this can be achieved through her role as a respectful, submissive wife, a mother, and by aspiring to resemble various female saintly figures venerated in the Coptic Church, for example St. Demiana, or even the most virtuous woman of all, St. Mary (although a rather unattainable ideal). Armanios reminds us that although these stances are certainly not shared by every clergyman in the Church, the discourse of a “virtuous woman” who depicts ideals of kindness, modesty, and virginity has been the prominent one in the contemporary Coptic community.⁴⁹⁵

⁴⁹³. The author uses masculine third person possessive pronoun (“his”) as a generic pronoun, thus the text is not exclusively addressing male readers.

⁴⁹⁴. Anonymous author, “*Malabis al-Hishma*,” *al-Tariq*, no. 6 (2019): 3-4. Translated from Arabic by the author.

⁴⁹⁵. Armanios, “The ‘Virtuous Woman’,” 110-127.

The author of the text in *al-Tariq* continues with more general remarks and explains that “the body is not to be revealed” and that “in our faith the body is a temple for the Holy Spirit.”⁴⁹⁶ This text is a prominent example of how editors outline the contours of various social (and moral) practices, prescribing what is considered as desirable behavior that fits within “the community’s faith,” while condemning what is seen as profligacy (*khalā‘a*).

Topics related to clothing and proper dress have also featured in *Eccliseia*. In a text titled “Do not conform to the pattern of this world” (taken from Romans 12:2), an unknown author discusses the relationship between physical appearance, body, and faith. The author provides Biblical arguments on the importance of looking “decently” (*in modo decoroso*) in relation to one’s faith and to respecting the Bible and its teachings. The author writes that “Being dressed decently means not wearing clothing that is excessively tight and which scandalizes others...” and that “the beauty of the children of God is internal, it is embellished by the virtues of calm, silence, obedience, etc.” In addition, the author makes an important remark that “decent and lawful clothing” is not only recommended for girls and women, but also for men.⁴⁹⁷

Discussions on dress and modesty within the Coptic communities in diaspora often echo those in Egypt, reflecting the cultural context and shared moral views upheld by the clergy in Egypt. A controversial episode exemplifying this occurred in 2012 when Bishop Bishoy of Damietta advised Coptic women to emulate the modesty of their “Muslim sisters,” suggesting attire that aligns more closely with conservative values. His comments, heavily influenced by the political climate of that period, incited significant dissent and unrest among many Coptic Egyptian women.⁴⁹⁸ Although this instance may appear specific and contentious, particularly due to the comparison with Muslim women, it underscores the intent of the church leadership to shape and influence the sartorial choices of their followers, particularly of women. This guidance aims to foster what is perceived as moral, desirable, and decent behavior, illustrating the ongoing engagement with issues of modesty and propriety.

^{496.} Anonymous author, “Malabis al-Hishma,” *al-Tariq*, no. 6, 3-4. Translated from Arabic by the author.

^{497.} Anonymous author, “Non conformatevi alla mentalità di questo secolo (Romani 12, 2),” *Eccliseia* September 2020, 33.

^{498.} See Mariz Tadros, The Guardian, “Egypt’s women have had enough of being told to cover up,” accessed March 23, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/may/29/egypt-women-cover-up-coptic>.

Al Arabiya News, “Coptic bishop advises women in Egypt to dress modestly like ‘Muslims and St. Mary’,” accessed March 23, 2024, <https://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/2F05%2F31%2F217718>.

Besides the social and moral debates in the *Perché no?/Attualità* section, the magazine of the Coptic community of Milan guides its young readers through texts in a section called *Il Buon Atleta* ("The good athlete"). This section offers texts and discussions on a different set of topics compared to those discussed above. The section has featured texts on instructions for success, how to transform oneself by renewing one's mind, spiritual battles, social media, the importance of being calm, among others. Unlike the texts in *Perché no?/Attualità*, the ones in "The good athlete" section do not deal with any contentious (or controversial) issues, which have led many church leaders (especially in the diaspora) to reaffirm and sometimes redefine their stances towards these various matters (such as abortion or euthanasia). This magazine's articles, by weaving biblical references into relatable discussions of everyday issues, aim to connect with young readers, fostering a deeper understanding of faith and its relevance in their lives. By combining everyday life with the spiritual, the authors of these texts, mostly unsigned, guide their readers towards achieving their goals, better understanding themselves or the world around them, at the same time enhancing their spirituality.

Titles of some of the texts in this category include "How to gain a charismatic character," "The desire for knowledge," "The seven habits for those who seek success," and "Marriage: the necessary maturation."⁴⁹⁹ Another instance is a text published in a 2018 issue of *Eccliseia* which deals with social media and influencers. The author writes about the true meaning of an influential person, explaining that "being an influential person means being strong to the point of being able to make changes in others without having any authority or official strength." The author adds that an influential person is someone who "knows who Christ is, that is, they know what Christianity is." They continue by relating an influential to a spiritual person, quoting Pope Shenouda's definition of what it means to be spiritual, who wrote that it is a person "whose spirit guides his body and the Holy Spirit guides his spirit." The author of the text stresses that "the charismatic or influential person does not allow themselves to submit to sins. He/she is an educated person and involved in society."⁵⁰⁰ In order to enhance the youth's spirituality and teach them about "true values," the authors use a subtle and simple style of writing which does not have a strong instructive voice. One might say that by describing a true spiritual or influential person as someone who knows Christ and Christianity, who is educated and is part of the society, the Church creates an image of an ideal member of the community. With this type of texts which

⁴⁹⁹. Anonymous author, "Come conquistare un carattere carismatico," *Eccliseia*, October 2018, 32-35.

Anonymous author, "Desiderio della conoscenza," *Eccliseia*, May 2019, 24-25.

Anonymous author, "Le sette abitudini per chi cerca il successo," *Eccliseia*, November 2019, 32-33.

Anonymous author, "Il matrimonio: la maturazione necessaria," *Eccliseia*, February 2020, 34-35.

⁵⁰⁰. Anonymous author, "Essere Influencer," *Eccliseia*, September 2018, 28-31.

combine daily life with spiritual matters, accompanied by numerous Bible verses and quotes by important Church leaders, and by using current self-help jargon in the magazine, the Diocese of Milan shows young readers how Christianity can be a tool for life transformation and gaining control over their personal challenges.

Visions, goals, and use

Both *al-Tariq* and *Eccliseia* offer a diverse range of content, delving into history, theology, spirituality, and church traditions, often featuring texts that blend elements from these traditional genres. Essentially, both magazines aim to be comprehensive resources for their respective Coptic communities, catering to a variety of reader interests. However, their overall characters and approach differ significantly. This is largely due to the content, writing styles chosen by the editors and authors, languages, and their main target audiences.

Over time, *al-Tariq* has established itself as a magazine that fosters a strong sense of community. It reflects the spirit of the Dutch Coptic community in various ways. A dedicated section provides news from the Church in both Arabic and Dutch, highlighting important events and upcoming celebrations. Following major events, photos are included, showcasing graduations, visits from important Church figures (like Pope Shenouda's visit in 2010), and other milestones. The magazine actively encourages donations (*“periodeke giften”*) for ongoing projects, renovations, or future church expansions. Participating in such donations strengthens a sense of belonging and allows members to contribute to the community's achievements.

Further solidifying its communal character, *al-Tariq* features full-length articles (mostly in Arabic) about the Diocese itself, its history, and Coptic churches in the Netherlands. Clergy and laypeople alike contribute texts celebrating anniversaries, new church openings, or priest ordinations. These writings express pride in the community's growth, highlighting the journey from a single priest serving a small flock to a thriving Diocese with nine churches, a monastery, and plans for further expansion. The magazine's communal nature is further emphasized by regular contributions from parish priests (showing their photos and names) and a dedicated section featuring the Bishop's message in every issue. In general, these and similar texts feature a large number of words that relate to the local Dutch community and the Dutch Coptic diocese; for instance, geographical designations such as ‘the Netherlands’ (*Hūlandā*) and ‘Dutch’ (*Hūlandī*), or words and phrases like ‘the Diocese’ or ‘our Diocese’ (*al-ībārshiyya*), ‘our Church/churches’ (*kanīsatonā/kanā’isunā*), and

'the Bishop/our Bishop' (*al-usquf/usqufunā*), which with the use of the first person plural possessive pronoun ('our') help to strengthen the notion of communal life and the sense of togetherness among parishioners.

In contrast, *Eccliseia* lacks the same focus on community life. Though entirely in Italian and featuring a final page dedicated to Bishop Anba Kirolos and a recent photo of the current Bishop, Anba Antonio, there are few explicit references to the Diocese of Milan or the community itself within its content. Later issues introduced an "Eccliseia News" section, offering reflections on recent events and activities in local churches, sometimes accompanied by photos. Occasionally, the editors recommend books for readers. These efforts appear to be a symbolic attempt to strengthen the connection between the youth and the local Coptic diocese.

Aside from mentions of the two bishops and occasional local church references in the news section, most of *Eccliseia*'s content rarely mentions Italy, Milan, or names of parish priests. It focuses primarily on the Diocese's goal: educating and informing the youth about their Church and its traditions. This is often achieved through spiritual texts that can sometimes feel broad and more generically 'Christian.' This approach extends to social and moral issues. Unlike *al-Tariq*, *Eccliseia*'s editors and contributors typically avoid personal opinions or practical advice. Instead, they address these topics from a more distant perspective, relying heavily on Scriptures for support and even occasionally mentioning scientific references to justify the main argument.

These divergent approaches align with the underlying differences in how *al-Tariq* and *Eccliseia* were envisioned. Examining the format, content, and style of both magazines allows us to grasp their intended functions and how they are received within their respective communities. From a closer look, *al-Tariq* appears more attuned to particularly Coptic (or Egyptian) cultural norms. Its contributors, including Bishop Anba Arseny, seem more inclined to delve into and offer guidance on various social and moral issues from particularly 'Egyptian perspective,' reflecting the views of the Egyptian church on marital problems, dress code, and relations among family members. *Eccliseia* handles these topics more subtly and its contributors have developed more careful strategies and style of argumentation regarding various social and moral issues. While firmly condemning practices like premarital relationships or abortion, its authors avoid drawing on cultural or traditional reasons. Instead, they base their arguments solely on Scriptures and established doctrine.

Lastly, how are these magazines actually used in their respective communities? Despite being envisioned for home readership and being available in the churches,

both *al-Tariq* and *Eccliseia* appear to have a symbolic role rather than relying on extensive reading. While their editors and clergy encourage parishioners to read them, there's limited evidence of a substantial readership, particularly among the youth. However, *Eccliseia* does find some practical use in Sunday school classes. The act of having the magazines available in churches and their occasional use in religious education suggests a symbolic purpose. They represent the commitment of the dioceses to fostering spirituality and knowledge within their communities, even if their direct reach might be limited. According to the editor of *al-Tariq*, its ultimate goal is “the proclamation of God's word and kingdom to his children.”⁵⁰¹ The continued publication of these magazines, including the digitization of recent issues, underscores their significance as a channel for intended preservation of Coptic heritage and spirituality and a testament to fostering a sense of communal belonging.

Conclusion

Examining *al-Tariq* and *Eccliseia* reveals how the Dutch and Milanese Coptic communities navigate faith, tradition, and modernity in the diaspora. While *Eccliseia* adopts a broad Christian perspective targeting a younger Italian audience, *al-Tariq* connects more explicitly with Coptic Egyptian cultural heritage and social norms for a Dutch audience. This contrast reveals the inherent tension between maintaining a distinct Coptic Egyptian character and adapting to the local environment, a challenge faced by many diaspora communities. Yet, beneath these differences lies a shared purpose: to guide their communities in understanding and practicing their faith in a new land, with a strong focus on the youth.

Both magazines utilize history and shared moral values to foster a sense of belonging, acting as boundary markers through their emphasis on ‘unchanging tradition’ - a concept transmitted from the Egyptian Church that provides continuity for diasporic Copts. The fact that the majority of texts discussing social and moral issues are authored and/or edited by the clergy signals their principal role in addressing and shaping community members’ moral and social norms. Despite their limited readership, these publications play a crucial role in shaping community ethics, echoed in sermons, community events, and youth gatherings, thus resonating beyond their pages.

The magazines not only reflect but also shape the understanding of faith, tradition, and Church teachings within these communities, blending universal Christian

⁵⁰¹. Bishop Anba Arseny, *Zilveren Jubileum*, 22.

values with specific cultural norms from Egypt. *Al-Tariq*, resembling a communal chronicle, documents the Dutch Coptic journey, while *Eccliseia* serves more as an educational tool for young Italians, maintaining strong ties to the Coptic hierarchy. Both magazines symbolize the preservation of tradition in the diaspora, highlighting the complex layering of Coptic, Orthodox, Christian, and local ‘identities’ through various spatial and temporal references.

In conclusion, as vivid reflections of their communities, both *al-Tariq* and *Eccliseia* illustrate how Coptic Orthodox dioceses in the Netherlands and Milan navigate intra-communal developments and discussions at local and transnational levels. They are pivotal in defining what ‘Coptic tradition’ means and how it is transmitted, emphasizing the vision of the churches on the ongoing dialogue within these diasporic settings. Although their actual readership might be limited, the publishing of the two magazines has a strong symbolic meaning; they reflect how the two migrant churches see their communities, their heritage, their places within the host societies, as well as what topics and issues need to be addressed in order to maintain a continuous bond between the faithful and their Church.

Chapter 6.

Paving “the right way” and keeping
the youth

Introduction

During a Sunday morning visit to the Coptic church in The Hague in February 2020, I intended to become more familiar with the ways Coptic tradition is preserved and transmitted in mahgar. In a conversation with a senior member of the community, we talked about different church activities and practices, including the production of texts and teaching. When I asked him whether there are Sunday schools in his church, he affirmed with assurance: “Of course, otherwise there would be no need for a church!” During my subsequent ethnographic fieldwork among Coptic communities in the Netherlands and Italy between early 2020 and late 2022, I realized that children and youth lie at the heart of many of the churches’ projects and that committed socialization and education in the church are indeed seen as a prerequisite for the survival of a religious communal identity in the diaspora. It is precisely through Sunday school education and various socialization programs that Church leaders shape Coptic children and youth as the future of the community.

The Sunday School Movement, founded at the beginning of the twentieth century, transformed the relationship between the Church and its members, redefined communal identities, as well as the ways of looking at what constitutes Coptic tradition, and, more broadly, Coptic identity. During this period, youth started to be seen as the nucleus of the Coptic community who were to carry the reform of the Church. Children and youth continue to play a vital role in today’s Coptic Church, a role that arguably becomes even more salient in the lands of immigration. The central place children and youth hold in the Coptic Orthodox Church, as well as the views on the role of the Church in youth’s lives, is reflected in a well-known quote by Pope Shenouda III: “A Church without youth is a Church without a future,... [and] youth without a Church is youth without a future.”⁵⁰²

The chapter explores the role of religious upbringing of children and youth in the Coptic Orthodox communities in the Netherlands and northern Italy. It situates church upbringing more broadly within the constellation of migration, boundary making, and group maintenance in order to argue that church education and socialization programs in diaspora hold a central place in shaping a particular diasporic Coptic community, where church leaders create and negotiate between hard and more fluid group boundaries among its youngest members. This chapter enriches the limited research on Coptic Sunday schools in the diaspora, particularly by examining the materials used, the process of the production and transmission of

⁵⁰². Al-Anba Estefanos, "Kanisa bila Shabab Kanisa bila Mustaqbal 'Risala Hama min Niyafat al-Anba Estefanos li Kull al-Shabab' | Barnamij Shabab Hikaya," CTV Egypt, accessed December 8, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=62jLuWOeljQ>.

knowledge, and how the system of church upbringing shapes senses of belonging among Coptic children and youth. More broadly, the chapter seeks to explore the repurposed role of Sunday schools in *mahgar*. The two central questions of this chapter are: how do Coptic churches in the Netherlands and Italy engage with and retain their youth as active participants within the church? And what role(s) do different church members play in this process?⁵⁰³ In this, I return to several other questions I discussed in the introduction: what kind of boundary making is at play in the process of maintenance of communal bonds? What mechanisms and tools do the churches utilize to achieve a sense of groupness, and what kinds of bonds are created as a consequence of this process?

Data collection for this chapter was primarily conducted through three modes of research, namely participant observation among the Coptic communities in the Netherlands and Italy, semi-structured interviews and informal conversations with the clergy and lay members of the communities (particularly in churches in Milan and Utrecht), and close reading of various materials used in Sunday school education and socialization programs.

Sunday school movement and church *khidma*

The Sunday school movement of the Coptic Orthodox Church is usually considered as the heart of the church revival of the twentieth century.⁵⁰⁴ The founder of the Coptic Sunday schools was Habib Girgis (1876-1951), a layman and the dean of the Coptic Orthodox Seminary. Girgis' vision for reform resulted in a movement that became an integral part of the tradition of the Coptic Church in Egypt, which later on continued to evolve in the Coptic *mahgar* and today represents an inseparable element of the religious lives and practices of many Copts around the world. The target of this vision was the entire Coptic community, with children and youth at its center.

Around 1900, Habib Girgis initiated informal Bible reading meetings for Coptic children at the Virgin Mary church in Cairo's Fagalla district. His biggest aims were to counter Western missionary influence and provide an Orthodox alternative to missionary schools, as well as to provide much needed Christian education to Coptic children.⁵⁰⁵ The Coptic Sunday Schools sought to cultivate children's love for the

⁵⁰³. For example, in terms of generational differences and the clerical/lay status.

⁵⁰⁴. Sedra, *From Mission to Modernity*, 8.

⁵⁰⁵. Henderson, “The Egyptian Coptic Christians,” 157-158.

Al-Anba Martirus, *Nur Ashraq fi al-Zulma: al-Qiddis al-'Azim al-Arshidyakun Habib Jirjis* (Cairo: Printing house Hany Samir, 2014), 34.

Bible, their Church, their faith, and the society. Girgis emphasized the importance of attending Sunday liturgy and weekly lessons, along with teaching Christian virtues and instilling a “true Christian spirit.” The Sunday schools incorporated volunteer work, such as visiting the sick and assisting the poor, as well as spiritual and social activities like retreats in the monasteries. The goal was to raise Coptic children as active members of the Church, deeply connected to their faith and community in their daily lives.⁵⁰⁶ Girgis’ vision, thus, played a crucial role in delineating the principles of community belonging and helped define what it meant to be a devout Copt.

Over time, Sunday schools expanded, and by the late 1940s, around 42,000 students followed a universal curriculum developed by Girgis.⁵⁰⁷ The reform movement gained further momentum as individual churches in Cairo emerged as its leaders, who understood the purpose and the nature of the reform differently from one another. This led to the development of various aspects of church service, encompassing spirituality, pedagogy, and social engagement, reflecting an evolving perception of the Church’s role in society and believers’ lives. A fundamental role in disseminating the vision and principles of the Sunday schools and church service was played by St. Anthony church in Shubra, Cairo, led by the charismatic Nazir Gayed, later to be Pope Shenouda III.⁵⁰⁸ The Sunday school movement then became fully institutionalized and the Church adopted the role of an all-embracing body, acting as a major provider of spiritual, social, and even economic support for many believers (especially for youth).⁵⁰⁹ The Church attracted a growing number of followers through its newly established practice of church service (*khidma*), which yielded a new intergenerational order with committed, authorized adult laity as church servants or helpers (*khuddām*) and new generations who are to be served (*makhdūmīn*).⁵¹⁰

Church service and the involvement of children and youth in church life were enhanced by the expansion of activities and practices that had the youngest members of the community at their core and as their main target. These activities started to penetrate into the personal lives of many young Copts, and from the 1960s, Coptic youth were increasingly mobilized into the Church institution. One such example is

^{506.} Ibid., 35-37.

Father Tadros Malaty, *Introduction to the Coptic Orthodox Church* (Alexandria: St. George’s Coptic Orthodox Church, 1993), 196.

^{507.} Mereet Hany Adly, “Internal Reformation Within the Contemporary Coptic Imagined Community: The Sunday School Movement and Mechanisms of Minority Survival,” *Journal of Religious and Theological Information* 18, no. 2-3 (2019): 75-91.

^{508.} See Reiss, *Erneuerung in der Koptisch-Orthodoxen Kirche*; Hasan, *Christians versus Muslims in Modern Egypt*; and Carolyn Ramzy, “The Performative Politics of (Dis)Engagement.”

^{509.} Hasan, *Christians versus Muslims in Modern Egypt*, 77-87.

^{510.} Stene, “Belonging to the Church Community,” 148.

the practice of *iftiqād*, which became an institutionalized practice of personal visits by deacons, servants, or priests to church members’ homes as an act of support for the parish member. Other examples of additional activities that were organized by the Church include regular Bible study meetings (initiated and later institutionalized by Pope Shenouda III), spiritual trips to monasteries (known as *bayt al-khilwa*), charitable activities and trips to remote areas where young Copts had the opportunity to help community members in need. The institutionalization of the Sunday schools movement and centralization of youth activities were brought to the next level with the establishment of the General Bishopric of Youth in 1980, with Bishop Anba Moussa as its leader.⁵¹¹

Youth activities as well as everyday needs of young Copts, although initially outside of strict clerical control, became institutionally bound to the clerical hierarchy. According to Dina El-Khawaga, “clericalization” of youth activities was conducted as a defense against potential external ‘dangers’ that could negatively affect Coptic youth, and as a strategy to prevent, minimize and control any type of opposition or resistance (to the institutional and hierarchical order) by zealous young Copts. Either way, the process of clericalization of youth and their activities was seen as a means to defend and protect the community and its boundaries. The central place Coptic children and youth hold in these processes is further reflected in the emergence and proliferation of a new field of preaching and writing which is primarily directed towards the youngest members of the Church. These sermons and publications often address concerns of children and youth, either taking them as their main audience or meant for *khuddām*, clergy or parents who are to show them “the right path.”⁵¹²

Coptic church upbringing – internal boundaries and communal roles

The Sunday school education in Coptic diaspora, including other programs and activities geared towards children and youth, are seen as a continuation of the tradition established in Egypt, as briefly described above.⁵¹³ When the first migrants from Egypt established church parishes in their new countries, they also made sure

^{511.} Hasan, *Christians versus Muslims in Modern Egypt*, 184-186.

^{512.} El-Khawaga, “The Laity as the Heart of the Coptic Clerical Reform,” 142-165.

^{513.} Sunday school education is officially called “Church upbringing” (*al-tarbiyya al-kanasiyya*). However, colloquially the term Sunday schools (for example, in Arabic *Madāris al-Aḥad* or in Dutch *Zondagscholen*) is still predominantly used within the communities, to which I will adhere in my writing. I will use *al-tarbiyya al-kanasiyya* when referring to the broader system of educational and social activities geared towards children and youth.

to provide Sunday school education to the youngest members of the community, sometimes seen as a “communal duty.” Although many migrant Coptic churches face numerous practical and technical challenges with regard to the organization of their *tarbiyya kanasiyya*, Sunday schools have become an indispensable element of the transnational Coptic Orthodox Church.

Throughout his patriarchate, Pope Shenouda III expressed his enthusiasm and concern about the issues of youth in *mahgar*. According to the pope, one of the main reasons the Church established Coptic schools (i.e. Sunday schools) in diaspora was to raise and teach the children of Coptic immigrants about “our moral values, traditions, and Church principles from a young age.”⁵¹⁴ In addition, various youth conferences organized by diaspora churches have played a strong educational role and are meant to discuss challenges and issues the Coptic youth deal with in their daily lives. Although such conferences are held in Egypt too, initiated by Bishop Anba Moussa in 2000, it is clear that those in *mahgar* acquire a new, repurposed role in the eyes of the Church leadership: according to Pope Shenouda, the Church needs to make a great effort to protect new generations from any dogmatic or moral deviation amid “strange currents present in Western countries.”⁵¹⁵ Being wary of a potential negative influence of these “currents” on youth in *mahgar* and, more broadly, of them losing their distinctive Egyptian and Coptic ‘identity,’ the pope asserted that “if we leave them without service and care, they will dissolve completely within the Western societies.”⁵¹⁶

According to Coptic priests in the Netherlands and northern Italy, as well as many other lay members of the community, children and youth, or more precisely the second and third generations, lie at the heart of many church activities and practices. A priest serving in a large Coptic parish in the Netherlands has referred to Coptic children and youth as “the future of the [Coptic] Church and of the whole Coptic community in the Netherlands,” and that is why “the main focus of the church has to be educating the youth and keeping them connected to their church.”⁵¹⁷ Although the majority of church members were born in Egypt, church leaders underline their primary focus on serving second-generation Copts born in the Netherlands, thus giving them “constant care.”⁵¹⁸

^{514.} Al-Banna, *al-Aqbat fi Misr wa-l-Mahjar*, 183. Translated from Arabic by the author.

^{515.} Ibid., 168. Translated from Arabic by the author.

^{516.} Ibid., 179. Translated from Arabic by the author.

^{517.} Personal communication with a Coptic priest in the Netherlands, February 26, 2020.

^{518.} Bishop Anba Arseny, *Zilveren Jubileum*, 5.

A priest serving a Coptic parish near Milan admitted that the questions and issues revolving around youth and their effective integration into the church have occupied a great amount of time and energy of church leaders. In fact, the Diocese of Milan has established a separate “office” dedicated particularly to the activities and questions related to children and youth, headed by a priest who was raised in Italy. During a conversation with Father Daoud Lamei, a high profile and well known Coptic priest from Cairo, I was told that the Coptic Church in Egypt is also highly invested in how to adequately approach the youth and adapt this approach to their needs. However, according to this priest, Coptic churches in *mahgar* are additionally at risk since their youth is exposed to an environment and values that might be incompatible with the Church’s teachings. Father Daoud, however, took pride in the fact that the Coptic Church in Egypt and in the diaspora has been successful in attracting and keeping many young people inside the church (compared to many other denominations), a sentiment shared with me multiple times by various members of the Dutch and north Italian Coptic communities.⁵¹⁹

According to Bishoy, a second-generation Sunday school teacher in the Coptic church in Utrecht, one of the main goals of Sunday schools is to teach children from an early age the principles of the Orthodox faith.⁵²⁰ This stance was shared by Marina, a Sunday school servant in a Coptic church in Milan, who explained that Sunday schools are supposed to transmit the faith to the children. She added that other principal goals are to “to maintain the link with the church, its tradition and history,... and also to safeguard the faith from external ... danger, dangers in general.”⁵²¹ Although she did not specify what she meant by “dangers,” later in our conversation Marina mentioned potential negative effects of the “outside” society, such as values in contrast with more traditional Christian teachings, on young Copts’ Orthodox Christian upbringing and socialization. Hence, one can notice a similar line of thought between Marina and Pope Shenouda when it comes to the “protection” of Coptic children and youth.

Furthermore, Abanoub, the son of a priest and a second-generation Coptic Sunday school servant in a church in Milan, clarified that the main goal of Sunday schools is in fact the goal of the Church as a whole – “to make the kids and children closer to God [as much] as possible.”⁵²² The importance of creating and fostering a (personal) connection with God was also underlined by Bishoy and another Sunday school

^{519.} Personal communication with Father Daoud Lamei, February 8, 2022.

^{520.} The names of all interviewees are pseudonymized.

Interview with Bishoy, a Sunday school teacher in Utrecht, December 10, 2022.

^{521.} Interview with Marina, a Sunday school teacher in Milan, March 9, 2023.

^{522.} Interview with Abanoub, a Sunday school teacher in Milan, December 22, 2022.

teacher from the same parish.⁵²³ Therefore, the two most significant goals of the church upbringing in these two churches, which are certainly related to the concerns of the broader Coptic Orthodox in diaspora, seem to be strengthening children's faith and connection with God, and teaching them principles seen as a protection from potential negative influxes in host societies. In addition, uniquely to the *mahgar* context, 'migrant Sunday schools' become places for cultivating ties to Egypt and its Christian heritage among second- and third-generation Copts. These goals and visions are clearly reflected in the content of the Sunday school education and other youth upbringing activities, as well as in the ways these are executed, as will be further discussed below.

On a more practical level, all Sunday schools share a similar structure and organization, which might vary depending on the size of the parish and sometimes on personal preferences of church leaders. Students are divided into groups based on their age, reflecting the need for different approach, content, and education objectives for each age. In most cases, the youngest groups in Sunday schools are children in kindergarten, known as *ḥaḍāna* in Arabic, about three-four years old, whereas the oldest are students in their late teenage years. In his book on how to relate to children geared towards church leaders, servants, and parents, Pope Shenouda underlines the importance of integrating small children into the community and building a strong foundation from an early age, emphasizing the importance of what is "imprinted" in children's minds for the rest of their lives. The pope insists that "[b]ecause the child is the first cell of the society and the church, if we gain him, we win an entire generation, and if we lose him we lose the future of the generation we live in, and consequent loss of the other generations."⁵²⁴ Therefore, as Stene has noted, Sunday schools represent a realm through which Coptic children are drawn into the community.⁵²⁵

From early childhood, children are taught by their parents, priests, and church servants about the importance of regular attendance and participation in Sunday schools, as part of an active effort to socialize the youngest members of the community into church life. The practice of *iftiqād* is largely followed today in Coptic communities in the Netherlands and Italy, and it is done both by priests and Sunday school servants. Although many churches do not use the strictest means for monitoring children's attendance used in the early stages of the Sunday school movement, servants nevertheless follow their students' attendance through simple registers and know which child 'lags behind' in Sunday schools, and thus needs

^{523.} Interview with Kyrillos, a Sunday school teacher in Utrecht, December 13, 2022.

^{524.} Pope Shenouda III, *How to Relate to Children* (Sydney: Coptic Orthodox Patriarchate, 1995), 8.

^{525.} Stene, "Belonging to the Church Community," 141.

special attention. If a child stops attending the liturgy or Sunday school classes, the servant usually tries to get in touch with the student or their parents before visiting their house.

When discussing the practice of *iftiqād*, Abanoub admitted: “We don’t want to lose them [the children].” When someone is absent from church or Sunday school, the teachers or priests initially reach out with a message to the children and then to their parents to inquire if everything is alright. However, my interlocutor emphasized that they respect privacy and would not visit someone’s home without permission.⁵²⁶ A Sunday school teacher from Amsterdam shared similar views. He explained that although they cannot force any child (or any other member for that matter) to regularly attend liturgies and Sunday school classes, teachers and priests primarily aim to find out if there are any issues and offer support and help, in order to ensure the child’s active participation in church life.⁵²⁷ In the words of a Coptic priest in the Netherlands, one of the main principles of the Coptic Church is that it should “go for” its members and not to wait for them to come, but to reach them actively, so that the (young) Copts can remain actively connected with their identity, culture and heritage.⁵²⁸ *Iftiqād*, therefore, serves as one of the tools for paying additional attention to children and youth (and their parents) who might face problems or show signs of disinterest in the church, ultimately seeking to prevent losing a member of the community.

Both in the Netherlands and Italy, reflecting the practice in Egypt, students graduate from Sunday schools and enter the “preparation to become servants” (*‘i’ād al-khuddām*) and serve their younger ‘church mates’ (*‘makhdūmīn*). Although classes for the preparation for *khidma* are not obligatory, many young Copts attend them and feel enthusiastic about the opportunity to contribute to the transmission of Church tradition to younger generations. By actively involving them in the upbringing and education of children, church leaders offer second-generation Copts not only the chance to participate in transmitting church teachings but also help them take pride in their community membership, thereby fostering its growth.

Such enthusiasm was expressed, for instance, by a teenage girl in the Utrecht parish who at the time of our conversation was attending the preparation classes. She stressed that the preparation for service is not mandatory, but she felt that “it is good to do it.” She explained: “I want to teach little kids and give them something

⁵²⁶. Personal communication with Abanoub, November 5, 2021.

⁵²⁷. Personal communication with a second-generation Sunday school teacher in Amsterdam, February 21, 2020.

⁵²⁸. Personal communication with a Coptic priest in the Netherlands, February 26, 2020.

what I was given when I was a kid.” Although she could leave the church after the liturgy and enjoy her free time “like most of [her] peers who are not Copts,” she feels it is her “duty” to serve the church or, more precisely, its youngest members, thus signaling their key role in the community.⁵²⁹ These views reveal the recognition of the importance and need for continuity, which is twofold – continuity of traditions and practices from the Coptic Church in Egypt, and continuity (or survival) of the community itself. The youth, once being served by their older peers, now embrace the responsibility and an active role in securing the future of their community.

It is useful to consult Barth's distinction between (self-)ascription and performance in the status (or ‘group identity’) to better understand how practices such as church *khidma*, regular Sunday school attendance, and *iftiqād* shape group membership and boundaries at the internal level. Although being a member of the Coptic community or the Coptic Church is fundamentally based on family origin and baptism, and not necessarily contingent on specific performative acts, engaging actively in these roles is crucial for realizing membership. While regular attendance at Sunday liturgy, active participation in Sunday schools, and preparation for church *khidma* are not mandatory for membership in a church parish, the Coptic Church, and the Coptic community at large, these performative practices establish a symbolic boundary of belonging. Following Brubaker's and Cooper's theory, besides the elements of commonality (origin and baptism), regular attendance, active participation in parish practices, and *khidma* then become the basis for a stronger connectedness among members and thus contribute to the sense of groupness and belonging to the community. These practices delineate who is considered a ‘devout’ or ‘active’ Coptic believer within the church. Furthermore, in predominantly or increasingly secular states such as the Netherlands and Italy, these practices serve as public, everyday affirmations of one's faith and religious affiliation. Thus, they not only reinforce internal community bonds (for example, between *khuddām* and *makhdūmīn*, or clergy and lay members more broadly), but also mark a distinct separation from the secular mainstream, accentuating an important ‘identity marker’ of young Copts vis-a-vis their peers in the migration context.⁵³⁰

As mentioned earlier, the church upbringing system does not include only Sunday school education, but extends to incorporate many other religious and social activities for the younger generations. They involve children and youth of different ages and

^{529.} Personal communication with a second-generation church member in Utrecht, October 23, 2022.

^{530.} For more on discussions and narratives on what and who constitutes a ‘good Copt,’ see, e.g., Ibrahim, *Identity, Marginalisation, Activism, and Victimhood in Egypt*; and Haddad and Donovan, “Good Copt, Bad Copt.”

are usually held outside of the main part of the church “schedule” (for example in the evenings). They are generally meant to bring children or youth together and vary in the extent to which they involve and have religious practices at their core. The church actively organizes a variety of youth activities, reflecting its commitment to keeping young members engaged and attentive to their needs. These activities include youth meetings, Bible study groups, spiritual days (commonly known by their Arabic name as *ayyām rūḥiyya*), choirs, different types of trips, sports activities and competitions, summer and Christmas camps, and youth conferences. Although these activities differ in their subject matter and nature, ranging from ‘strictly’ religious to more secular, they all are meant to socialize the children and youth into church life and actively include them in its institutional body. Through diverse youth-oriented activities, the Church ultimately seeks to achieve one of its core goals - instilling Christian teachings and transmitting “the correct faith” to the second generation.⁵³¹

By consulting the official website of the diocese of the Netherlands, we get a better insight into what the Friday evening youth meetings in different Coptic churches across the country are meant to achieve. The page about youth meetings in Utrecht mentions that one of the main aims of these meetings is “growing together towards God, becoming stronger in faith, learning from each other and creating unity.”⁵³² The church in The Hague writes that the main idea of youth meetings is “for young people, by young people” (resembling the motto of *Eccliseia* in Milan), who are “united by a common love for Christ.”⁵³³ The Amsterdam parish emphasizes that youth meetings have a strong social aspect, besides their educational purpose, explaining that “we undertake many activities together and have a close-knit group within the Church.”⁵³⁴ The team of the parish in Leidschendam describes the main goal of youth meetings to be discussing “issues about faith together. By learning from each other, we want to grow spiritually in our lives,” and the members of the Eindhoven parish write that after the lesson, “we close together with a prayer before starting the activities.”⁵³⁵ As we

^{531.} Bishop Anba Arseny, *Zilveren Jubileum*, 17.

^{532.} Koptisch Orthodox Bisdome Nederland, “Vrijdagbijeekomst Koptische Jongeren Utrecht,” accessed March 19, 2024, <https://www.koptischekerk.nl/vrijdagbijeekomst/vrijdagbijeekomst-koptische-jongeren-utrecht/>

^{533.} Koptisch Orthodox Bisdome Nederland, “Vrijdagbijeekomst Koptische Jongeren Den Haag,” accessed March 19, 2024, <https://www.koptischekerk.nl/vrijdagbijeekomst/vrijdagbijeekomst-koptische-jongeren-den-haag/>

^{534.} Koptisch Orthodox Bisdome Nederland, “Vrijdagbijeekomst Koptische Jongeren Amsterdam,” accessed March 19, 2024, <https://www.koptischekerk.nl/vrijdagbijeekomst/vrijdagbijeekomst-koptische-jongeren-amsterdam/>.

^{535.} Koptisch Orthodox Bisdome Nederland, “Vrijdagbijeekomst Koptische Jongeren Leidschendam,” accessed March 19, 2024, <https://www.koptischekerk.nl/vrijdagbijeekomst/vrijdagbijeekomst-koptische-jongeren-leidschendam/>; “Vrijdagbijeekomst Koptische Jongeren Eindhoven,” accessed March 19, 2024, <https://www.koptischekerk.nl/vrijdagbijeekomst/vrijdagbijeekomst-koptische-jongeren-eindhoven/>.

see, such descriptions contain a large number of words and phrases that emphasize the communal and group character of these gatherings, and of the religious practice more broadly. These include “together” (*samen*), joint/jointly (*gezamenlijk*), “we/our” (*we/onze*), “common” (*gemeenschappelijk*), “unity” (*eenheid*), and “from/with each other” (*van/met elkaar*).

This way, a strong sense of groupness is forged among young Copts, within one parish or their diocese more broadly, by encouraging them to participate in an array of group activities, which emphasize their group characteristics, ultimately creating a sense of “we-ness” centered around the Church. Ross has argued that collectivity, or “we-feeling,” reaches a higher degree of social-border definition, what she calls an *intensive contact*, when there is a high proportion of the various *kinds* of contacts and interactions in which individuals engage.⁵³⁶ In general, these various types of activities and practices which fall under the wider programs of *al-tarbiyya al-kanasiyya* serve to organize and shape a great deal of social life of Coptic children and youth in the Netherlands and Italy (especially in the Diocese of Milan, mainly due to different practical and geographical reasons, as discussed in Chapter 4), ultimately serving to create a “thick” sense of group belonging (or “thick identity”) to their communities.

Content, curricula, and materials

The general thematic composition of the Coptic church upbringing in diaspora, which also applies to Egypt more broadly, reflects the ideas about the main goals of this upbringing and covers a wide range of topics and different types of activities understood to be the most effective means to achieve those goals. On the whole, Coptic church upbringing programs incorporate two principal aspects of education: first, the actual instruction, training, and transmission of information and knowledge (*ta’līm*), which also includes the transmission of and instilling “correct values” among children, and second, instruction on the importance of religious practice and participation in the liturgy, which relates more broadly to the morally and socially right conduct, both inside and outside the church parameters (*tarbiyya*). Linda Herrera argues that modern (public) education in Egypt came to embody both *ta’līm* and *tarbiyya* in its domains, both in secularized and Islamic forms, and this aspect has certainly influenced the approach to education in the Coptic Church as well.⁵³⁷

^{536.} Jennie-Keith Ross et al., “Social Borders: Definitions of Diversity [and Comments and Reply],” *Current Anthropology* 16, no. 1 (1975): 54.

^{537.} Linda Herrera, *Educating Egypt: Civic Values and Ideological Struggles* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2022), 2-4.

The main themes that are discussed in different church upbringing programs include Bible study, history of Christianity and the Coptic Church in particular, saints' lives, church dogma and Christian teachings, and ethics and discipline. Outside of the Sunday schools in their narrowest sense, *khuddām* also teach children hymn lessons primarily in Coptic (sometimes also in Dutch/Italian in order for children to grasp their meanings better), often for boys who have roles as deacons in the liturgy, as well as basic Arabic and/or Coptic language lessons. It is often the case that during lessons or other church activities, students have the opportunity to learn about Egypt, its geography, everyday culture (e.g. Egyptian cuisine) and particularly its contemporary Christian heritage (for instance, learning *tarānīm*). This can be seen as a strategy to create and strengthen a particular bond with Egypt as an abiding reminder of young Copts' belonging – Egypt is the birthplace of most of their family members, as well as of the Church to which they belong. According to the earlier mentioned senior clergyman in the Netherlands, the two main reasons for providing Arabic lessons to second- and third-generation Copts are a better and easier communication with their family members in Egypt and establishing a stronger connection with the “Mother Church” (*al-Kanīsa al-Umm*) in Egypt, both symbolically and because the largest part of the Coptic Church heritage is written in Arabic.⁵³⁸

The content and the selection of topics and themes covered across different church upbringing activities is, therefore, broad and extensive. Due to various practical reasons and contextual circumstances, adaptations and changes in the church upbringing and the overall communal practices have taken place in diasporic Coptic churches. As discussed in the previous chapters, liturgy, traditional hymns (*alḥān*) and books have largely been translated from Arabic and Coptic into Dutch/Italian in order to cater to the needs of the second and third generations born outside of Egypt. Many of my informants, both priests and Sunday school teachers, have shared that such adaptations, i.e. primarily language and form related, are of secondary importance and thus need to be made in order to appeal to the youngest members of the community. This has led to divergent attitudes towards the importance of teaching Arabic and Coptic in the church upbringing programs, where some members deem language classes essential for maintaining the connection with the ‘homeland’ heritage (largely first-generation migrants), while some other church members do not believe this should be one of the priorities. At the same time the primacy of teaching Orthodox Christian morals dogma has been affirmed, thus giving priority to the “unchangeable elements” of Coptic Orthodox traditions (i.e. Church teachings) over more “cultural” or “national” elements (such as language), as described by some of my interlocutors. As Barth suggests, paying attention to the contextual

⁵³⁸. Interview with a senior Coptic clergy member in the Netherlands, December 6, 2020, online.

differences, or *ecologic variations*, caused here by migration, allows us to see ‘group identity’ markers not as a sum of objective, inherent differences, but as features that the actors themselves *choose* and *regard* as significant. Therefore, in order to achieve church upbringing in a diasporic context and keep the children and youth inside, church leaders in the Netherlands and northern Italy engage in a boundary making process in which certain group features are deemed as more effective and relevant for achieving such goals and thus become “emblems of differences.”⁵³⁹

In the diverse setting of European Coptic diasporas, challenges and tensions arise regarding which elements of tradition and group markers are deemed more significant and thus become “emblems of difference” for future generations. This debate often centers on the prioritization between broader Christian/Orthodox values and more specific Coptic/Egyptian norms. For instance, in some Roman diocese parishes, senior first-generation priests emphasize Arabic and Egyptian cultural education. In contrast, Milanese parishes, often led by younger priests raised in Italy, tend to adopt a more general Christian/Orthodox approach, with a preference for Italian over Arabic, partly due to perceived needs for integration into the local society. Meanwhile, the situation in the Netherlands illustrates an active search for balance at the diocesan level, at the same time revealing differences depending on the parish. As discussions in Chapters 4 and 5 have illustrated, in all three dioceses, debates are shaped by a variety of factors including practical realities, generational shifts, and the social-demographic composition of each parish or diocese.

A revealing discussion with a highly educated, second-generation church member from Amsterdam highlighted these dynamic negotiations. He articulated the difficulty in delineating “culture” from “faith,” advocating for a greater focus on the core Orthodox faith rather than the “Coptic cultural or national identity.”⁵⁴⁰ While it is not clear whether this perspective represents the majority within the church, such stances can certainly be linked with the unique position of second-generation members, many of whom often see ecumenism as vital for the Coptic Church’s future, as was the case with my interlocutor in Amsterdam.

Essentially, all Coptic Orthodox churches in *mahgar* make use of adaptations of the curriculum published by the Bishopric of Youth of the Coptic Orthodox Patriarchate in Egypt. As the curriculum from Egypt is published in Arabic (officially called *Manāhiḡ al-tarbiyya al-kanasiyya*, “Church upbringing curricula”), many diasporic dioceses translate it into their local languages. This is the case with the Coptic communities

⁵³⁹. Barth, “Introduction,” 14.

⁵⁴⁰. Personal communication with a second-generation church member, July 25, 2021, in Amsterdam.

in the Netherlands and Milan, who teach and instruct their children in Dutch/Italian. As discussed in earlier chapters, most second- and third-generation Copts are not fluent in Egyptian Arabic (especially in reading and writing), and church leaders are aware of the need for accommodation. They believe that the best way to transmit the knowledge and information and shape their faith through Sunday schools is in the local languages because this is the language in which both teachers and youth are most comfortable. This contrasts with the ideology of the early days of the Sunday school movement in Egypt which emphasized the primal role of Coptic for Coptic children, even though Arabic remained the language of instruction. Habib Girgis and other important figures of the movement aimed at reviving Coptic as the Copts’ ‘true native’ language and held that Coptic should be used as the language through which Copts would be reached spiritually and thus rise from darkness.⁵⁴¹

The translations of the Arabic curriculum are usually done by groups of servants, mostly consisting of the 1.5 or second-generation church members, who are bilingual or simply master two or more languages.⁵⁴² For example, the translation group of the Diocese of Milan, called “I figli della luce” (The children of light), translated the curriculum from Egypt directly from Arabic into Italian, a move that was seen as a significant way to remain connected to ‘homeland’ and to preserve the content and structure of the church upbringing system from Egypt.

On the other hand, the Coptic community of the Netherlands uses the curriculum of the Diocese of the Southern United States, which was then translated from English to Dutch. The curriculum’s original preface in English states that the Coptic Diocese of the Southern United States “felt the pressing need for a modified Sunday School Curriculum which would be *better suited to address the problems and issues facing children both in America and the lands of immigration.*” (emphasis added).⁵⁴³ The modification of the original curriculum from Egypt resulted in the elimination of a number of lessons as well as in adding new ones that concern specifically Coptic communities in the lands of immigration. The newly added lessons primarily concern a more extensive teaching of the Bible, knowledge of other beliefs (for example, basic information about other Christian denominations), church history and social topics relevant

^{541.} Sedra, *From Mission to Modernity*, 110.

^{542.} There are different definitions of who precisely constitutes the 1.5 generation. Here, I consider those who emigrated from Egypt as toddlers or small children and thus started their primary school education in their host countries to be the members of this generation.

^{543.} The authors of the curriculum have, therefore, envisaged that the adapted materials should and can be used not only in the USA, but also in the rest of the Coptic *mahgar* (primarily in Canada, Europe, and Australia, where most diasporic Copts live), due to the perceived similarities of the social and cultural contexts of different host countries.

and adequate for different ages (such as marriage, social diversity, homosexuality, or “dealing with others”). The preface further mentions that these additional lessons “give greater consideration to differences in quality of life, education, media influence, cultural differences and the surrounding diversity of beliefs between Egyptian society and that of the west.”⁵⁴⁴ Although I did not have a chance to learn about the precise reasons of using the curriculum of the Southern United States diocese in the Netherlands, the fact that the Dutch translation does not demonstrate any significant changes in form or content compared to the US curriculum, illustrates commonalities in how different Coptic churches in mahgar see migration-related challenges that affect and set priorities for their church upbringing programs. Additionally, church leaders and Sunday school teachers coordinate and adapt the curriculum and other teaching materials every year in order to ensure development and the transmission of proper knowledge to children, as well as to keep their interest and motivation at a high level.⁵⁴⁵

The content of the curricula is divided and organized according to age groups. For each age group, there is a specific set of learning goals of what students of that age should learn, reflecting the original plan of Girgis’ curricula. For example, the Dutch curriculum envisages that children of age six should learn that God cares and loves them, and that they should learn to respect the Church. The program for age eight states that the main theme to be conveyed at this stage is the might and power of their God, and that children should be able to memorize as many Bible verses as possible. The emphasis for older groups is on a deeper and more comprehensive analysis of the Bible, on explaining certain phenomena using logic, and on discussing different social topics that specifically concern teenagers, such as friendship, relationships, family relations, love, doubts, among others. The special attention given to psychological and pedagogical differences in how and what to teach children and youth of different ages demonstrates the Church’s commitment to a proper integration of its youngest members into the communal and ecclesiastical domains. More than just keeping them inside the Church, the focus on appropriate knowledge, discipline, and skills prepares children and young people of different ages for their role in the community – as deacons, choir singers, servants, or Sunday school teachers.

The structure of Sunday school lessons in the Netherlands and Italy is somewhat flexible and depends highly on the teaching style and organization of every *khādim*. However, every lesson usually has several key elements, reflecting the original

⁵⁴⁴. Bishop Anba Youssef, *Sunday School Curriculum Grade 3* (Colleyville: The Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern USA, n.d.), iii, <http://www.suscopts.org/ssc/Grade03.pdf>.

⁵⁴⁵. Bishop Anba Arseny, *Zilveren Jubileum*, 12.

curriculum from Egypt. These are Bible verses for memorization, main objective of the lesson, its main content, and conclusion and application of the lesson. Both curricula used in the dioceses in the Netherlands and Milan mention main sources used for the preparation of each lesson or more broadly for the whole group. Scriptures are the leading and most commonly used and cited source in the two curricula. Other fundamental sources for the Coptic Church, such as the Synaxarion and *Agbeya* are referred to. Furthermore, the sources abound in books and materials by Coptic Orthodox authors, predominantly clerical figures. Among them are a priest from Alexandria and influential theologian Fr. Tadros Y. Malaty, patristics scholar and educator Fr. Marcos Daoud, previous leader of the Coptic Church Pope Shenouda III, theologian and monk Matta El Meskeen, and several bishops from Egypt (e.g. Bishop Anba Yoannes). It is interesting to highlight the fact that although many bookstore shelves in Coptic churches in the Netherlands and Italy abound in Pope Shenouda's publications, his books are not often cited as sources used in the preparation of the US curriculum used in the Netherlands. For example, in the curriculum for group 5, Shenouda's books are mentioned twice as sources, in group 6 only once, and in group 7 twice. By contrast, books by Father Tadros Malaty, a prominent figure who played a pivotal role in the establishment of Coptic communities in the US, feature much more frequently as sources in these curricula, specifically thirteen times in group 5 and fifteen times each in groups 6 and 7. Besides Coptic authors, the Dutch curriculum cites works of various non-Egyptian as well as non-Orthodox authors, mostly theologians, priests and pastors. Some of the used works include *The Golden Bible Atlas* by Samuel Terrien, *Butler's Lives of the Saints* by Alban Butler, *The Life of David* and *The Life of Joseph* by Frederick Brotherton Meyer, among others. The curriculum used in the Diocese of Milan mentions its sources less explicitly, mentioning primarily the Bible and the original curriculum of Egypt as its main sources.

As an illustration, I will present an example of a lesson from the curriculum of the Diocese of Milan meant for group 3 of the middle section (age twelve and thirteen). The lesson is entitled “Cosa ha offerto il cristianesimo al mondo?” (“What has Christianity offered the world?”). Its objective is to teach the children about the contributions of Christianity to the world and to raise a question of what one can contribute and offer to the world and other people as an individual. After learning the verse of the day, in the introduction, the teacher (*catechista*) provides the students with a coloring map of the globe where only the land is colored. The students are instructed to color the parts representing water because life would be impossible without it. Then, the connection is made between water and Christianity, by analogy concluding that Christianity brings life. In the main part of the lesson, the *catechista*

explains the success of diffusion of Christ's message and speaks about contributions of Christianity to the world (for instance, Christ as an example of how to behave humanly to others, disciples and apostles who passed on the true meanings of life, martyrs who demonstrate the meaning of sacrifice). At the end, the teacher tells the story of Pope Shenouda III as an example of someone who revived the Church and helped spread the Coptic Church beyond its traditional geographical borders. The text celebrates his spiritual and educational endeavors, his personality and virtues, and his patriotism, citing some of his most famous sayings, such as: "Egypt is not a country we live in, but a country that lives within us."⁵⁴⁶

This lesson represents a typical example of a Sunday school lesson which essentially incorporates different categories and elements (methodological and thematic) into one single unit. The lesson, like many other lessons in the curricula, displays a thematic heterogeneity, which makes it a difficult task to situate it within traditionally bounded genres. Furthermore, the lesson reflects the eclectic approach to the transmission of knowledge of Coptic Sunday schools, allowing different goals to be achieved in one such lesson – children will learn about history of Christianity, about its contributions to today's world by using creative analogy (drawing exercise), they will identify important ('true') role models (Jesus, apostles, martyrs) and 'correct' values from their lives and actions, as well as about influential figures and developments in the contemporary Coptic Church (Pope Shenouda and his legacy). Finally, a strong emphasis on Shenouda's patriotic sentiments and references to Egypt in this and many other lessons can be seen as a way to create and strengthen a particular bond with Egypt.

In smaller communities, the use of Sunday school curricula is less well organized. As illustrated earlier, a smaller number of children and a limited number of *khuddām* usually results in adaptations, modifications and a more flexible use of educational materials. Moreover, some diasporic communities do not translate and publish their local version of the Sunday school curriculum. This is the case for the Coptic community in Spain, which does not have a published translation of their curriculum. Instead, priests and servants in different Coptic parishes across Spain use the original Arabic version from the Coptic Church of Egypt, from which they choose appropriate lessons, modifying and translating them if necessary. They create PowerPoint presentations of the lessons, which is, in fact, a widespread phenomenon

⁵⁴⁶. *Lezioni di Catechismo: classe terza media* (Milan: Diocesi cristiana copta ortodossa di Milano e dintorni, n.d.), 252-259. Although it is not clear when exactly Pope Shenouda stated this saying, various sources suggest it was pronounced in Egypt and does not relate directly to the diaspora context. In fact, the saying was originally coined by Makram Ebeid Pasha, a famous Egyptian politician and member of the Wafd nationalist party.

in many Coptic churches nowadays. According to Father Rewis Anba Paula, who serves the community of Cervera in Catalonia, there is no need to translate the voluminous Sunday school curricula from Egypt at this point, since current priests and servants are all able to use the Arabic original version and due to a limited number of Sunday school students (for example, the parish in Cervera has only three groups in Sunday schools), it is fairly easy to prepare modified lessons and it would certainly be a challenging task to create a well-structured curriculum for a still growing community.

However, the priest is currently working on a project of translating the books for the preparation of servants (*i' dād al-khidma*), published in fourteen volumes by the Coptic Orthodox Patriarchate in Cairo, which are meant to educate and prepare future servants and Sunday school teachers. The materials focus both on acquiring the necessary knowledge about the Church, history and dogma (i.e., *ta' līm* aspect) and on the didactics and acquiring pedagogical skills, along with the attention to teaching social and moral discipline (i.e., *tarbiyya*). The priest plans to teach the materials to the youth of his parish in a thorough and comprehensive way (thus, covering each part of the series), which will occur in the form of courses and a final exam. Father Rewis thus demonstrates a clear vision towards the future generation and puts in strong efforts to educate and socialize its members into the church and its ministry. By preparing and translating the *i' dād al-khidma* series, the priest is leaving a legacy and paving the way for the youngest members to “be an example”⁵⁴⁷ and serve the community still in the making.⁵⁴⁸

Lessons are usually given after the Sunday liturgy, after which children go to the classrooms (or other kinds of spaces within the church building) with their teachers, sometimes accompanied by the parish priest. Every lesson in Sunday schools begins and ends with a prayer, usually performed in the local language. We can understand this as part of the mission of Sunday schools to instill the importance of prayer in every Copt. This is part of broader *tarbiyya* practices, in which children and youth learn discipline, ethics, commitment, and obedience, through the involvement in different sensorial and bodily practices such as performance in the Holy liturgy, singing, group prayers and reading of the Bible. For example, the Coptic church in Catalonia has published a two-part publication in Spanish titled *Mi iglesia: la misa*

^{547.} In his book *The Release of the Spirit*, Pope Shenouda narrates the story of his encounter with an angel who delivered him a message of the true meaning of being a servant and performing a ministry in the church. The angel told then still inexperienced Nazir that in order to be a real servant, he must “be an example” [to his community]. Pope Shenouda III, *The Release of the Spirit* (Cairo: Coptic Orthodox Patriarchate, 1990), 121.

^{548.} Personal communication with Father Rewis Anba Paula on February 23, 2023, in Cervera.

(“My church: the mass”), which aims to teach small children about the structure and meanings of every part of the Holy liturgy. Every part of the liturgy is explained through simple illustrations and is accompanied by a text, aiming to teach children the very performance in the liturgy in a simple and interactive way.⁵⁴⁹ As all these practices are usually performed as a group (liturgy, choir, Bible readings), learning how to pray, perform, and practice one’s religion in church leads to a stronger feeling of solidarity and shared values among group members who belong to the same community.⁵⁵⁰ Besides reinforcing a sense of belonging within the group through a moral obligation to meet role expectations, religious and moral commitment also serves as a key marker for young Copts in the Netherlands and Italy, distinguishing them from their Dutch and Italian peers.

Particular attention in these pedagogical processes is given to help students understand the Church and its teachings; in other words, to understand the *why* aspect of their religious belonging. This mainly comes from the belief that the children will better remember the main objectives of the lesson if they truly understand the meaning and logic behind what is taught to them (which is, of course, true for general education as well). This does not only concern a successful adoption of a lesson objective, but also the broader issue of how to keep the children inside the Church. In virtually all Sunday school classes I attended during my fieldwork in the Netherlands and Italy, the *khuddām* have established an interactive atmosphere in their classes and made sure to converse with students in order to check if they understood the main objectives of the lessons. In fact, this is something young Copts learn in the preparation classes to become *khuddām* and such instructions are clearly stated in the official Sunday school curricula. Abanoub, my interviewee from Milan, reflected on this issue, saying: “We want to teach them to *want* to go to the church, not because they *have to*... We go to the liturgy because we *want to*.”⁵⁵¹ In Abanoub’s opinion, this lies at the foundation of ensuring that children will understand the importance of adopting church teachings and of going to the church in the first place. As Frank Bessac explains, understanding the value of such teachings as a fundamental community characteristic regardless of its functionality as a boundary marker provides a bigger chance for boundary maintenance.⁵⁵²

This is perhaps part of the wider emphasis on the importance of having the right approach in the church upbringing of Coptic children and youth, both in Egypt and in the diaspora. Seeking “the right approach” towards children and youth was often

^{549.} For more details, see the publication entry in the project database, <https://fourcornersoftheworld.pt.rs.ru.nl/publication/1310/public/>.

^{550.} See Ramzy, “The Performative Politics of (Dis)Engagement.”

^{551.} Personal communication with Abanoub, November 5, 2022, in Milan.

^{552.} Ross et al., “Social Borders,” 62.

mentioned in my conversations with various Coptic priests and Sunday school teachers in the Netherlands, Italy, and Egypt. During the *i'dād* classes and in the curricula, it is emphasized that children should learn in a relaxing, open atmosphere without pressure, where they do not feel like they are interrogated or that they only sit and listen during Sunday school lessons. This comes from the realization that children attend ‘regular’ school during the week and then Sunday schools one or two days in the weekend. At the same time, this is in most cases the only time when church leaders (both clergy and lay members) can transmit church teachings, values, and elements of Coptic traditions to the youngest members of the community. Several of my interlocutors across different parishes in the Netherlands and Italy have mentioned that creating a balance between being too strict and too flexible in their pedagogical approach, and between what is considered Coptic (and Egyptian) values and those of their wider societies represents one of the biggest challenges for church leaders today. Such topics are also part of the regular agenda during meetings of bishops, both in and outside Egypt, underlining the urgency of finding a suitable and effective way to keep the children and youth ‘inside.’ This is especially relevant in today’s context of migration, rapid globalization, and secularization, which the Church deems ‘threatening.’ Several of my interlocutors have therefore emphasized the importance of reaching out to the children and youth ‘in their own language’ and applying a certain degree of flexibility in Sunday schools and broader church upbringing programs in order to avoid potential undesirable side effects of a strict boundary maintenance that might push them away from the Church.

Correct knowledge, authority, and transnationalism

Although the church upbringing system of the Coptic Church has been centralized to a certain extent on the transnational level (for instance, when it comes to the organization or using the same Sunday school curriculum), every Sunday school *khādim/a* is essentially free to organize their classes according to their own affinities and use a wide range of materials. This freedom and autonomy is based on a guideline in the curriculum which sees individual creativity, innovation, and effort as important prerequisites for successful service, i.e. education of the youngest members of the community. Additionally, the Southern US Diocese curriculum, used by the Coptic community in the Netherlands, explicitly advises *khuddām* to provide their students with additional books and stories to read at home, which would help them to further develop their faith and learn more about their Church.⁵⁵³ This also means that church upbringing continues outside of the church and should be

⁵⁵³. Sunday School Curriculum Grade 6, iv (Colleyville: The Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern USA, n.d.), <http://www.suscopts.org/ssc/Grade06.pdf>.

fostered at home.⁵⁵⁴ At the same time, however, a certain degree of uniformity in terms of teaching styles and the use of materials is often sought. It is explicitly stated that the work of Sunday school servants must always align with the directives of the clergy, indicating the limits of their autonomy.

My analysis of different types of sources for Sunday school teaching sheds light on the questions of what is considered correct knowledge, and on issues of legitimacy and authority in teaching and knowledge production, and the importance of transnational ties and networks in this process. More broadly, these questions help us understand the role of *khuddām* in the diaspora, as well as clergy's roles in the broad church upbringing practices.

There are different types of materials which fall out of the scope of Sunday school curricula and which are used both in Sunday school education and other socialization programs in Coptic churches in the Netherlands and Italy. A prominent example are numerous online and digital materials used as important sources of information and as auxiliary tools in education. These include popular Coptic websites and databases that are used, shared, and recommended by the clergy and church servants, highlighting the transnational aspect of religious upbringing in the Coptic Church.⁵⁵⁵ For example, Father Youssef, senior priest serving the parish of Eindhoven, shared that he regularly sends PDF books from the Coptic Treasures website to youth, in order to motivate them to read and learn more about theology and Church history.

Additionally, there are various types of content on YouTube, encompassing both Coptic and broader Christian topics. For instance, the Coptic diocese of the Netherlands has its own YouTube series, where priests, deacons, and servants create videos containing lessons in different genres and discussing various topics, including Bible studies, theology, family and social issues, sacraments, to name only

^{554.} In fact, many of my informants from Coptic communities in both countries stressed the importance of religious education and socialization of children at home, which should precede and accompany those in the church. Pope Shenouda also wrote about the importance of home education and upbringing, which should accompany and strengthen that of the church. See Pope Shenouda III, *How to Relate to Children* (Sydney: Coptic Orthodox Publication and Translation, 1995), 49-50.

^{555.} Prominent examples of popular Coptic websites and repositories are Coptic Treasures, a database with a large number of digitized publications mostly by the Coptic Orthodox Church, and the already mentioned website St-takla.org, which contains different types of texts on the Coptic Church, its history and tradition. Both are well known and used among transnational Coptic communities.

a few.⁵⁵⁶ The videos are created in Dutch, primarily by second-generation deacons and *khuddām*, as well as in Arabic, by some of the priests who also write articles in *al-Tariq*. These videos, besides being available on the Diocese’s official YouTube channel, are shared among church members, shared on the official Facebook pages of individual churches, and occasionally used in Sunday schools. Besides the fact that such materials provide a platform for young Sunday school servants and deacons to play an active role in producing and disseminating knowledge among the *makhdūmīn*, the very fact that (part of) the content was created by and features second-generation youth explaining lessons in a very simple manner can be seen as an attempt to make children and youth learn in a more direct and informal way from their peers.

Although some publications by Pope Shenouda feature in different Sunday school curricula, many of the pope’s other books are often used as additional materials in different educational and social settings, as they are considered an integral part of the contemporary literary tradition of the Coptic Church. In a conversation with Bishoy, my Sunday school interlocutor from Utrecht, we touched upon Pope Shenouda and his contributions in the field of church service, ministry and Sunday schools. As an enthusiastic reader who always wants to learn more about his Church, Bishoy pointed to several books by Pope Shenouda, including *The Release of the Spirit* and *The Spiritual Ministry*, both exploring and defining the meanings of church service, devotion, and belonging to the Church. Bishoy revealed that he personally likes to read Pope Shenouda’s books and considers them as important sources for learning more about his role as a church servant.⁵⁵⁷

In a similar vein, during a conversation with a priest serving in a Coptic church in the Diocese of Rome about tradition, Sunday schools, and church publications, I brought up Pope Shenouda’s works upon seeing some of his publications on a shelf inside the church. When I asked the priest whether he finds these publications important for the transmission of Coptic tradition in diaspora, he exclaimed: “Of course! They are [like a] *madrassa* (school)!”⁵⁵⁸ Both Bishoy, as a second-generation layperson, and the priest in their own ways confirmed that the publications of arguably the most influential contemporary figure of the Coptic Church indeed have a lasting impact on its members as an important point of reference when it comes to preservation and transmission of official Church teachings. Consequently, Pope Shenouda and

⁵⁵⁶. See the diocese’s official YouTube page <https://www.youtube.com/@koptischorthodoxbisdomvann231/> videos.

⁵⁵⁷. Interview with Bishoy, a Sunday school teacher in Utrecht, December 10, 2022.

⁵⁵⁸. Personal communication with a Coptic priest in Italy, November 25, 2021.

his literary opus have become an embodiment of an authoritative tradition for many Copts in the lands of immigration.

Another type of auxiliary materials used by teachers in Sunday schools are sermons. Marina, a 1.5-generation Sunday school teacher in Milan, expressed her preference for this kind of material in her classes. When talking about Sunday school materials and the preparation of her classes, Marina explained: “For example, I prefer to listen [to] sermons from a priest in Egypt. ... I listen [to] these sermons in Arabic and I translate this directly into Italian to prepare my lessons. I prefer this type of activity.”⁵⁵⁹ She finds this type of source particularly innovative and useful for teaching the topics related to social and moral issues. Marina explains that such topics are crucial for youth (more precisely, high school and university students), but asserts that it is more effective to explain the argument to the students in a spoken manner presented by a (well-known) priest or bishop.

Furthermore, when clarifying why she uses sermons in her classes to such a great extent, Marina referred to the role of a priest, assigning him a two-layered authority. First, she asserted that she is confident to refer to sermons by priests who are well-known within the transnational Coptic community and who are “capable” of providing her with “good information” to prepare her class. Many Coptic priests, both in Egypt and diaspora, have established “positions of trust” within their own communities when it comes to knowledge and information in different fields.⁵⁶⁰ This communal support has further resulted in the rise of multiple influential figures on the transnational level, whose works are shared across borders and who thus become, to use Marina’s words, “known in the whole community” for transferring “good information” to the members of the Church.

Another reason why sermons represent a useful and appropriate source for teaching directly correlates with the question of what constitutes “good information.” When asked about the benefits of using priests and bishops’ sermons as an educational material in Sunday schools, Marina expressed humility and self-doubt as a lay community member: “[By using sermons,] I don’t risk to say something that ... is wrong or is not Christian. So, I feel comfortable with this type of sermons.”⁵⁶¹ Therefore, one could say that by avoiding to rely solely on her own set of beliefs, knowledge or experience and choosing to depend on a priest’s sermon and his

⁵⁵⁹. Interview with Marina, a Sunday school teacher in Milan, March 9, 2023.

⁵⁶⁰. One of the most prominent examples, mentioned by Marina during the interview, is the aforementioned Father Daoud Lamei, who has enjoyed popularity and respect by many Copts around the world.

⁵⁶¹. Interview with Marina, a Sunday school teacher in Milan, March 9, 2023.

presumed competence, Marina demonstrated what Bandak and Boylston call “deferral to authority.”⁵⁶² Marina further connected this sense of uncertainty to the fact that she does not know where all the information on the Internet comes from and who owns or promotes all the websites that circulate on social media and within the community. In other words, she reveals that it is not easy to filter “good,” i.e. “Christian,” from “incorrect” or “non-Christian” information. Therefore, turning to the authority eliminates the risk of transmitting the latter to her students. Additionally, she mentioned her preference for using sermons particularly from Egyptian priests and bishops in her classes, as their origin from Egypt and the heart of the Coptic Orthodox Church assures her of their quality. This underscores the view of the Patriarchate as the ultimate authority on correct knowledge, or, in Marina’s words, “good information.”

In a similar spirit, in a Sunday school class for high school students in Mari Mina church in Utrecht which focused on decision-making, Bishoy, the teacher, discussed with students about the ways and challenges of making good decisions. After asserting that a good decision should be made with brain, heart, and the Holy Spirit together, the teacher reminded the students of the priest’s role in the church as well as for the community and their everyday lives. While the priest might not be the right person for business advice, Bishoy clarified that *abounas* are always ready to give them advice, especially when it comes to spiritual and social matters. The same topic can be found in the curriculum used among the communities in Milan, specifically for group 4 of *superiori*. The lesson presents three important factors or elements that are part of the process of making a good decision, namely continuous prayer, thinking wisely, and seeking advice from an experienced person. As one of the main principles to follow when making a decision, the text instructs the students: “You need to have a point of reference: the Holy Bible, the Holy Spirit that lives in us and the spiritual father. If you have a point of reference, you will not deviate from the right path.”⁵⁶³

In a study on migrant Coptic families living in and around Milan, Giuliani and Regalia investigate the relationship between religious and communal belonging and migration experiences among many practicing Coptic Orthodox adults and children. The accounts of the interviewed church members exhibit their strong attachment to their priests (and the bishop) and great reliance on their advice in decision-making processes and other daily matters. Both parents and their children shared that they

^{562.} Andreas Bandak and Tom Boylston, “The ‘Orthodoxy’ of Orthodoxy: On Moral Imperfection, Correctness, and Deferral in Religious Worlds,” *Religion and Society* 5, no. 1 (2014): 25–46.

^{563.} *Lezioni di Catechismo: classe quarta superiore* (Milan: Diocesi cristiana copta ortodossa di Milano e dintorni, n.d.), 88. Translated from Italian by the author.

turn to the priest when they need answers to difficult questions and expressed certainty that the church leaders are leading them on the right path.⁵⁶⁴

While these attitudes are certainly encouraged and taught by parents to their children at home, the vital role of the priest for the church and his community is a topic that church members become socialized into from an early age. A lesson for group 6 of the curriculum used by the Coptic Church in the Netherlands deals with priesthood and the role of the priest in the Coptic Church. When explaining the role of the priest, the authors write: “He is the intercessor in the Holiest of Holies for the community. He is a teacher who teaches the people the Word of God and guides them to the way of God, to virtues, mysteries of the religion and explains the rituals and details of the Word of truth.”⁵⁶⁵ Citing as well Malachi 2:7: “For the lips of a priest ought to preserve knowledge, because he is the messenger of the Lord Almighty and people seek instruction from his mouth.” From this passage, we can see that the role of the priest is directly related to *teaching, preserving knowledge, and instruction*.

Therefore, parish priests or one’s spiritual father (or sometimes the bishop) are understood to possess the competence and authority to which one is supposed to turn to when seeking advice or answers, or when lacking knowledge about a certain matter. Along with Scriptures, the clergy acquire an active role of guiding their church members to the correct belief and practices. In church education as well as in everyday matters, priests as communal leaders are often those “points of reference” who, explicitly or implicitly, demarcate orthodoxies from heterodoxies, the correct from incorrect. As Fader and Naumescu argue, this process of demarcation is a boundary-making practice which determines or regulates one’s membership and belonging.⁵⁶⁶

Although the clergy are often seen as the higher or even ultimate authority when it comes to many decisions about different church practices, including the dilemma of what is a legitimate and correct source in children’s education, Sunday school teachers are essentially given a high degree of authority and a crucial role in the Sunday school education as servants who are supposed to transmit knowledge and values to the children, as well as shape them into committed members of the community. Therefore, this type of boundary-making certainly does not occur

^{564.} Giuliani and Regalia, “Religious Belonging and (Forced) Migration: a Study on Migrant Coptic Families in Italy,” in *Migrants and Religion*, 609.

^{565.} *Zondagschool curriculum Groep 6* (Amsterdam: Koptisch orthodox bisdom van Nederland, n.d.), 127. Translated from Dutch by the author.

^{566.} Ayala Fader and Vlad Naumescu, “Religious Orthodoxies: Provocations from the Jewish and Christian Margins,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 51 (2022): 335.

without the agency of lay members of the community, including the youngest ones. Stene rightly points out that Sunday schools and other socialization programs have given both adults and children opportunities to play important roles in this arena, which ultimately strengthens their belonging to the group.⁵⁶⁷ Ramzy explains that *khuddām* were originally given the role of presenting the principles of Orthodox religious education to the children, while Hasan asserts that servants were the ones who integrated and disciplined other church-goers (including the children) into the new system of church education, and were subsequently able to mobilize new leaders from within the community.⁵⁶⁸ Furthermore, as Father Tadros Malaty notes, Sunday school *khuddām* have a crucial role to teach children and youth to become active members of their church, with a prospect of some of them becoming future Church leaders.⁵⁶⁹

Coptic communities in the Netherlands, Italy, and Spain have published a considerable amount of texts that are geared towards and are meant to be used by the youngest generations. Although not necessarily directly used in the education and upbringing of the second and third generations inside the church, these publications inform children and youth about the history, teachings, and traditions of the Coptic Orthodox Church. Besides the communal magazines, discussed in the previous chapter, and the “testimony books” mentioned in Chapter 4, further examples that fit into this category include a Q&A informative book about the Coptic Church authored by Elham Khalil and sold in several Coptic churches in the Netherlands, hagiographies (for example, the Diocese of Milan has published a series of around twenty pocket-size booklets on saints’ lives in Italian), and history books and booklets which tell the story of the Coptic Church, such as the booklet published by the Coptic church in Utrecht which was geared towards the “new generation of Dutch Egyptians, who were born here [in the Netherlands] and who are curious about the rich history of their Church.”⁵⁷⁰ Such publications do not only signify the church leaders’ goal to inform and teach the youth about their Church (it is difficult to say if and to what extent they read these publications), but even more importantly they reflect the central place children and youth hold in many of the Church’s programs, endeavors, and anxieties, as well as they represent material heritage that should be preserved by the future generations.

^{567.} Stene, “Belonging to the Church Community,” 147.

^{568.} Ramzy, “The Performative Politics of (Dis)Engagement,” 113. Hasan, *Christians versus Muslims in Modern Egypt*, 70.

^{569.} Father Tadros Malaty, *Introduction to the Coptic Orthodox Church*, 196.

^{570.} Father Bishoy Kamel Tadros, *Kopten en de Koptische kerk in het bijzonder* (Utrecht: Koptisch Orthodoxe Kerk van de Heilige Mar-Guirguis en St. Demiana, n.d.), 5. Translated from Dutch by the author.

Two worlds: External boundaries and negotiating (non)belonging

As discussed in the Introduction, the ways groups define themselves and vis-à-vis others are often strengthened through the encounter with other groups. This is why I argue that although Coptic churches in the Netherlands and Italy apply similar educational and pedagogical mechanisms as churches in Egypt, boundary making processes in diaspora cannot be the same as in Egypt. The formation and redefinition of communal values, carried out through church upbringing as shown in the previous sections, certainly creates a sense of groupness among young Copts in diaspora, but frequent interactions with those who are seen as outsiders often leads to a stronger emphasis of social differences between ‘us’ and ‘them,’ and leads to particular self-reflection of one’s belonging. As Ross suggests, sometimes members of the core community intentionally sharpen (symbolically or even institutionally) their social borders in order to protect their definition of their communal identity.⁵⁷¹ Following Barth’s and Paulsen Galal’s references to sameness and difference with regard to group identities, I will adopt narratives of differences and sameness as analytical tools to understand and describe how Copts in the Netherlands and northern Italy express, negotiate and create different senses of belonging, both among children and youth in the church upbringing and on the communal level more broadly.⁵⁷² Many individuals employ such narratives of difference and sameness when defining their belonging to the Church, to their community, to Egypt, or vis-à-vis other groups and the society.

Many of my interlocutors have repeatedly engaged in conversations about the relationship between the community and the “outside world.” Juxtaposing ‘our’ culture or religion with ‘theirs,’ many church-goers often see the values of the societies in which they have settled as inherently different or incompatible with the ones cultivated in their church. Besides noticing and emphasizing cultural and religious differences among various groups in their countries, both first- and second-generation Copts also spoke of the seemingly diminishing role of Christianity or even of its non-existence among the majority populations, both in the Netherlands and Italy. This has allowed for a sentiment of solidarity and an active rapprochement, either on the official ecumenical or rather symbolic level, between the Coptic Church and other Orthodox churches, as well as with local (majority) Protestant or Catholic communities. Here, the *us*, in the common ‘us’ and ‘them’ discourse, are active, practicing Christians who fight for a common, broader

^{571.} Ross et al., “Social Borders,” 56.

^{572.} See Lisa Paulsen Galal, “Coptic Christian practices: formations of sameness and difference,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 23, no. 1 (2012): 45–58.

Christian (or specifically Orthodox) cause in secular societies. Both clergy and laity, adults and children, have spoken about these issues with great interest and zeal or even with a dose of preoccupation. The significance and urgency of such issues are understandably reflected in the church upbringing programs as they are supposed to teach the youngest members of the community about the importance of maintaining a strong connection to their faith and the Church, which is concurrently shaped and negotiated by the use of narratives of difference and sameness. The importance of maintaining such a connection, as we could see, is often understood as a prerequisite for safeguarding communal boundaries.

One of the principal strategies used by Coptic church leaders in the Netherlands and northern Italy for defining and safeguarding their communal boundaries is employing narratives of difference. From theological differences to differences in values, life styles and everyday practices (what we might associate with ‘culture’), these narratives of difference are employed, reproduced and learned by many members of the community. From informal conversations to more official interviews with priests, Sunday school teachers, and other lay church goers, both Dutch and Italian societies were described to me as “different” (“from us”), “modern,” “(too) liberal,” “secular,” and the majority of their population as lacking faith. Furthermore, similarly to Habib Girgis’ original task of defending ‘Orthodoxy’ from Western missions, differences between the Coptic Church, on the one hand, and other churches and denominations, on the other, were sometimes mentioned as important distinguishing identity markers. Whether theological or cultural, many Copts in the Netherlands and northern Italy, including the second generation, often focused on differences between their community and other groups (often the majority populations) when explaining and defining their beliefs, practices and tradition of their Church.

Although the role of religion in public life and state-church relations in the Netherlands and Italy differ significantly, my Coptic interlocutors from both countries have described their wider societies, cultures, and attitudes of the majority populations in the Netherlands and Italy (particularly in Milan) towards religion in very similar ways. As mentioned above, what was usually equated with the “secular” were liberal social values (for example related to sexuality and sexual freedom) and social openness, individuality, and, most prominently, absence of public religious expression and assumed lack of faith.⁵⁷³ Therefore, without the need to further

⁵⁷³. A sociological study on the (decreasing) level of religiosity among youth in the Netherlands and Italy, and more broadly in Europe, is out of the scope of this article. For more information about this, see the 2018 report by Pew Research Center on this issue: <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2018/06/13/young-adults-around-the-world-are-less-religious-by-several-measures/>.

theorize the meanings of the “secular” and secularization, which falls out of the main scope of this research, both young Dutch and Italian Copts have here expressed their understandings of the concepts and, more importantly, why they see it as an external risk that may endanger boundaries of their communities. In a similar vein, Beekers has shown how young practicing Protestant Christians and Muslims in the Netherlands have expressed similar views of their “secular” environment and its effects on their religious identities.⁵⁷⁴

Several of my interlocutors involved in Sunday school education in Milan talked about the incompatibility of the “two worlds” – the church and the everyday life outside of it – in conversations about church upbringing of the youngest members of the community.⁵⁷⁵ When comparing religious practice and socialization of Coptic children in Egypt and Italy, Abanoub observed that in Italy there is a clear boundary between one’s church life and the everyday, public one. Unlike in Egypt, where the church is their life,” young Copts in Italy “have the problem of the outside world. They have the church and there is a fight for the rest [of the time and space].”⁵⁷⁶ Abanoub’s words clearly reflect his view of Italian society as secular, where faith and religious practice are largely relocated to the private sphere.

A first-generation church-goer who is involved in the organization of Sunday school education in a Coptic church in Milan followed a similar reasoning when explaining the main focus of Sunday schools in her church, “We focus on the Bible and Bible stories because we want to teach the Orthodox tradition ... especially because the outside culture [i.e. Italian] is different from ours.”⁵⁷⁷ Besides referring to the non-church domain as “the outside culture” similar to Abanoub, she revealed the church’s way to deal with this external sphere. Although the curriculum used in Coptic churches in Egypt also gives great attention to studying the Bible, this practice acquires a new purpose in diaspora. I argue that the understanding of “the Orthodox tradition” here becomes recontextualized as it comes to be interpreted vis-à-vis what many have called “Western, liberal values” or used to demarcate Orthodox teachings from those of other churches, including the ones labeled as heretical. This mirrors

^{574.} See Daan Beekers, *Young Muslims and Christians in a secular Europe : pursuing religious commitment in the Netherlands* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021).

^{575.} Several other scholars have also written about the existence and perceived incompatibility of “two worlds/cultures” among different immigrant communities. Among them is Sarah Bakker Kellogg’s research on the Syriac Orthodox community in the Netherlands. See Sarah Bakker Kellogg, “A Racial-Religious Imagination: Syriac Christians, Iconic Bodies, and the Sensory Politics of Ethical Difference in the Netherlands,” *Cultural Anthropology* 36, no. 4 (2021): 618-648.

^{576.} Interview with Abanoub, a Sunday school teacher in Milan, December 22, 2022.

^{577.} Personal communication with a first-generation church goer in Milan, 5 November 2022.

the efforts and anxieties of eighteenth-century Coptic bishops who used sermons to defend and redefine ‘Orthodoxy’ and a broader ‘Coptic identity’ against the backdrop of a strong Catholic missionary influence in Egypt, whose “heterodox practices,” as seen by Church authorities, “weakened ‘authentic’ Coptic traditions, [and] blurred the outlines of the community.”⁵⁷⁸

A similar understanding of the Coptic position in a secularized, diasporic context was adopted by different members of the Coptic communities in the Netherlands. According to a Dutch Coptic priest, second- and third-generation Copts find themselves caught between “two societies.” In his view, the diverse and pluralistic Dutch society often tempts them away from the church. To counter this, Church leaders strive to keep them within the Coptic community and its confines by organizing numerous activities in the parish and on the diocesan level. According to the priest, in Egypt, children are immersed in the church environment from an early age, surrounded by fellow Copts with whom they also spend considerable time outside the church.⁵⁷⁹ However, in the Netherlands and in the diaspora context more broadly, Copts often live far from other church members and may only attend services once a week, if at all. The priest pointed out that it is desirable if the children spend time with those who have had the same kind of upbringing, in the priest’s words – who were “told the same things” (at home and in the church). This way, they feel a strong sense of belonging to the community and are more likely to adhere to the “correct” teachings. Bishops and priests in the diaspora therefore place significant emphasis on youth socialization as a means to engage young Copts in activities that promote elements of sameness among community members, helping them to remain attached to their faith and religious identity in their everyday lives and remain on “the right path.”⁵⁸⁰ This “right path” can thus be best (if not only) achieved if diaspora Coptic churches seek to reproduce the role of the Church as a full communal body.

Even amid the debates and negotiations around what kind of teachings and values should be prioritized in the upbringing of children – more specifically Coptic/Egyptian or broader Orthodox/Christian ones – most of what is taught to children

⁵⁷⁸. Armanios, *Coptic Christianity in Ottoman Egypt*, 145.

For more on how the Coptic Orthodox Church defined Coptic identity as exclusively ‘Orthodox’ in light of Western missionaries’ influence in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Egypt, see Sharkey, *American evangelicals in Egypt*.

⁵⁷⁹. It is worth noting that not all ‘practicing’ children and youth are socialized into their church life in the same way and without any deviations from the ‘default’ or ‘desired’ practices. Many young Copts in Egypt also engage in ‘ambiguous’ practices on a daily basis and negotiate their own faith, belonging and membership to the community in various ways. See for example Ibrahim, *Identity, Marginalisation, Activism, and Victimhood in Egypt*.

⁵⁸⁰. Personal communication with a Coptic priest in the Netherlands, 5 December 2022.

and youth should ultimately have the same goal - setting them onto “the right path.” Central to this endeavor is the shaping of their morality. Church leaders engage youth by tackling contentious social issues, instructing them in the correct execution of religious practices, and imparting the core beliefs of the early Church fathers. These teachings are intended to clearly delineate desirable and undesirable norms and behaviors among the youngest members of the community. Furthermore, it is crucial to recognize that the concept of “the right path” is significantly influenced by the local context and the perceived need to counteract what is often described as an overly liberal or secular environment. This situational influence underscores the role of churches in defining boundaries against the broader “outside” society, ensuring that the upbringing provided within the church walls equips the youth to navigate and reconcile their faith with the challenges of a secular world. Eventually, teaching “the Orthodox tradition” in *mahgar* becomes a pedagogical tool for defining ethical correctness and protecting the confines of the community, and serves, more broadly, to secure the continuity of Church teachings as well as of social and cultural orders from Egypt.

As mentioned above, both the Netherlands and Italy are seen as highly secularized and liberal societies in the eyes of many ‘practicing’ Copts, an understanding which affects the ways they see their position within the wider society and directly or indirectly transforms their own communal practices. Although Christianity in Italy and the Netherlands has clearly not faded away, it is often the case that members of the Coptic Church in these countries see the group of non-practicing Christians, together with atheists or agnostics, as non-believers or “nominal Christians” and as contributors to the overall decline or seeming disappearance of religion. In addition, involvement in various public activities considered secular or incompatible with religion, especially among the youth, further creates the gap between the ‘practicing’ or ‘committed’ and the rest of the society. This has allowed the Coptic communities in the Netherlands and Italy to side with other committed Christian groups, both majority and migrant ones, who share the same concerns over the apparent danger for the survival of the wider Christian community and whose pursuit of living in a ‘true Christian spirit’ has been significantly challenged.⁵⁸¹ The fact that the local Catholic Church in Milan is also struggling to keep and attract Italian youth was confirmed to me by an informant from the Office for Pastoral care for migrants of the Archdiocese of Milan. According to the informant, all Catholic communities the Office cooperates with, including

⁵⁸¹. It is not rare that even some politically- or culturally-opposing Christian groups become allies in the struggle against liberal views on various contemporary moral dilemmas, such as abortion or same-sex marriage. See Kristina Stoeckl and Dmitry Uzlaner, *The Moralists International: Russia in the Global Culture Wars* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2022).

Catholic Copts, have experienced the negative effects of secularization of the society, which has mostly affected religious participation of the youth.

In order to strengthen ecumenical ties, as well as their sense of belonging to the wider Christian ‘family’ and to expand their religious practices beyond their ethnic congregations, many Dutch and Italian Copts, whether clergy or laypeople, participate in different pan-Christian or pan-Orthodox activities and events. During such activities, a common aspect of belonging is identified and further strengthened by focusing on the narratives and elements of sameness. These can include the very belonging to the same religion (Christianity) or church family (Orthodox), sharing similar challenges such as keeping the youth against the backdrop of secularization, and often sharing similar stances regarding social and moral issues in the society. Some of these activities include official ecumenical meetings, pastoral care services, educational initiatives, joint choir concerts and prayers, to name a few. In some of these activities, children and young adults are the main target group or they are the main participants. During these joint practices, challenges and concerns shared by many religious communities can sometimes be addressed and discussed directly, while in many other situations they are dealt with rather symbolically, such as singing. Joint choir meetings are one of the most prominent examples in which the youngest church members participate with high zeal. Oriental Orthodox churches in the Netherlands (consisting of Copts, Syriacs, Ethiopians, and Eritreans, and Armenians) organize joint annual choir performances, where groups of young people come together, led by the clergy, and represent their church and proudly sing their traditional hymns. Similarly, many young Copts in Milan, including my Sunday school interlocutors, participate in all-Christian Christmas choir meetings every year. These types of activities allow young Copts to participate in religious practices beyond their own communities, demonstrate agency and their roles as active community members, and strengthen the connection with their ‘practicing’ peers.

Another common narrative of difference that serves as a strong boundary marker among both Copts in the Netherlands and Italy is the distinction and distancing from (Egyptian) Muslims. Although such narratives are usually not, at least explicitly, (to my knowledge) part of Sunday school lessons or of any public discourses (public statements or social media publications), anti-Islamic sentiments and distancing oneself from Islam is a prominent way for many first- and second-generation Copts in the Netherlands and Italy to express their communal as well as ethnic belonging. Such boundary work is mainly twofold; first, it is often related to negative feelings and memories of discrimination and persecution of Christians (‘by Muslims’) in Egypt. And second, it is related to the negative image of Islam and Muslims in Europe,

and the West more broadly, which is today tightly linked with the categories of ‘migrants,’ the Middle East, as well as the Arabic language. Some of my interlocutors have shared that they are occasionally misrecognized as Muslims in the street, by their neighbors, or colleagues, mainly because of their appearance and if they hear Arabic, leading many to feel frustration and sometimes experiencing discrimination or maltreatment.⁵⁸² This has led many Copts, and other Middle Eastern Christians in Europe, to emphasize Christianity as one of their main group markers that serves to prove their ‘integration’ and their place in Western societies (in this case seen at least historically or symbolically Christian), as opposed to Muslims. Some scholars have described this phenomenon as “stratified minoritization,” where some minority groups define themselves in hierarchical relation to another minority group.⁵⁸³ Moreover, neither the Coptic churches in the Netherlands nor the ones in Milan have any direct relations or cooperation with Egyptian Muslims in their respective countries, probably further refuting the possibility of the existence of broader national Egyptian diasporas. It is important to note that anti-Muslim sentiments, and conversely, a stronger emphasis on Christianity and the ‘Coptic identity,’ were more common during my conversations with Coptic church members in Milan compared to the Netherlands. This may be attributed to the significant presence of Egyptians in the province of Milan and the negative image of low-income, often irregular Egyptian immigrants (who are predominantly Muslim) in the area. In contrast, in the Netherlands, the negative perceptions of Muslims typically do not involve Egyptians, which affects the dynamics differently.

While Christianity has served some Coptic church goers to distance themselves from Muslims and to side with the local population and claim a more “successful integration,” in many other cases, Christianity, or more precisely an active religious life, has also signified an obstacle in the feeling of acceptance. Many (young)

^{582.} Similar findings have been recorded by other scholars, including Fiona McCallum Guiney, Andreas Schmoller, and Sarah Bakker Kellogg; see McCallum Guiney, “Middle Eastern Christian Identities in Europe;” Andreas Schmoller, “Anti-Islamic Narratives of Middle Eastern Diaspora Christians: An Interdisciplinary Analytical Framework,” in *Eastern and Oriental Christianity in the Diaspora*, eds. Herman Teule and Joseph Verheyden (Leuven: Peeters, 2020), 189–214; and Bakker Kellogg, “A Racial-Religious Imagination.” The newly inaugurated Coptic church in Venice (which falls under the direct control of the Patriarchate in Egypt) was vandalized by Islamophobic graffiti on its walls in 2014. Because of the domes and the lack of visibly Christian elements (like crosses) on the church building during the period of construction, the perpetrators misrecognized it as a mosque. See VeneziaToday, ““Porsei”, “Isis merde”: pensa sia una moschea ma è la chiesa copta,” accessed March 18, 2024, <https://www.veneziatoday.it/cronaca/chiesa-copta-campalto-writer-islam.html>.

^{583.} See Susan Koshy, “Morphing Race into Ethnicity: Asian Americans and Critical Transformations of Whiteness,” *Boundary 2*, 28, no. 1 (2001): 153–194.

Copts have shared that they experienced scrutiny or even negative treatment in their schools or by their colleagues with regard to their religious belonging. Such experiences have been reported by other scholars too, for example by Schmoller in the case of different Middle Eastern Christian denominations in Austria.⁵⁸⁴ Coptic children and teenagers who actively attend church, pray, and fast often do not find understanding from many of their non-believing school peers who have not had any kind of religious upbringing. Several of my informants shared that many of their Dutch and Italian peers see them as conservative, a designation which most of my interlocutors found negative. A second-generation university student in Milan shared that his schoolmates asked him about his wrist tattoo (a common religious marker of many Copts in Egypt and diaspora) and why he goes to the church. He explained his reaction, “I learned not to care... I thank my parents that they raised me this way.” In addition, he mentioned that his school peers often perceive those who go to church as conservative and the Coptic Church as “a church of rules.”⁵⁸⁵ Another example concerns a group of teenage girls in the church in the northern Dutch city of Leeuwarden. Several of them mentioned that in many situations they felt misunderstood and looked upon differently by their Dutch peers because they are religious. The girls agreed that it is difficult to be “ourselves and say that we go to church every Sunday...It is somehow odd and not cool enough.”⁵⁸⁶ This leads many young practicing Copts to become friends mostly, or even solely, with those who share their stances on religious practice, and who were raised the same way, or in the words of the above-quoted Dutch Coptic priest, “who were told the same things.” In her description of different social-border definitions, Ross explains that the sense of ‘collective identity’ can be strengthened when a group faces scrutiny, stereotypes, and certain expectations from others, leading to a stronger sense of “we-ness.”⁵⁸⁷

One of the principal tasks of Sunday school education and youth socialization activities is to teach the children and youth to never be ashamed of their faith and to be proud of their Christian (Orthodox) heritage. Two of the Sunday school lessons I attended focused particularly on these issues. The first was a lesson held in the Coptic church in Utrecht for children around age of ten to early teenage years. The focus of the lesson was peer pressure. The teacher asked his students about their own experiences of peer pressure and asked why Christians might experience it more than other groups in the society. The teacher explained that not everyone shares

⁵⁸⁴. See Schmoller, “Anti-Islamic Narratives of Middle Eastern Diaspora Christians,” 199–202.

⁵⁸⁵. Personal communication with a second-generation Copt in St. Mark Coptic church in Milan, 5 November 2022.

⁵⁸⁶. Personal communication with a group of second-generation members of the Coptic church in Leeuwarden, 11 September 2022.

⁵⁸⁷. Ross et al., “Social Borders,” 54.

“our values” and that “our morals” are not accepted by everyone in the society. By providing the students with many quotes and examples from the Bible to support the argument, the teacher asserted that the world needs Christians and, metaphorically, professed that “we must carry our cross” (*we moeten ons kruis dragen*) when dealing with peer pressure.

The other Sunday school lesson was held in St. Mark church in central Milan for a group of youth in their late teenage years. The lesson focused on teaching the students how to be proud of being different and to not conform to the majority. The teacher, a first-generation Coptic woman and a highly respected community member, taught her lesson in the form of a conversation. She explained to the students not to copy others (for example by going out to clubs, drinking or wearing provocative clothes) because they should not lose their uniqueness, which she primarily saw as being based on their religious beliefs and strong communal identity. In order to strengthen their moral imagination, the teacher used the examples of Jesus and saints as the true role models – “We should be like Mari Girgis, Mari Mina, St. Demiana...”⁵⁸⁸ In these two Sunday school lessons, “we” may be understood to be more than “Copts.” It exceeds the ethnic communal boundaries and refers to a larger domain of committed, practicing Christians who come to be seen as a minority facing challenges of maintaining their religious values and bringing up their children in a secular, liberal, and materialistic world. However, by providing examples of popular and highly venerated Coptic saints, an additional layer of the communal identity is mobilized, allowing young diasporic Copts to look up to Coptic saints as their role models.⁵⁸⁹ The above-mentioned examples illustrate the ways young Dutch and Italian Copts develop anxieties and self-reflections based on their religious commitment and a broader Christian identity.

Although members of the Coptic communities in the Netherlands and Milan largely employ narratives of difference and sameness in their church upbringing programs and reproduce them when defining their belonging, it needs to be mentioned that church leaders often emphasize the importance of adopting strategies of balance in their pedagogical approaches and care for children. Realizing that many Copts in diaspora, especially those born outside of Egypt, have a so-called dual identity (being both Coptic and Dutch/Italian⁵⁹⁰), church leaders, including the bishops, priests and servants,

^{588.} Sunday school lesson at the St. Mark Coptic church in Milan, 5 November 2022.

^{589.} This topic was also discussed in a 2020 issue of *Eccliseia*. The text was titled “Non conformatevi alla mentalità di questo secolo” (“Do not conform to the pattern of this world”), taken from Romans 12:2.

^{590.} In another study on the Copts in Italy, some members have expressed similar attitudes, explaining that they seek to combine the best of the ‘two worlds’ and cultures. A first-generation Copt has used the expression “Egyptitalian” to describe his belonging to both Egypt and Italy. Giuliani and Regalia, “Religious Belonging and (Forced) Migration,” 603.

have drawn attention to the risk of communal seclusion. A Coptic priest from the Netherlands explained that the mission of the church is to bring the people together, to make them a true, well-connected community (‘family’) and, most importantly, to educate the new generations as they represent the future. En route to achieving this mission, according to the priest, the Church wants to create a balance between the Coptic traditional values, on the one side, and modern, rather “open-minded” western European values, on the other, so that the next generations can at the same time learn about their heritage and respect the most significant traditions of their Coptic identity. In his words, pursuing this balance would lead to children keeping the Coptic part of their identity, while becoming fully ‘integrated’ into Dutch society without any problems. This reflects the views of a renowned Coptic priest and theologian Tadros Malaty, who wrote that the Copts living in Western countries should be focused on adopting the most constructive aspects of their host societies while still practicing their spirituality of the East without any contradiction.⁵⁹¹

Conclusion

Today, Sunday schools thrive both in Egypt and in the diaspora. The local Sunday schools in *mahgar* seem to represent the focal point of church activity and attendance among the younger generations.⁵⁹² Many priests and lay members of the Coptic communities in the Netherlands and Italy take pride in the high number of children and youth who go to the church, attend the Sunday liturgy, and participate in Sunday schools and other church activities. The system of church upbringing rightfully holds the official title of *al-tarbiyya al-kanasiyya*, since it encompasses both *ta’līm* and *tarbiyya* aspects in its scope. It seems indeed that both aspects of church education play a crucial role in keeping the second and third generations “inside” and on the “right way.” In addition, both aspects have helped to create and redefine communal boundaries and evoke a sense of collectivity among children and youth. Father Tadros Malaty has noted that the migration of Copts and the expansion of the Coptic Church across borders have added an additional responsibility to the Church in Egypt when it comes to taking care of its future generations living abroad, so that they can “become witnesses of Orthodoxy.”⁵⁹³

^{591.} Father Tadros Malaty, *Introduction to the Coptic Orthodox Church*, 295.

^{592.} Salib, “A Multidimensional Understanding of Sunday School in the Coptic Orthodox Tradition,” 257-269.

^{593.} Father Tadros Malaty, *Introduction to the Coptic Orthodox Church*, 192.

However, many church leaders are wary of the risk that future generations lose their interest in communal church practices; they certainly do not take many young Copts' religious vigor for granted. Securing the continuation of the Church and its teachings, and of the community itself through a remarkable system of church upbringing for children and youth has proven to be one of the major tasks of many Coptic churches in the lands of immigration. In western Europe, practicing Copts frequently encounter two significant challenges. Firstly, the rapid pace of secularization poses a threat to the active engagement of many young Coptic church-goers - a challenge that is not unique to them but shared by various religious groups in predominantly secular societies. Secondly, there is the necessity to adapt to local cultural and social norms that often conflict with Church teachings and traditional Coptic/Egyptian values. In these churches, there is a palpable tension regarding the extent of necessary adaptation, as they navigate the delicate balance between avoiding total communal seclusion and resisting full assimilation.

As evident from this chapter, church upbringing plays a critical role not only in transmitting knowledge and shaping young people's religious practices but also in defining their sense of belonging within the church, their community, and in relation to the wider society at large. By developing narratives of difference and sameness, different layers of belonging among the second generation are underscored, prioritized, and simultaneously expressed. For example, expressions of religious belonging among church members, such as Sunday school teachers and youth, and the content of church upbringing often align with broader Christian traditions. Yet, notably, when it comes to certain practices, expressions of piety, and cultural values, this upbringing sometimes diverges from those traditions, highlighting a distinctive 'Coptic identity.' More broadly, church upbringing has thus allowed young Copts in the Netherlands and Italy to be both Coptic and Dutch/Italian, as well as Egyptian, Orthodox, and Christian, signifying that church leaders might be successful at taking on the challenge of setting the youth on "the right path," while applying certain degrees of adaptation. Although Coptic churches in diaspora have been particularly determined to safeguard their communal confines and avoid potential assimilation of their children and youth through a 'proper' upbringing, the possibility for multiple belongings of the youngest generations is, in fact, a direct implication of such a diasporic church upbringing, characterized by conscious efforts and a well-calculated approach, and thus not its unexpected side effect.

Church leaders in the two European Coptic communities invest a great amount of energy and effort in education and upbringing of children and youth, whom they see as "the future" and the key to the survival and continuity of the community in *mahgar*.

Therefore, church upbringing in the two diasporic Coptic communities plays a crucial role in defining communal boundaries. Communal bonds from the ‘homeland’ are recreated and reproduced through various educational and social activities and practices directed towards children and youth, forming and solidifying an internal aspect of a communal boundary. In this process, shared value and meaning systems are created, which become fundamental group markers. At the same time, on the external level, boundaries are negotiated and redefined through newly established social relations caused by migration, in which other groups are increasingly categorized as “different” and which do not fit within “our” value systems.

Children and youth are given a crucial and active role in their church communities. As the social actors who are expected to represent future values of today’s communities, young Copts lie at the heart of the process of communal continuity. Through the church upbringing system, the Coptic Church makes use of different mechanisms and tools allowing for children and young people to acquire particular roles in their communities. Through the practice of *khidma*, children first adopt the role of *makhdūmīn* (lit. those who are served) and who sometimes need special attention and supervision through the practice of *iftiqād*. As they grow, they prepare to be *khuddām* who are given more autonomy and agency. Although the clergy continues to play a central role in the complex process of knowledge production and transmission, the active involvement of lay members, primarily *khuddām*, is understood as crucial for the church’s growth and prosperity. This way, ‘active’ young Copts are prepared to serve future generations and therefore secure its continuity. In this process, we can argue that the transition from ‘childhood’ to what is considered as ‘youth’ is accompanied by and approximately corresponds to an important transition in the Copts’ communal religious lives and their roles in the church, roles which many of them adopt and perform with pride.

Chapter 7.

Conclusion

The initial wave of Coptic emigration began in the 1950s, involving a small, predominantly educated and skilled group. This emigration expanded significantly during the 1970s due to economic and political instability, which affected all Egyptians. The growing Islamization of the state and perceived religious discrimination further prompted Egypt's Christians to emigrate, many of whom settled in North America, Australia, and Europe. The first Coptic churches in Europe were established in the 1970s, specifically in the United Kingdom, France, and Germany, and slightly later in Italy, the Netherlands, Austria, and Spain, among others. Smaller in size and slightly younger in existence, Coptic communities in Europe are largely overlooked by scholars of Coptic and Middle Eastern studies, as well as among scholars of migration. This dissertation offered an intervention in filling this gap, providing the first comprehensive overview of the history of migration and the establishment of Coptic church communities in Europe.

The complex and multilayered process of community formation among migrant (religious) groups has often been overlooked or taken for granted. Diasporic Coptic communities are not an exception. Research on Copts outside of Egypt, as well as other migrant religious communities, has primarily focused on themes such as adaptation, cultural integration and change, the interplay between 'homeland' and 'host' society traditions, transnational connections, and the complex and often too broad concept of 'identity.' However, these have not been sufficiently analyzed in direct relation to the questions of how individuals *come to be communities* in the first place, what kind of communities they build, and how they continue to be so.

This dissertation uses this question as its main starting point, offering an exploration of several Coptic Orthodox communities in Europe, specifically in the Netherlands and Italy, through an analysis of their textual practices and prevalent narratives within these churches. The study, employing ethnography-like methods alongside philological, literary, and historical analyses, sought to demonstrate that by paying attention to and analyzing official textual practices, including overlooked simple and popular publications, we gain further insight into the internal dynamics, challenges, aspirations, and self-perceptions that define religious communities. In this conclusion, I provide a synthesized discussion of the three interrelated research questions explored throughout the dissertation: the roles of texts and textual practices in the making, maintaining, and reshaping of group boundaries among Coptic Orthodox communities in Europe; the contribution and central roles of church leaders in securing the future of the Coptic Orthodox Church and its communities in *mahgar*; and the mobilization of second- and third-generation Copts as both target and actors in boundary-making processes.

Textual practices, boundary-making, and belongings

When Copts migrated to new countries, they were initially scattered individuals and groups, with no substantial organized connections among themselves, except those who came from pre-existing networks from Egypt, such as extended families and friends. While there were faithful present before the foundation of new churches in these lands, my research supports the argument that it is the Church who in fact *created* the communities. Although the majority of members of Coptic parishes and dioceses in Europe, and in *mahgar* more broadly, share common ethnic origin and religious belonging, newly established parishes in host countries, shared religious practices, and parish activities provide the ground for forging stronger relational ties, or a higher degree of *connectedness* in Brubaker's and Cooper's words, among individuals.

In line with the Rewriting Global Orthodoxy project, my dissertation has focused on the central role of church textual practices in fostering a sense of groupness among members of the Coptic churches in the Netherlands and Italy and how these practices define and shape group boundaries within these churches. Given the argument that it was the Church who created these Coptic communities in *mahgar*, it becomes clear that traditions, teachings, and common church narratives, manifested through books, pamphlets, and other types of publications used in these churches, serve as the tools, or the glue, that bind individuals together and contribute to a feeling of belonging together (*Zusammengehörigkeitsgefühl*).

I have argued that in order to strengthen and secure solid group boundaries, church leaders and community members strive to create a sense of 'we-ness' among individuals. Throughout the chapters, it has been illustrated how textual practices of Coptic communities in Europe reflect and play a major role in the process of *communalization* (Weber, Juteau). Certain aspects of communal textual practices emerge as a necessity and become daily routine through the liturgical life, which necessitates the use of texts and books, thereby defining the daily religious practices of the community. The predominance of liturgical and ritual books, such as *Kholagys* and *Agbeyas*, in church bookstores highlights their central role in the religious life of the communities. These were the first books to be published and translated by early migrants in their new lands and are most frequently republished and revised, underscoring their enduring relevance for daily religious practices both in church and at home, thereby affirming their foundational importance to the collective spiritual needs of church members.

Furthermore, communalization often involves strategic choices by church leaders concerning the creation and selection of content for official publications, carefully selecting languages, topics, and genres. These align with what they consider essential for the continuity of their communities and homeland heritage, as well as with how these elements *should be* transmitted and taught. In other words, such choices reflect church leaders' visions of which elements should be mobilized to define both internal and external boundaries of their communities, but also mirror the need for adaptation caused by migration. This distinction underscores the broader context: while Coptic communities in Egypt are long-established, those in the diaspora must be constructed from scratch. Therefore, establishing and sustaining such communities in the diaspora, in places like the Netherlands and Italy, requires continuous efforts, negotiations, and redefinitions of what it means to be a Copt within these new social and cultural landscapes.

In the Coptic communities of the Netherlands and Italy, textual practices reflect a focused selection of genres and topics that align with the spiritual traditions and cultural heritage of the Church in Egypt and with the needs of local diasporic communities. Ritual and liturgical books, integral to daily and communal worship practices, dominate these selections and needs. The translations and publications of theological works, especially those by Pope Shenouda III, are prevalent, highlighting his significant role as a major spiritual figure. These works, foundational in shaping doctrinal understanding, link the diaspora communities with the religious discourses of their homeland. The availability of these publications in church bookstores mirrors the textual practices found in Egypt, providing a familiar environment that particularly resonates with first-generation migrants, enabling a sense of parish life from the homeland and of belonging to a community.

My research has shown that after liturgical books the most prevalent genres are religious teaching, spirituality, hagiography, and history, findings that were facilitated through work on the Four-Corners-of-the-World database. This genre diversity stems from the holistic vision upheld by church leadership, encompassing the multifaceted role of the church in the lives of its community members. Through their official publications, churches cover divergent aspects of knowledge production and transmission, perceiving these diverse themes and topics as essential components of the knowledge that the church should both possess and actively disseminate among its members. This diversity is common within singular publications, such as periodicals and educational materials, pointing to the blurring of genres and underscoring the intentions and purposes of such publications, which align with Carolyn Miller's genre theory.

As Asad reminds us, groups craft their distinctiveness through their own narratives. These narratives and the corresponding practices they inspire are instrumental in shaping what each group considers fundamental to its character. Consequently, such communal narratives form the basis for a strongly bounded sense of groupness. The historical narratives that frame the Coptic communities in the Netherlands and Italy play a pivotal role in defining communal boundaries and fostering a sense of belonging within the diaspora. A substantial portion of the publications available in European Coptic churches, whether sourced locally or imported from Egypt, focuses on the long-standing history and traditions of Coptic Christianity. These include the ancient origins of the Church and of Egyptian Christianity, its contributions to global Christianity such as monasticism, and themes of persecution and martyrdom, which are prominent narratives within the Coptic Church in Egypt and disseminated globally. Their extensive and continuous use, for example in literary formats like communal periodicals, serve to rewrite the history of communities, positioning the diaspora members within a larger framework of shared tradition and history.

By highlighting the tradition as “ancient,” “unchanging,” and “perseverant,” these narratives instill a profound sense of pride and belonging among community members, suggesting a larger role for them in the ongoing story of their faith. This sense of historical continuity is not just a passive heritage but is framed as a call to action, encouraging active participation in preserving these traditions, often presented as “under threat,” for example by learning the Coptic language or learning about early Egyptian saints among other things. Especially for young Copts born outside of Egypt, the portrayal of their faith as both vulnerable—particularly in the face of migration—and inherently strong motivates their involvement in church activities. The emphasis on the enduring nature of Coptic faith, despite challenges, serves to reinforce church members’ commitment to maintaining their spiritual and cultural practices, for instance through an active participation in the Liturgy, by reading and learning from church publications, and by *serving* their communities through Sunday schools.

Externally, this sense of an ancient, persevering community is highlighted on church websites, social media, and other public-oriented publications, where the Coptic Church is positioned within the global Christian landscape and local multicultural contexts. These public expressions not only affirm internal group solidarity but also establish distinct markers that differentiate the community in a broader setting, reinforcing external recognition of their ‘unique’ historical and spiritual heritage.

All diasporic Coptic churches endeavor to preserve norms and values from Egypt, and although there is variation in views on what elements of Egyptian (Coptic) culture should be transmitted to the younger generations, they uniformly emphasize upholding traditional values vis-a-vis their Western host societies. Indeed, the insistence on traditional (or orthodox) values is another principal narrative that has permeated many church publications and activities. Thus, morality has served as a fundamental cornerstone for establishing boundaries within these communities. Textual practices within the European Coptic communities serve as vital tools for engaging with and shaping responses to various social issues, reflecting a broader engagement seen within transnational religious circles. These practices are particularly focused on moral and social debates that resonate across global religious communities, addressing urgent concerns such as gender roles, homosexuality, and reproductive rights. These issues mirror the so-called ‘culture wars’ in the United States that have permeated public and political discourse since the twentieth century, positioning devout and conservative religious communities along a conservative-liberal spectrum. Textual outputs from the Coptic church—ranging from Pope Shenouda’s writings on women’s roles and homosexuality, across articles in community magazines to official proclamations on church websites and social media—play a crucial role in this discourse, framing and reinforcing traditional stances within these vibrant cultural battlegrounds, ultimately placing every church member within the framework of *shared* values and norms.

Materials published and used by Coptic churches in Europe are predominantly in Arabic, local languages, and Coptic. This diversity of languages reflects the linguistic realities of these communities, their daily lives, and broader religious practices. In examining the linguistic landscapes of Coptic communities in the Netherlands and Italy, it becomes evident that the choices and negotiation of languages—Arabic, Dutch/Italian, and Coptic—are deeply intertwined with the processes of community boundary making. These choices reflect the active roles of church leaders in shaping community cohesion and addressing the diverse needs of their congregants across generations.

Language use within these communities does not adhere to a fixed hierarchy but varies based on local dynamics, the demographic structure of the parishes, and the strategic visions of church leaders. For example, the inclusion of Dutch and Italian in liturgical practices is not merely a functional adaptation but often a conscious effort to involve younger generations and integrate the community within the broader social fabric of the host countries. This adaptation strategy is crucial for maintaining the continuity of Church traditions in a language that is accessible to those born in

the diaspora. However, the decision to incorporate local languages in parish practices and publications is not always a unanimously agreed strategy; it often emerges out of necessity and practical considerations, and sometimes, despite internal debates, the inclusion of these languages almost imposes itself as a pragmatic response to the demands of adaptation.

The role of Coptic, predominantly used in liturgical settings and traditional hymns across all parishes in the Netherlands and Italy, underscores its symbolic significance as a marker of heritage and Coptic identity, as described by several of my interlocutors. Despite its limited daily use, efforts to preserve Coptic through educational initiatives, like Sunday school lessons in some cases, reflect a dedication to maintaining a tangible link to the old Church tradition from Egypt, as well as to the collective memory. This is evident in the liturgical books and hymnals that are carefully curated to include Coptic alongside translations, ensuring that the sacred language remains a vibrant part of communal worship, even when only a few are able to read the text.

Historically, the use of Arabic dominated the early decades of the diaspora communities, reflecting the demographic makeup of primarily first-generation immigrants. Over time, as these communities have matured and become more generationally diverse, there has been a noticeable shift towards incorporating local languages more prominently. This is illustrated by the inclusion of Dutch alongside Arabic in the official diocesan periodical in the Netherlands. In Milan, the early initiatives by Bishop Kirolos to translate liturgical texts into Italian exemplified a forward-thinking approach to fostering community growth and securing the future of the church in Italy. This effort is perceived not only as a strategy for adaptation but as a sign of the community's prosperity and evolving belonging within the host society. Still, Arabic publications from Egypt dominate church libraries in most parishes in Italy and the Netherlands, acting as repositories of homeland heritage – knowledge, traditions, and even material culture preserved through stories and memories.

Local languages play a crucial role in fostering a sense of belonging in the adopted countries. Adopting Dutch and Italian for religious practices can be seen as a strategy for 'rooting' and 'integration.' Besides through texts, claiming belonging to local countries and societies is also expressed and encouraged visually and materially. 'Rooting' through the local language has also been a prominent strategy of the Coptic churches in Catalonia, in Spain. The leader of the small community, a senior priest from Egypt, who is fluent in Spanish and is learning Catalan, has decided to publish

new publications mainly in Spanish. Additionally, symbolic material emplacement of the community in the local environment is also sought through creating Spanish language inscriptions on church iconostases. Such practices have also been common in recently produced iconostases across the Netherlands and Italy.

In general, the approach to language use is highly circumstantial and individualized, influenced by the preferences and educational strategies of the clergy. In the geographically dispersed parishes of the Roman diocese, where there is significant diversity in parishioners' backgrounds, language choices reflect a complex negotiation of cultural preservation and practical communication needs. Unlike in the diocese of Milan, where language ideologies tend to be more homogeneous and unified, with Italian being a principal language of many parish activities, churches belonging to the Roman dioceses have distinct linguistic practices, with Arabic still playing a prominent role due to the presence of senior priests, a larger number of individuals with lower levels of education, as well as a higher number of recent (irregular) immigrants. This flexibility allows the church to cater to a wide range of linguistic competencies and cultural backgrounds. However, such diversity significantly impacts the sense of cohesion and unity, as activities and attitudes heavily depend on individual parish dynamics. Conversely, in the Diocese of Milan, adoption of Italian has become a significant community marker.

These linguistic strategies highlight the dynamic nature of language ideologies within different Coptic diasporas. They also underscore the crucial role of the church in navigating the challenges of maintaining a cohesive community that honors its Egyptian Coptic heritage while adapting to new cultural landscapes. Texts and narratives, whether through liturgy books, social media posts, or official websites, play a pivotal role in this process. As these communities continue to evolve, the ongoing negotiation of language use will remain a key factor in defining their boundaries and shaping their collective futures within the European context.

The analysis of textual practices within European Coptic communities reveals a nuanced interplay of multiple layers of belonging that shape the communal boundaries and cohesion of diasporic groups. From local community bonds to global religious affiliations, these layers are reflected in as well as constructed and reinforced through a variety of communal texts and narratives.

At the local level, a sense of shared belonging or 'we-ness' is fostered within individual parishes and dioceses. Newly established parishes in *mahgar* provided a platform and space for a group performance of shared religion and culture. Publications, such as the

so-called “testimony books”, often celebrate the establishment of communities from scratch, enhancing pride and belonging through stories of collective achievement and perseverance, and underlining the central role of pioneering priests, later bishops, in this process. Lay members contribute significantly, with their active participation in church life reinforcing their connection to the community. For example, the involvement of lay community members in authoring and translating publications, often viewed as a service (*khidma*) to their church and community—further cements this belonging to the parish. This participatory approach to publishing does more than disseminate knowledge; it acts as a vital part of their spiritual and communal duty, enhancing the sense of belonging and participation among members. Such engagement not only strengthens individual bonds with the church but also weaves these personal contributions into the fabric of community life, reinforcing a sense of groupness and ensuring the continuity of tradition within these diasporic settings.

The connection to Egypt is robust, maintained through the replication of visual and material cultures and parish life from the ‘Mother Church’ and the use of Arabic in liturgical settings and communal publications that serve as repositories of tradition and heritage. These texts not only link members to the Coptic motherland but also engage them with the broader narrative of Coptic history and its global significance. Portraits of Egyptian bishops and references to popes in church literature underscore this connection, presenting a continuous link to the authoritative figures of the Church. Moral and social values, often broadly Egyptian (views on premarital sex, homosexuality or smoking), are presented as stemming from Church teachings. Additionally, through social media and newsletters, Dutch and Italian Copts read about various events in Coptic churches in Egypt and through the practice of *khidma* often donate and collect money for those in need in Egypt. Notably, there is a clear distancing from Egyptian Muslims in most Dutch and Italian Coptic parishes, with no formal collaboration in the diaspora.

Besides the local aspect of communalization, i.e. on the parish level, and the links to Church in Egypt, a sense of belonging to the global Coptic community is also evident. Shared experiences and collective challenges are discussed in texts that circulate widely among different diasporas, such as shared Sunday school curricula and reports on global Coptic events. Additionally, the use of and reliance on various online and digital Coptic sources and databases across individual European parishes reinforce a sense of belonging to the wider Coptic world. Publications by Pope Shenouda, referred to as “*madrasa*” and “the Christian library” (by Bishop Arseny), as well as by Father Tadros Malaty or Father Menassa Youhanna, constitute a thread connecting diaspora churches that use their writings (often available as PDFs on

official church websites). This circulation of materials, including borrowed texts published in communal magazines and translations of works by clergy from various countries, positions each local parish within a larger network of the Coptic Church, united by shared traditions, trends, and a common understanding of what it means to be Coptic. These practices consolidate not only the idea of a transnational Coptic identity but also reinforce a sense of shared purpose across national boundaries, particularly around the issue of morality in the West. Moreover, the perception of Coptic communities abroad by church leadership and notable lay figures in Egypt reflects a view of these communities as integral parts of the worldwide Coptic Church, rather than dispersed or separate entities. This perspective is evidenced by the avoidance of the term ‘diaspora’ (or even ‘*mahgar*’) in official discourses, and is further supported by regular clerical visits, shared textual practices, and unified historical narratives.

Today, with established second and third generations, there is an emphasis on balancing ‘two different’ cultures, Egyptian Coptic and Dutch, Italian, and Spanish, or European more broadly. Church leaders acknowledge young Copts’ European birthplaces and local languages as integral parts of their daily lives and who they are, leading to church leaders seeking “the right approach” to shape the commitment of second- and third-generation Copts to their Church. The belonging to their local environments is also achieved by authoring and publishing texts that highlight their presence and activities in these countries. Histories, church overviews, and descriptions of community events all find their way into these publications. Notably, these accounts often emphasize contact with the local population, such as the close relationship between the Roman Catholic church and the Coptic church in Milan. By showcasing these interactions, the texts solidify the position of Copts within their adopted societies, demonstrating a commitment to being valued members of their local surroundings. Although any type of assimilation or dissolution into the local societies is categorically rejected (i.e. loss of a distinct ‘Copticness’), total seclusion is avoided and not desired, as claims of belonging to local societies come from the need to be seen as equal and counter possible discrimination.

Consequently, Coptic communities in Europe challenge traditional views of diaspora by actively negotiating multiple layers of belonging that defy static identities and fixed notions of homeland. I argue that today’s communities, with many secured places of worship, established church lives and the presence of the second and third generations, do not occupy some kind of limbo or an ‘in-between’ space, as it is usually thought for diasporic communities, but in fact express belonging to their own parishes and larger dioceses, to Egypt and the Netherlands or Italy, as their countries

of residence or birth. This complex landscape spans local, national, and transnational spheres, where texts and narratives are pivotal in mediating relationships and providing a framework that supports unity while respecting the diversity and distinct needs of its members.

Common narratives and attitudes in official church discourses in the Netherlands and Italy also show broader 'Orthodox' and 'Christian' expressions of belonging. Context shapes these layers, as 'Orthodox' and 'Christian' categories gain new meanings in the West, embodying traditions seen as a bulwark in an increasingly secular world. Coptic communities respond by aligning with local and global (migrant) Christian groups to face the diminishing societal role of faith. For instance, Coptic churches in the Netherlands collaborate actively with other Orthodox congregations, and in Milan, they partner mostly with local Catholics, addressing the growing secularization together.

Despite being part of broader Orthodox or Christian spheres, discussions in publications focus mainly on distinct Coptic traditions rather than on a general Orthodoxy. Initiatives aiming for broader discussions, such as the "universally Christian" magazine *Tralci-Niklima* in Italy, faced resistance from clergy, highlighting tensions in balancing specific Coptic traditions with wider Christian belonging. Diocesan publications target their specific congregations and are typically not intended for broader local readerships, reinforcing the communal aspect of their textual practices, and often are in languages like Dutch, not accessible to other diasporas. In many instances, it is not clear whether expressions, texts, or broader narratives relate specifically to the Coptic church and community or to Christianity and the global Church more broadly. My analysis in Chapters 5 and 6 demonstrates that 'the Church' is often understood synonymously with 'the Coptic community,' yet there are contradictions in this alignment, especially when it comes to preserving unique cultural elements from Egypt, addressing moral issues, and navigating denominational differences among various Christian groups.

Clergy and securing the future of their communities

As already mentioned, this dissertation has argued that it was the Coptic Church, as an institution, with its clerical leadership who created the communities outside of Egypt. Although lay church members have been an indispensable part of the community formation processes in the Netherlands and Italy, my research has acknowledged the centrality of the clergy and institutional leadership in forging

and maintaining communal bonds and boundaries. Scholars like Brubaker, Cooper, Etzioni, and McCallum have all recognized the importance of institutions and institutional leadership in creating and strengthening communal ties. Here, I will recapitulate three crucial aspects of the clergy's roles in these processes, ultimately shedding light on how such endeavors contribute to securing the future of the Coptic Church in *mahgar*.

The first aspect concerns the establishment of parishes in host countries. The initiative to establish Coptic churches catering to the needs of migrants often originated directly from the Coptic Patriarchate in Egypt. Central to this process, the clergy played a fundamental role in congregating individuals and structuring these communities around the church, thereby fostering a sense of unity and shared purpose. In many cases, the pioneering priests collected names of Coptic migrants in new lands and sent reports back to the leadership in Cairo, reporting on the needs for establishing parishes. Therefore, the Church sought to provide early migrants with liturgical services and enable the performance of sacraments, such as baptism and holy matrimony. This way, as different Coptic leaders and authors have written, including Pope Shenouda and Bishop Arseny of the Netherlands, the Church *served* the believers and thus established *khidma* outside of Egypt. *Khidma* in this sense signified the presence of a priest in a new land, who could celebrate the Liturgy and who gathered dispersed individuals in order to establish stable church parishes, thus acting as a shepherd (*rā'ī*) who guided his flock and nurtured the communal spirit among the early migrants.

Clergy, chiefly bishops and local priests, shape and organize parish life to a great extent: their linguistic competences influence the languages used in the liturgy and general daily communication within the parish. Their backgrounds and personal affinities also dictate which activities are prioritized, whether *khuddām* are granted full agency, and what languages are taught within the parish. For instance, the priest serving in Bologna finds the preservation of Coptic a crucial aspect of being a Copt and occasionally teaches it to the children in his parish, which is not common across all the parishes in the diocese. The organization of parish life is usually done in accordance with, and under the supervision of, the bishop, particularly in centralized dioceses like Milan and the Netherlands, whereas in the Diocese of Rome, such direct oversight is not always possible.

One of the primary and initial tasks in establishing parishes by the Church and early clergy involved importing materials from Egypt—predominantly liturgical and other books that remind migrants of their homeland—and translating ritual books from

the outset, as exemplified by Bishop Marcos in the Netherlands who facilitated the translation of the liturgy into Dutch in 1976. Later on, mirroring the tradition in Egypt, clerical figures (priests and bishops) established themselves as authors and editors of various communal publications, including liturgical books, periodicals, articles, different types of pamphlets, as well as newsletters. This facilitated the establishment of bishops and priests as leading figures of their communities.

Furthermore, portraits of bishops adorn church walls and introductory pages of most publications, where their blessings are prominently mentioned in prefaces and introductions. In many cases, bishops, and sometimes priests, are authors of these prefaces and introductions. This constant visual and textual reminder reinforces the idea of a single, authoritative leader guiding the community. In this way, the bishop serves as a central figure, fostering a sense of shared direction and purpose among all members of the Coptic church, often celebrated through news, reports, and publications. Examples include the above-mentioned “testimony books” and YouTube documentaries about Bishops Anba Kirolos of Milan and Anba Arseny of the Netherlands.

The second aspect of the role of the Coptic clergy in *mahgar* in the process of boundary-making concerns moral guidance. Clergy within the Coptic Church, both in Egypt and the diaspora, serve as pivotal figures of authority, shaping the moral and social norms of their congregations. Their roles are instrumental in delineating the boundaries of the community, reflecting a continuation of dynamics observed within Egypt’s Coptic community. In the diaspora, the challenge intensifies as communities need to be forged anew amidst migration and the pressures of secularization and cultural integration in Western societies. This necessitates a strategic, multifaceted engagement from church leaders to maintain doctrinal purity and communal cohesion.

In Western contexts such as the Netherlands and Italy, Coptic bishops and priests use a variety of channels to impart these values—texts, sermons, personal consultations, and educational programs are all employed to reach across generational lines within the community. Publications like *al-Tariq* and *Eccliseia* play a crucial role, with their repetitive nature and fixed columns over the years underscoring the enduring relevance of topics such as marriage, upbringing of children, or ethical dilemmas for the church and its clergy, who are often the authors of these texts. Tailored to resonate with the realities of the diaspora, these periodicals persistently discuss moral and social issues, reflecting the commitment of churches to guiding their congregants through the challenges of modern society. Although these periodicals

may have a limited readership, the texts on Christian values, proper conduct, and morality reflect broader narratives within the church and can be found in other spheres of activity, including in Sunday schools and different types of communal or transnational conferences. Some categorized under the *mashūra* genre, these publications offer guidance that is both practical and reflective of Orthodox teachings, ensuring relevance and adherence to traditional values.

A large portion of these discussions is focused on youth, who are deemed most susceptible to secular influences due to their upbringing abroad. However, the adult members of the community are also targeted, tasked with upholding and transmitting Egyptian Christian values to their children to ensure they are raised on “the right path.” Although many of the values and norms taught to youth can be characterized as broadly Egyptian or Middle Eastern (such as views on homosexuality, drinking alcohol, or premarital sex), the heavy use and reliance on Scriptures places such discourses under a particularly Christian framework. Through these efforts, the clergy extend their influence beyond religious practices to become a central part of daily life for Copts abroad, guiding them through the complexities of modern society while keeping them rooted in their Orthodox Christian heritage.

Lastly, closely connected to the second aspect, the clergy are largely seen as possessors and producers of correct, verified, and legitimate knowledge. Within the transnational Coptic Church, from local parishes in the diaspora to the historical centers in Egypt, clergy are entrusted with the authoritative production and transmission of knowledge that aligns with Orthodox teachings. The content delivered through sermons, Sunday school materials, and various publications reflects a deep-seated trust in the clergy’s capacity to discern and distribute ‘correct’ knowledge.

In diaspora communities, the responsibility of clergy in producing and transmitting verified knowledge is particularly critical, given the need to forge cohesive community bonds that rest on shared teachings and values. For instance, texts by influential figures like Pope Shenouda III are incorporated extensively within Sunday school curricula and are used transnationally, underpinning the education of the youngest church members with a consistent doctrinal foundation. Similarly, sermons from well-known priests and bishops, preferred by Sunday school teachers like Marina in Milan, are translated and adapted to local contexts, ensuring that teachings remain rooted in Coptic Orthodox principles yet accessible to the youth facing modern social and moral challenges. These sermons, drawn from recognized authorities within the church, help educators like Marina avoid the dissemination of erroneous or non-

Christian information, highlighting a communal deference to clerical authority as a safeguard against doctrinal inaccuracies.

Furthermore, the integration of these teachings into daily decision-making and moral evaluations illustrates the profound influence of the clergy in shaping community norms and behaviors. For instance, in settings like the Sunday school in Utrecht, discussions on decision-making underscore the priest's role as a spiritual advisor whose guidance is crucial in navigating both personal and communal dilemmas. The understanding of priests and bishops as custodians of 'correct' knowledge reflects a broader narrative within the church, arising not only from their roles in administering sacraments and offering spiritual guidance but also from their recognized or assumed expertise in matters concerning the Church, its history, and traditions. As figures entrusted with the responsibility to transmit this knowledge to their congregants, their authority is underscored by the fact that they are the primary authors of many publications found within the churches. Despite the varying educational backgrounds of these clerical figures, their authority is seldom questioned, underlining the trust and dependency placed in their teachings by the community, a dynamic that is mirrored in both Egypt and *mahgar*. This enduring trust in the clergy's authority ensures that they remain pivotal in defining and maintaining the doctrinal purity and communal integrity of the Coptic Church, regardless of geographic or cultural distances.

Youth as target and agents: Engaging and shaping communal boundaries

Second- and third-generation Copts in *mahgar* are central to the boundary-making process within European Coptic communities, serving both as primary targets and active participants in shaping and maintaining these communal boundaries. These younger members are often regarded as "the future of the Church," a perspective strongly supported by church leaders both in Egypt and in the diaspora. This significant role is reflected in the multitude of church programs tailored specifically for them—from the translation of liturgical texts to modern digital outreach efforts such as YouTube videos and podcasts, all designed to resonate with their lived experiences in European contexts.

As targets, these younger Copts are integrated into the educational framework of *al-tarbiyya al-kanasiyya* ("church upbringing") through Sunday schools, which impart knowledge of Church traditions, history, and doctrines alongside moral teachings

and the importance of active participation in church celebrations, thus focusing heavily on both *ta'lim* (transmission of knowledge and instruction) and *tarbiyya* (upbringing) aspects of education. This system, supported by linguistic adaptations and publications tailored to them, ensures the accessibility and relevance of Church teachings. Additional engagement through youth conferences and practices like *iftiqād*, where church leaders or experienced *khuddām* (helpers) visit families and children who lose interest in attending liturgies or Sunday schools, helps to reinforce those teachings and ensure the youth remain within the church sphere.

Transitioning from recipients to contributors, these youths undergo a significant transformation as they grow. The process of growing up within the church marks their shift from *makhdūmīn* (those who are served) to *khuddām* (those who serve), actively involving them in the communal spiritual and cultural life. Older youths take on responsibilities such as translating and publishing church materials (like groups *Osret al-targama wa al-nashr* in Amsterdam and *I figli della luce* in Milan), serving in liturgical roles (for male members), and teaching in Sunday schools, thus passing on their knowledge and traditions to younger cohorts. They also organize their own meetings, select topics for communal discussions, and represent the church in broader societal interactions, which highlights their vital role in linking their communities with the external environment.

This active involvement of youth in church activities is crucial for realizing their membership within the community, as outlined by theorists like Barth, and Brubaker and Cooper. Their regular attendance at Sunday liturgies, participation in Sunday schools, and engagement in *khidma* are not just ritualistic; these actions establish a symbolic boundary of belonging and reinforce internal community bonds. Moreover, in secular contexts like the Netherlands and Italy, these practices serve as everyday affirmations of faith and distinct identity markers, separating them from the secular mainstream and enhancing the sense of belonging to a distinctive, bounded group.

By assigning these roles and responsibilities, church leaders not only foster a strong connection among community members but also instill a sense of pride and value in the younger generation. These young Copts are empowered to see themselves as crucial actors in preserving the rich traditions from Egypt and adapting them to their lives in *mahgar*, ensuring the survival and vibrancy of their community.

While there is no quantitative data to support the notion that the number of active children and youth in Coptic churches across Europe is increasing or that these individuals will maintain their involvement in church activities in the future,

qualitative indicators do highlight ongoing efforts to engage this demographic, as illustrated above. Unlike in Egypt, where the parish often becomes a central aspect of Coptic life, securing youth participation in Europe seems more challenging. Some priests and Sunday school teachers have reported difficulties in attracting large numbers of young people to join church *khidma* consistently, especially in smaller parishes like the one in Leeuwarden in the northern Netherlands or some parishes in the Roman diocese. Despite these challenges, there is undeniable evidence of concerted attempts to reach out to younger church members. This is evidenced by recent increases in activities tailored specifically for them, along with a growing number of publications and translations intended for the youth, to which they also contributed. Additionally, the clergy and parents frequently collaborate to foster connections between the youth and the church. Several priests in the Netherlands and Italy have expressed both encouragement and caution about the active involvement of young members in their parishes, acknowledging that this is an ongoing process. Ultimately, further research incorporating both diachronic developments and quantitative data is essential to fully understand these dynamics.

Concluding remarks

7

The question of securing the continuity and future of the community and Church traditions from Egypt in *mahgar* can be placed within larger discussions pertinent to the Rewriting Global Orthodoxy project. It is important to underline that although multiple similarities and common developments have been observed in how different Oriental Orthodox churches practice their religion in various European countries, there is no specifically ‘Oriental Orthodox’ way of being about the issue of securing continuity and more broadly related to how these communities deal with issues of adaptation, boundary maintenance, and belonging in the diaspora. However, the idea of ‘Global Orthodoxy’ provides a framework within which we can better understand current and possible future attitudes regarding the question of how to ensure the continuity of Coptic and other (Oriental) Orthodox communities in Europe or elsewhere. While certainly more scholarly research and deeper comparisons are needed in this field, I suggest that the insistence on “authenticity” and “unchanging faith and tradition”, as well as the strong boundary work around morality, as clearly expressed in diasporic Coptic churches, form the ground for a broader Orthodox framework.

Overall, the findings of this study highlight numerous similarities in how diasporic churches in the Netherlands and Italy, as well as in the small communities of Spain,

deal with challenges of migration, change, and adaptation, and how they work to forge a sense of belonging together within their communities. More studies on other Coptic communities in Europe are needed in order to designate these commonalities and experiences as specifically ‘Coptic European,’ but it is evident that one can detect the existence and production of narratives of *shared* struggles, concerns, and aspirations across different Coptic communities in Europe. At the same time, however, research into different Coptic communities across Europe reveals significant variations in community formation and lived experiences, shaped by factors such as geographic dispersion, demographic composition, financial resources, and organizational structures. Notably, the Netherlands presents a more unified and centralized diocesan structure, in contrast to Italy, where two independent dioceses have developed divergently since the 1980s and 1990s due to distinct geographical, demographic, and financial conditions. The Milan diocese exhibits a high degree of unity, whereas the Rome diocese is characterized by diversity and a weaker sense of communal belonging. This disparity challenges the notion of a coherent ‘Coptic community in Italy’ and reflects broader patterns observed in other European countries like France. These distinctions indicate that developments and dynamics in these communities could provide insights into future trends in other diasporic Coptic communities, refuting the notion of a singular ‘Coptic identity in the diaspora.’

Finally, studying textual practices of the Coptic communities in the Netherlands and Italy reveals a conscious effort to define and shape these communities. The stories, histories, and different types of content presented in various textual formats contribute to the ongoing ‘rewriting’ of these communities and their boundaries. This reflects the dynamic nature of expressions of what it means to be ‘Coptic’ in the Netherlands, Italy, Europe, and in the diaspora more broadly. Therefore, the analysis of texts and common church narratives in these churches showcases how church leaders, together with lay members, engage in continuous boundary work and do not take continuity and growth of their communities for granted. Despite limited and sometimes symbolic readership, the ongoing efforts to publish, translate, and disseminate various materials and narratives among church members, especially second and third generations, underscore the need to address ambiguities, adapt to changing circumstances, and maintain group boundaries and community cohesion.

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Research Data Management

The research data for this project was collected through various methods, including notes from fieldwork visits, audio recordings of interviews, and their subsequent transcriptions. Some of these notes are available in physical form on paper, while others are in digital format. Additionally, certain documents contain my personal notes, ideas, and reflections, which were instrumental in helping me develop my research questions and ideas, as well as to reflect on what I observed, heard, and read during the study. The processing of this data follows rigorous standards to ensure both the accuracy and security of the information throughout the research process.

Data Collection: The data was gathered from multiple sources, including informal conversations and personal communications with various church members across different countries—specifically, the Netherlands, Italy, Spain, and Egypt. Alongside these interactions, general observations were carefully recorded during visits to the churches. These notes, which include crucial details such as dates, places, and occasionally the names of specific individuals, are essential for maintaining the contextual accuracy of the research.

Data Transcription and Anonymization: Audio recordings of interviews were transcribed into detailed text documents for analysis. To protect the privacy of participants, most names and identifying details were pseudonymized or anonymized during transcription. This process involved replacing real names with pseudonyms or removing direct identifiers, ensuring participants' identities are safeguarded. The original names and personal information are securely stored in a separate, protected folder within the Radboud University cloud storage system, accessible only to authorized project members.

Data Organization: For better structure and organization, the notes were categorized based on their content. Notes related to general observations and themes are stored in one set of documents. Notes from Sunday schools and youth activities are maintained separately to keep the data organized. Additionally, interview transcriptions are stored in distinct documents to facilitate easier access and analysis.

Textual Materials: Textual materials collected from various Coptic churches in Europe, used to create a general overview of the textual practices in these communities, for the work in the Four-Corners-of-the-World database, and for the analysis of specific research questions and themes, are available in physical form in my personal library. Some of these materials are also available in digital format,

stored in the cloud, or accessed via various church websites that were consulted during the research.

Data Storage: All research data, including fieldwork notes, general observations, personal reflections, specific communication details, interview transcriptions, and collected textual materials, is securely stored. Digital data is maintained in the protected folder of the Radboud University cloud storage, which is equipped with advanced security measures, and access is strictly limited to project members. Physical materials, including notes and textual resources, are stored securely in my personal library.

Data Utilization in Dissertation: Parts of these conversations, observations, and collected textual materials were used in the dissertation, including direct quotes. However, all identifiable information used in the dissertation was thoroughly anonymized to ensure the confidentiality of participants, particularly for those whose identities and personal details were not critical to the research or who did not consent to having their details shared publicly. When it comes to communal church publications, information available in those sources (such as names of authors and translators, places of publication, etc.) was included in the references due to their public character.

Appendix 1 – General interview questions (Italy)

1. When did the migration of Copts to Milan/Italy begin and what were the main reasons for migration?
2. The Coptic Church in Italy has 2 bishops – what are the main reasons for that?
3. Is the community in Lombardy growing? Are there differences in migration of Copts to northern Italy now compared to earlier times?
4. What are the most crucial issues that the Church had to deal with upon migration and when it comes to establishing the Coptic community in northern Italy?
5. How does the Coptic Diocese of Milan try to preserve Coptic tradition and identity in Italy?
 - a. What are the most important aspects of this tradition and identity that are transmitted to the young Copts in Milan/Italy?
 - b. What are the Diocese's strategies to preserve this tradition among different generations of Copts in the community? (for example, in order to keep the community together in the Church)
6. Do you think the Coptic tradition somehow changes in the diaspora, more specifically in Europe and in Italy? (compared to Egypt)
 - a. What can change and what cannot?
7. There is a strong effort and attention towards “i giovani” of the church. What does that exactly mean and where can we see that effort (in what activities and strategies)?
8. In what ways does the Diocese keep the connection with Egypt?
9. Tell me more about the language use in the church and among the community members (Arabic-Italian-Coptic).
10. Can you tell me more about the cooperation between the Coptic Church and other churches in Milan/Italy? – for example, with the Catholics and other Orthodox churches.
11. Can you tell me more about textual and publishing activities of the Diocese?
 - a. Publishing new materials
 - b. Translation of books into Italian
 - c. Digitization of books and other materials (on the website, as pdf, etc.)
12. How does the Diocese use various books in the church – for liturgy, education, etc.?
13. Do people use and buy these books in churches; do they like to read? How about digital formats?

Appendix 2 – Interview questions and topics related to migration and textual practices in the Netherlands (Arabic)

1. هجرة الأقباط إلى أوروبا وخاصةً إلى هولندا (وبلجيكا)، والأسباب الأساسية لهجرتهم
2. إنتاج ونشر وبيع الكتب في الكنيسة القبطية في هولندا - المعلومات الأساسية
3. أهمية الكتب للكنيسة ولتراثها في الوقت المعاصر خاصةً في المهجر القبطي (هل الناس يقرأون...ويشترون كتب الكنيسة، كتب 'حقيقية' مقابل كتب عبر الإنترنت)
4. لغات الكنيسة القبطية في هولندا (في أنشطتها المختلفة) وأهمية هذه اللغات ل'هوية' أو 'شخصية' الكنيسة
5. تدريس اللغتين العربية والقبطية في الكنيسة (مثلاً في مدارس الأحد)
6. أبرز التغيرات والقضايا التي يجب على الكنيسة في المهجر أن تتعامل معها (مقارنة بالوضع في مصر والأزمنة السابقة)

Translation:

1. Migration of the Copts to Europe and specifically to the Netherlands (and Belgium), and the main reasons for their migration.
2. Production, publishing, and selling of books in the Coptic church in the Netherlands – main information.
3. The importance of these books for the church and its tradition in the contemporary times, and especially in diaspora (e.g., do people read and buy books in the church?; what about 'real' (printed) books versus those on the internet?...)
4. The languages of the Coptic church in the Netherlands (across various activities) and the importance of these languages for the 'identity' of the church.
5. The teaching of Arabic and Coptic in the church (for example, in Sunday schools)
6. The most salient changes and issues that the churches in mahgar need to deal with (compared to the situation in Egypt and earlier periods)

Appendix 3 – Interview questions on Sunday schools

1. Give some general information about the Sunday school education in your church and the diocese more broadly – its meanings for the church and community, importance and goals.
2. Can you tell me more about the Sunday school curriculum: the source; how do teachers apply it?; do you add any sources?; does the design and structure of the curriculum help in your goal?; are there any changes or adaptations to the European/Dutch context?
3. What are the most important things that the church and its servants want to teach and ‘instill’ within children?
4. What are the most important topics and themes covered in Sunday schools?
5. What is your feeling or impression when it comes to receptiveness of children and youth of these teachings and practices?
6. Can you tell me a bit more about the importance of cultivating/promoting Egyptian and Coptic identity in the community, and particularly among young Copts? And how is this done?
7. What is the most commonly spoken language (‘Lingua franca’) in your church? How important is it to retain Arabic for the ‘communal identity’? How are these linguistic challenges negotiated?
8. How do you see the question of a ‘dual identity’ and belonging to both Egypt and the local society? What are the struggles and challenges of this, if there are any? And how does the church approach this issue in Sunday schools?
9. One of the biggest challenges of the church is how to keep the youth inside. What is your take on this? What is the biggest challenge here and how do the churches in *mahgar* approach this issue?
10. What is the role of priests for community members and particularly for the youth in your church?
11. How does the Church see those ‘secular’ or ‘liberal’ activities among the youth, that are usually normal and common among the Dutch/Italian youth?
12. Can you say something about youth activities and what is their main purpose?
13. What role does the church and the community play for you? In general, how important are they for your daily living and as part of your identity or in your life?
14. Have you experience any differences when it comes to religiosity and practicing religion and faith compared to your parents? (who were born in Egypt)



Curriculum Vitae

Matija Miličić was born in Vrbas, Serbia, on May 29, 1995. He completed his Bachelor of Arts in Arabic Language, Literature, and Culture at the University of Belgrade in 2018. Following this, he pursued a Master of Arts in Middle Eastern Studies with a specialization in Arabic Studies at Leiden University, where he graduated in 2019. His master's thesis explored literary representation and expressions of nation, statehood, and national and societal belonging in contemporary Kuwaiti novels.

In December 2019, Matija began his PhD in Religious Studies at Radboud University Nijmegen, as part of the larger ERC-funded project "Rewriting Global Orthodoxy: Oriental Christians in Europe between 1970 and 2020." During his PhD project, Matija conducted research trips among various Coptic Orthodox communities in the Netherlands, Italy, Spain, and Egypt. Between 2020 and 2024, he presented his research at various international conferences and workshops and his work has been published in journals such as *Etnofoor* and in edited volumes, as well as on platforms like Egypt Migrations.

In addition to his academic work, Matija has pursued further professional development, including a certification in Teaching Arabic as a Foreign Language from the Netherlands-Flemish Institute in Cairo (NVIC) and a course on Migrant Inclusion Policies and Practices at Radboud University. In April 2024, he joined Museum Catharijneconvent in Utrecht as a Researcher and Heritage Specialist, focusing on the preservation and development of material heritage among different Orthodox communities in the Netherlands.

Summary/Samenvatting

This dissertation examines the intricate processes of community formation among the Coptic Orthodox communities in the Netherlands and Italy, focusing on the role of textual practices in negotiating identities and maintaining cultural and religious heritage within diaspora conditions. These communities, primarily formed from migrations beginning in the 1970s, offer a rich context for exploring how texts sustain traditional practices in new sociocultural landscapes.

The methodology employed in this dissertation reflects the interdisciplinary nature of the larger “Rewriting Global Orthodoxy” project, drawing from a diverse range of disciplines such as religious studies, history, anthropology, and literary studies to provide a holistic understanding of the community dynamics within Coptic Orthodox communities in Europe. The study integrates ethnographic observations, content analysis of community publications, and interviews with community leaders and members. This methodological approach enabled a multifaceted exploration of how texts are intertwined with the everyday lives and religious practices of these communities, helping to sustain a continuous connection with Coptic traditions while adapting to new sociocultural environments.

Central to the analysis are three guiding research questions: What roles do texts and textual practices play in the making, maintaining, and reshaping of group boundaries among Coptic Orthodox communities in Europe? What contributions do church leaders make in securing the future of these communities? How are second and third-generation Copts mobilized as both targets and actors in these boundary-making processes?

Challenging the often vague and indiscriminately used concept of ‘identity,’ this research draws upon the sophisticated theoretical propositions by Brubaker and Cooper, who advocate for the analytical use of *commonality*, *connectedness*, and *groupness* instead. This framework provides a robust tool for dissecting the processes through which communities articulate their sense of belonging and manage their communal boundaries. Additionally, by integrating concepts such as diaspora and boundary-making from scholars like Fredrik Barth and Rogers Brubaker, the dissertation enriches the understanding of how religious communities maintain their cohesion in the diaspora context through active and dynamic boundary management practices.

The study rigorously examines the profound influence of official church publications - ranging from history books to communal magazines and Sunday school materials

- authored predominantly by clerical community members. These texts, utilized in various rituals, practices, and activities both within church settings and at home, along with narratives they shape and disseminate, go beyond serving as mere repositories of information. They are powerful instruments for shaping and maintaining a shared sense of belonging within new social contexts, essentially redefining and reinterpreting group boundaries and traditions. This process of rewriting is often a deliberate strategy by the churches to navigate the complexities of maintaining cohesive community identity in a dynamically changing environment.

Textual practices in the Coptic Orthodox Church are not limited to transferring narrations or religious doctrine; they serve a broader function of increasing the visibility of the community within the wider society and carving out a public space for believers to connect with their faith and church. The production and dissemination of these texts, from liturgical books such as *Kholagys* and *Agbeyas* to various theological books and hagiographies available in church shops, mirror a tradition common to Coptic churches in Egypt.

Language plays a critical role in these practices, with Arabic, Coptic, and the local European languages each serving distinct functions that collectively facilitate the daily religious and communal life of the Coptic diaspora. Arabic links members to their Egyptian roots and is predominantly used in liturgies, daily communication, and publishing; Coptic is reserved for liturgical use, highlighting connections to ancient Christian traditions; and local languages such as Dutch and Italian are crucial for engaging younger generations and integrating the community into the broader social fabric of their new countries. This linguistic negotiation reflects both adaptation and strategies by church leaders is a key aspect of how community boundaries are negotiated and maintained, ultimately showcasing what it means to be a 'Copt' in the Netherlands or Italy.

By choosing to rewrite and retell certain narratives, the communities engage in a dynamic process of sustaining and adapting their traditions to address the challenges of uprootedness in the diaspora. Ultimately, this research underscores the multifaceted nature of texts as active participants in the construction and ongoing development of religious communities. By analyzing both the content and how these publications are produced and used, a deeper understanding of the inner dynamics and practices that bind the members of these communities together across national borders is achieved.

The active engagement of youth within the community, detailed in one of the chapters, is a significant focus; they are deeply involved in community and textual practices, which ensures they recognize their importance in sustaining church traditions. This involvement not only cultivates a strong sense of belonging but also positions them as integral to the “future of the Church.” Clergy and senior lay members specifically design activities and publications for these younger generations, recognizing them as the bearers of traditions and the ones who will navigate the Church through societal challenges in environments often seen as “modern” and “secular.” These efforts are aimed at imparting the ‘right’ and ‘proper’ values and teachings that are deemed essential for maintaining the integrity and unity of the communities. Concurrently, the youth also take initiative by organizing their own activities, such as youth meetings, and assuming active roles within the church, ensuring that they contribute to, rather than merely inherit, the traditions and teachings of their community.

Overall, this dissertation contributes to diaspora studies, religious studies, and migration studies by detailing the mechanisms through which communities *become* communities in the first place, and how they maintain their coherence and unity amidst challenges caused by migration. It provides detailed insights into how textual practices and broader communal narratives within European Coptic Orthodox churches help navigate change, adaptation, and continuity, and how such practices contribute to the rewriting of group boundaries. The study highlights how various Coptic communities in Europe develop a sense of belonging, yet exhibit significant differences in community structure influenced by demographic, geographic, and sociocultural factors. These variations challenge the idea of a unified ‘Coptic identity in the diaspora’ and underscore the need for further research into these diverse diasporic experiences.

Deze dissertatie onderzoekt de complexe processen van gemeenschapsvorming binnen de Koptisch-Orthodoxe gemeenschappen in Nederland en Italië, met een focus op de geschreven traditie en de rol daarvan bij identiteitsvormingen behoud van cultureel en religieus erfgoed binnen diaspora-omstandigheden. Deze gemeenschappen, die voornamelijk zijn gevormd vanaf de migratie die begon in de jaren '70, bieden een rijke context voor de verkenning hoe teksten ondersteunen in nieuwe sociaal-culturele landschappen.

De methodologie die in deze dissertatie wordt gebruikt, weerspiegelt de interdisciplinaire aard van het grotere project "Rewriting Global Orthodoxy", waarbij wordt geput uit een diverse reeks disciplines zoals religiestudies, geschiedenis, antropologie en literatuurstudies om een holistisch begrip te bieden van de dynamiek binnen Koptisch-Orthodoxe gemeenschappen in Europa. De studie integreert etnografische observaties, inhoudsanalyse van publicaties van de geloofsgemeenschappen en interviews met hun leiders en -leden. Deze aanpak maakte een veelzijdige verkenning mogelijk van hoe teksten zijn verweven met het dagelijks leven en de religieuze praktijken van deze gemeenschappen, waardoor een continue verbinding met Koptische tradities wordt vormgegeven terwijl men zich aanpast aan nieuwe sociaal-culturele omgevingen.

Centraal in de analyse staan drie leidende onderzoeksvragen. Welke rol spelen teksten en tekstuele praktijken bij het vormen, onderhouden en hervormen van groepsgrenzen in Koptisch-Orthodoxe gemeenschappen in Europa? Welke bijdrage leveren kerkleiders aan het veiligstellen van de toekomst van deze gemeenschappen? Hoe worden Kopten van de tweede en derde generatie gemobiliseerd, zowel als ontvangers als makers in deze grensvormende processen?

De studie onderzoekt grondig de verregaande invloed van officiële kerkpublicaties - variërend van geschiedenisboeken tot gemeenschappelijke tijdschriften en zondagsschoolmateriaal - die voornamelijk door kerkelijke gemeenschapsleden zijn geschreven. Deze teksten, gebruikt in verschillende rituelen, praktijken en activiteiten zowel binnen kerkelijke instellingen als thuis, zijn meer dan slechts informatiedragers. Ze zijn krachtige instrumenten voor het vormen en onderhouden van een gedeeld gevoel van verbondenheid binnen nieuwe sociale contexten, waarbij groepsgrenzen en tradities in wezen opnieuw worden gedefinieerd en geïnterpreteerd. Dit proces van herdefiniëring is vaak een doelbewuste strategie van de kerken om de complexiteit van het handhaven van een samenhangende gemeenschapsidentiteit in een dynamisch veranderende omgeving te kunnen sturen.

Taal speelt een cruciale rol in deze praktijken, waarbij het Arabisch, het Koptisch en de lokale Europese talen elk afzonderlijke functies vervullen die gezamenlijk het dagelijkse religieuze en gemeenschappelijke leven van de Koptische diaspora vergemakkelijken. Arabisch verbindt leden met hun Egyptische wortels en wordt voornamelijk gebruikt in liturgieën, dagelijkse communicatie en publicaties; Koptisch wordt slechts toegepast voor liturgisch gebruik, waarbij de verbindingen met oude christelijke tradities worden benadrukt; en lokale talen zoals Nederlands en Italiaans zijn essentieel voor het betrekken van jongere generaties en het integreren van de gemeenschap in het bredere sociale netwerk van hun nieuwe thuisland. Deze linguïstische onderhandeling weerspiegelt zowel aanpassing als strategie van kerkleiders en is een sleutelaspect van hoe gemeenschapsgrenzen worden onderhouden. Die grenzen illustreren uiteindelijk wat het betekent om een ‘Kopt’ te zijn in Nederland of Italië.

Door ervoor te kiezen bepaalde verhalen opnieuw te vertellen en te herschrijven, gaan de gemeenschappen een dynamisch proces aan om hun tradities in stand te houden en aan te passen om de uitdagingen van ontworteling in de diaspora aan te gaan. Uiteindelijk benadrukt dit onderzoek de veelzijdige aard van teksten als ‘actieve bronnen’ voor de opbouw en voortdurende ontwikkeling van religieuze gemeenschappen. Door zowel de inhoud te analyseren als de wijze waarop deze publicaties worden geproduceerd en gebruikt, wordt een dieper inzicht verkregen in de interne dynamiek en praktijken die de leden van deze gemeenschappen samenbinden, zelfs over landsgrenzen heen.

De actieve betrokkenheid van jongeren binnen de gemeenschap, gedetailleerd beschreven in een van de hoofdstukken, is een belangrijk aandachtspunt; ze zijn diep betrokken bij gemeenschaps- en tekstuele praktijken, wat ervoor zorgt dat ze hun belang bij het in stand houden van kerktradities erkennen. Deze betrokkenheid kweekt niet alleen een sterk gevoel van verbondenheid, maar positioneert hen ook als cruciaal voor de “toekomst van de Kerk”. Kerkleiders en oudere lekenleden ontwerpen specifiek activiteiten en publicaties voor deze jongere generaties, waarbij zij hen erkennen als de dragers van tradities en als degenen die de Kerk zullen navigeren door maatschappelijke uitdagingen in omgevingen die vaak als “modern” en “seculier” worden beschouwd. Deze inspanningen zijn gericht op het overbrengen van de ‘juiste’ en ‘geschikte’ waarden en leringen die essentieel worden geacht voor het handhaven van de integriteit en eenheid van de gemeenschappen. Tegelijkertijd nemen jongeren ook het initiatief door hun eigen activiteiten te organiseren, zoals jeugdbijeenkomsten, en actief rollen binnen de kerk op zich te nemen, ervoor zorgend dat ze bijdragen aan de tradities en leringen van hun gemeenschap, in plaats van die alleen te beërven.

Over het geheel genomen draagt deze dissertatie bij aan diasporastudies, religiestudies en migratiestudies door in detail te beschrijven welke mechanismen ervoor zorgen dat gemeenschappen überhaupt gemeenschappen worden en hoe ze hun samenhang en eenheid handhaven temidden van uitdagingen veroorzaakt door migratie. Deze studie biedt gedetailleerde inzichten in hoe tekstuele praktijken en bredere gemeenschappelijke verhalen binnen Europese Koptisch-Orthodoxe kerken helpen om verandering, aanpassing en continuïteit te controleren en hoe dergelijke praktijken bijdragen aan het herschrijven van groepsgrenzen. De studie benadrukt hoe verschillende Koptische gemeenschappen in Europa een gevoel van verbondenheid ontwikkelen, maar toch aanzienlijke verschillen vertonen in gemeenschapsstructuur, beïnvloed door demografische, geografische en sociaal-culturele factoren. Deze variaties dagen het idee van een eenduidige 'Koptische identiteit in de diaspora' uit en onderstrepen de noodzaak van verder onderzoek naar de diverse diasporische ervaringen.

