

## Coptic Orthodox Christian Resilience in the Face of Ongoing Discrimination



(One of the burnt churches on the day the Muslim Brotherhood's protests were dispersed in 2013<sup>9</sup>)

### Abstract:

The discrimination against Coptic Christians in Egypt is part of an ongoing history of struggle. There has been a great deal of coverage of the dramatic attacks against Coptic individuals, ranging from dragging and assaulting women naked across streets, as seen with Soaad Thabet <sup>34</sup>, to murdering priests <sup>31</sup> and bombing churches <sup>32</sup>. In the face of these experiences of injustice and prejudice, the vast majority of the Coptic community, instead of responding with anger or defeatism, have shown resilience. Despite the attacks and assaults, Copts have generally continued to remain strong, steady, and even forgiving of those persecuting them.

In order to examine why and how the Coptic community shows resilience in the face of persecution, I begin with a historical analysis of the treatment of the Coptic community, then

discuss the various forms of discrimination, and how and why the large majority of Copts have proven to be resilient all throughout. In order to explore this in greater depth, I utilize interviews that I personally conducted with Coptic Christians who emigrated from different areas across Egypt to Southern California, and examined the commonalities of their experiences. There is a total of 25 interviewees, ranging from age 20 to mid 60's; two of whom are priests. Priests were chosen to become part of the interviews as to allow for the full analysis of discrimination and resilience among all Coptic Christian groups- laymen and clergymen.

**This research will:**

1. Examine how and why Coptic Christians have been resilient all throughout their history of discrimination, while also studying the different forms of prejudice against them.
2. Include original in-depth interviews of Coptic Christians who have lived for at least ten years in Egypt and immigrated to Southern California, and explore their experiences with discrimination or lack thereof, and their attitudes towards resilience.

**Results:** Discrimination is a common experience among the great majority of Coptic Christians. The degree and form of this discrimination varies based on socioeconomic backgrounds and other environmental factors. This is reflected by the experiences of the interview subjects; all participants reported that they faced discrimination throughout their years of residency in Egypt. Several of the participants also shared having experienced specific forms discrimination that are embedded in most schools. In response to this discrimination, the vast majority of participants,

even through frustrations, have showed resilience, attributing their reactions to their faith and the teachings of the Coptic Orthodox Church.

**Implications:** The ability of Coptic Christians to endure centuries-long prejudice and persecution is worth studying and analyzing. This resilience has enabled the community to maintain a strong well-being and positive adaptation despite continuous struggles and threats which may have implications for other groups facing historical discrimination. Furthermore, the study concludes that Egyptian education policymakers need to address the biases that ignore the existence and rights of Christians in school systems. These biases are inherently dangerous to the educational and professional development of Christian students, in addition to their mental and emotional health. Moreover, government officeholders ought to create policies that condemn and hold partakers of harassment and attacks accountable.

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On April 7<sup>th</sup>, the year 2022, Father Arsanious Wadeed, a Coptic Orthodox Archpriest was stabbed to death in the neck while on a social outing with some of his church's youth group. Fr. Arsanious had not previously known the murderer; there was no tension leading up to the incident. Rather, Fr. Arsanious's black garment and cross are a sufficient trigger to violent acts as has been the case with numerous other Coptic clergymen. This discrimination, however, is not limited to priests but is distributed among all who identify as Coptic Christians. In 2015, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS), kidnapped and beheaded 21 Coptic Christians, twenty of whom were Egyptian and one Ghanian. This atrocity was professionally shot and recorded on video then released to the internet. One of the 21 martyrs was Mina Aziz.



(21 martyrs of Libya- Moments before the beheading of the 21 Coptic Christians ISIS, 2015)

Mother of Mina Aziz, retold the story of finding out that her son was one of the martyrs:

“Someone was going around the houses [in the village] with his laptop showing everyone the video [of the martyrs getting beheaded by the beach], and my brother, who is a priest told him to show me a photo so I can see for myself and be reassured and comforted of where my son is now.

I saw one part where one of the martyrs, not my son, got killed, and immediately the man with the laptop put down the screen so I couldn’t watch the rest of the video. But I told him ‘no, don't turn it off, keep it on, keep it on.’

He told me ‘one part is enough, you will suffer.’ I told him:

‘Trust me I will not be upset, they reached heaven, and I should in fact thank those [ISIS] who sent them to heaven, the beautiful place we cannot reach ... Now we are reassured and comforted that we have seen them [holding on to their faith to death] ... I offered the gift that God has granted me back to Him, how can I not? Thank you Lord.’”

(“Al-Ur: The pain that fills the void left behind by 13 Copts executed in Libya.” Mina’s mother, 2015<sup>21</sup>.)



(Mina’s Mother. Photo by Ibrahim Ezzat, “Al-Ur: The pain that fills the void left behind by 13 Copts executed in Libya<sup>21</sup>.”)

To forgive is one form of strength, but to go further and thank the murderers of one’s son is a deep form of inner-peace. The most known and rational reaction of a mother who lost her son to a barbaric and savage killing is to loathe and curse those who have done the act of evil, and following this, the next natural action would be to fall into a period of depression. Mina’s mother, however, displayed a power of resilience that is unknown to the majority of people. She thanked ISIS for sending her son to heaven, proving unmoved and steady in her faith. ISIS has committed numerous atrocities across the world, all equally terrifying and saddening. However, not all reactions have been similar, and certainly not all reactions have demonstrated such immense amounts of positivity through pain as did Mina’s mother and other Coptic Orthodox families. What could possibly explain the mother’s reaction to her son’s death and wanting to

watch his beheading video? I argue that this is one of many examples of members of the community possessing an incredible amount of resilience.

“Essential Meaning of *resilience*

: the ability of something to return to its original shape after it has been pulled, stretched, pressed, bent, etc.”

(“Resilience,” Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary<sup>4</sup>)

In terms of the Coptic community, resilience is courageously praying in the midst of ashes of a burnt church rather than protesting and violently rioting. It is

: the ability to present an enormous capacity of forgiveness, love, and strength after having been assaulted, attacked, and abhorred.

Resilience is a core aspect of the Coptic Orthodox Community; it is not a strategy for survival, but a way of life. Mina and the rest of the 20 martyrs died for their faith, and they did so courageously. They were presented with two options: life or their faith, and without hesitation, they chose the latter. Their resilience was not a strategy to win life on earth, in fact, it cost them their life. Their resilience was a reflection of their faith. Although “pulled, stretched, pressed, [and] bent” emotionally, mentally, and physically, they remained firm in their positions. Similarly, Mina’s mother has shown resilience in the face of hatred, and so does the greater majority of the Coptic Orthodox Christian community in Egypt. Due to this surprising and

commonly held characteristic, I seek to explain why the Coptic community in particular consistently reacts in this way.



(Coptic mass service in the church of St. George posted its arson in October 2019, "The Fire Did Not Prevent the People of Helwan from Praying in St. George's Church." *Copts United* <sup>29</sup>)



(St. George Coptic Orthodox Church of Helwan's traces of fire, "Video and Images ... The Traces of the Burning of St. George's Church in Helwan." *Youm7* <sup>30</sup>)

of

**Churches as the price  
Freedom**

"Freedom has a high price, and the burning of churches is a part of the price that we are offering to our country with patience and love" was the response of Pope Tawadros, the 118<sup>th</sup> and current pope of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria, to the members of the Subcommittee on European and Asian Affairs of the Committee on International Relations of Congress who visited him in September 2013, after the destruction of 43 churches, demolition of 207 Coptic properties, organizations, and orphanages, and homelessness of 1000 families and orphans on August 13<sup>th</sup> of 2013<sup>1</sup>. After the demolition of large parts of a community that has already been losing its members to attacks and death over centuries, Coptic Christians have astonishingly continued to present an enduring sense of peace and love for their country that is mightier than the received attacks.

Coptic Christians are an ethno-religious Christian group that dominates the Christian population in Egypt and constitutes an overall minority of 10% of the entire Egyptian population. The term 'Copt' is derived from the Greek word 'Aigyptos,' which means Egypt. Aigyptos began getting pronounced as "gypt," hence today's term "Egypt." After the Islamic invasion of Egypt, "Copt" (pronounced "Qypty" in Arabic) became the term that refers to Egyptian Christians. Copts are believed to be direct descendants of Egypt's ancient Pharaonic people, and the first in the MENA (Middle Eastern and North African) region to convert to Christianity after the arrival of St. Mark the Evangelist in the city of Alexandria, Egypt in the early first century AD<sup>2</sup>. Since the Islamic conquest of Egypt under Amr Ibn Al-As, an Arab Muslim conquest commander, in 641 AD<sup>3</sup>, Copts have been living through a long series of attacks and discrimination. Discrimination and exclusion often lead to a definite reaction of *resentment*, but not in the case of Egypt's Christians. To understand the level of persecution, it is important to know the history of discrimination suffered by the community.



## **Historical Discrimination**

Amr Ibn Al-As's conquest of Egypt was one of the first examples that highlighted the Coptic community's resilience. Anyone who resisted the army led by Ibn Al-As was burnt to death; "As the historian John Al-Nakisi, a contemporary eyewitness to this invasion, says, "The yoke they laid on the Egyptians was heavier than what the Pharaoh of Egypt laid on the Children of Israel<sup>6</sup>." The new leaders also instilled a discriminatory tax that every non-Muslim had to pay to be allowed to live on the land without having to convert to Islam. In early A.D. 66, a similar scenario occurred with the Jews in Rome when Titus Flavius Vespasian, the Roman governor of Judea, ruled that taxes of the Great Temple in Jerusalem are to be collected for fiscal reasons<sup>20</sup>. Riots broke out in Judea, causing more rage among the authorities and leading to more ruthless suppression of Jews and their expulsion into separate parts of the kingdom<sup>20</sup>. In reverse, Coptic Christians have ensured to maintain a central philosophy of strength and love that continues to be taught to this day; Coptic Sunday school teachers continue to teach kids "to love Muslims even ... [if] they treat [them] badly," and to pray for those who persecute them<sup>22</sup>. This philosophy is not taught through passiveness, as passiveness would only be suppressed anger. To pray for a persecutor requires a high degree of self-awareness of one's feelings to redirect them into positive and strong emotions that regenerate love and strength for generations.

Md Jahid Hossain Bhuiyan describes the jizya in his works as a means of tolerance and holds that it is merely a tax that allowed non-Muslims to "enter the Islamic kingdom through legal means<sup>5</sup>." He misleadingly describes the jizya as a regulatory tax for entry even though it was imposed by newcomers on already-existing populations, stripping them of their humanity. The Thirty Years' War, which was the most destructive conflict in Europe before the

twentieth-century world wars, was rooted in religion. Likewise, Sunni-Shi'a divide that was reignited in Syria in 2017 leading to "44 percent of all fatalities in organized violence worldwide [as part of the Syrian Civil War] <sup>7</sup>, was also based on religious disagreements. Both conflicts and other religious wars are prominent for their viciousness. A common factor among these wars is the intertwining link between politics and religion. Religious groups sought not only religious freedom but religious power. By this I mean when a certain religious group takes complete authority over a nation under the justification of being either God-chosen or righteous rulers. The Coptic community did not entertain such pursuits of power in the name of God. Rather, they only asked for peaceful religious freedom even when they outnumbered their invaders.

### **Religious Freedom Over Religious Power**

As the conquerors under Amr Ibn Al-As managed their interests in Alexandria, seventy thousand people, including monks, from Wadi El-Natrun, a depressed desert in Northern Egypt, headed to Amr Ibn Al-As. Being an assembly of 70,000 against Amr's army of 4,000, defeat against the Arabs would not have been difficult, but the monks in charge asked Amr for "religious freedom and the return of their patriarch from exile" only<sup>6</sup>. Immediately, this made Amr become a partial ally of the Coptic Christian community, returning the pope from exile, and permitting the establishment of more churches. The people were indeed content with what they were given; this was no disguise of tolerance but rather unbreakable resilience. The Coptic population was not threatened by armed intruders, but rather stood firmly in their beliefs. Their firmness was not only in cautiously dealing with the conquerors, but in their insistence that they shall continue to face hatred with love.

A great evidence of their contentment is the annual mention of appreciation of Amr Ibn Al-As during the reading of the church's Synaxarium. The Synaxarium is “a book that has the stories of martyrs alongside other venerated saints and historical events distributed on the days of the Coptic calendar, is read in every Coptic liturgy.”<sup>10</sup> Although Amr did not fully obliterate any discriminatory policies, such as the jizya, which would not be lifted until 1855<sup>11</sup>, Egypt’s Copts are still appreciative of his imperfect tolerance. Their acknowledgement of his works in the Synaxarium is a prime reflection of their forgiveness and resilience.

“Pope Benjamin came back after he had been in hiding for 13 years. Amr Ebn-Elas was courteous toward him and honored him. He returned the churches and all their properties back to him.”

(“The Departure of St. Benjamin, 38th Pope of Alexandria,” Coptic Synaxarium, *St. Takla.org*,  
Coptic Orthodox Church Heritage<sup>12</sup>)

“Verily in all the lands of which we have taken possession hitherto I have never seen a man of God like this man.”

(Amr Ibn Al-As about Pope Benjamin, “History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic,” *The Tertullian Project*.<sup>13</sup>)

### **Incomplete Freedom**

Although Amr had returned the Pope and some churches, restrictions remained unreasonable, and many of the permissions granted were easily reverted by future leaders. The jizya remained in place, and by the last years of Pope Benjamin’s life, Amr had returned to

threatening Copts with death if they were hiding any wealth. The legacy of Amr Ibn Al-As would continue under the following rulers, such as Al-Ma'mun who reigned from 813 until 833. Under his reign, taxpayers took and sold children of Coptic families who could not afford to pay taxes and tied them to mills instead of animals and beat them to ground <sup>14</sup>. In the 850s, the ruling governor of Alexandria ordered that terrifying images of demons be placed on top of Christian homes, and that all Christian office workers be expelled. More policies and atrocities, such as tattooing Copts with iron rings to make them recognizable, would continue to evolve during the reign of several caliphs.

The long legacy of discrimination took different forms each century, but the overall exclusion and treatment of Coptic Christians as second-class citizens continues until today. As one reads a few excerpts of the history of Coptic persecution, it could only be assumed that Egypt's Christians hatred and anger grew, and this would be completely justified and within reason. Yet this has not been the overall sentiment. This phenomenon is clearly illustrated in the story of Pope Kyrillos and President Nasser.

### **Pope Kyrillos and Abdel Nasser**

During the presidency of Gamal Abdel Nasser, the contemporary Coptic patriarch, Pope Kyrillos, had requested to meet the president 10 times to discuss the ongoing discrimination against Christians in Egypt, but Nasser continuously refused. Eventually, the pope had finally managed to meet Abdel Nasser, but just as the pope began suggesting that Egypt's Christians are facing discrimination, Nasser refused to continue the conversation.

Fast forward, Abdel Nasser's daughter was sick and no one was able to heal her, and one of the Parliament's members suggested to refer her to Pope Kyrillos as he was known for

miracles of healing the sick. Abdel Nasser proceeded and went to the Pope, and immediately Pope Kyrillos went to their home to pray upon Nasser's daughter, and she was healed. Following this, the president told Pope Kyrillos <sup>15</sup>:

"From today onwards, you are my father, I will call you my father, and as you pray for your Christian children, pray for my children, and from now on you shall not go to the presidential palace. This house is now your home, and you may come at any time you want."

(Former President Abdel Nasser to Pope Kyrillos, "Love after enmity," *Dostor Newspaper*, Dostor.org <sup>15</sup>.)



(Ermiia, Bishop. "The Pope And the President." Coptic News Network, 9 Mar. 2021, <https://www.copticnn.com/3822-the-pope-and-the-president/>.)

Abdel Nasser's insistence to not meet the Pope, who is the official spokesperson for the millions of Coptic Christians and to not discuss discrimination issues, was a reflection of the overall relationship between Copts and Muslims in the country. They have been coexisting for centuries- sharing schools, living spaces, leisure communities, jobs, and malls, and this in itself is noteworthy. To this day, there remains states like the Island of Cyprus, which is physically

divided by a wall to create a separation between the Turkish Cypriots, who are predominantly Muslim, and Greek Cypriots, who are predominantly Christian. Egypt's Christians and Muslims have lived as neighbors, but this amiable relationship is with restrictions as reflected in Nasser's rejection to speak with the pope about Coptic discrimination.

Pope Kyrillos's ability to disregard the humiliation of being shut down upon discussing the issue of Coptic exclusion, and compassion to pray for the president's daughter signifies the Coptic resilience that has enabled the minority population to endure. After every incident of exclusion, Copts have proven able to bounce back. Pope Kyrillos willingly held on to the notion of peaceful existence, and accordingly reacted to the president's request to pray for his daughter without any attempt of requiring an apology for the president's previous treatment. To pray on behalf of somebody, one must be completely free of resentment towards the person whom he/she is praying for in order for the prayer to be truthful and well-intentioned. For Pope Kyrillos to pray for Abdel Nasser's daughter, he must have had enough strength to forgive him. The power to seamlessly proceed in life with people after having been ill-treated by them is one great resilience, and it had not only been seen with Pope Kyrillos, but with the popes to follow and the community.

### **Exiled but unmoved**

Abdel Nasser ended his presidency on positive terms with the Coptic Church. However, the following president, Anwar El-Sadat, did not preserve the diplomatic relationship. El-Sadat, who opened doors for the Muslim Brotherhood faction by releasing them from prisons and encouraging their participation in the drafting of new articles, exiled Pope Shenouda III in 1981.

This was in response to the pope's expression of resentment towards the increasing bombings and attacks against Coptic churches; in addition to his order which called that no state representative congratulations shall be received for the Easter celebration.<sup>17</sup> It is important to note that Pope Shenouda was aggrieved by the series of attacks and government's inaction, not by specific people and groups. This is reflected through his continuous respect and attempts of maintaining good communication with the president. Resilience is defined by forgiveness, love, and strength, but certainly not passiveness; Pope Shenouda had found it necessary to express the grief his people are experiencing as they continued to lose thousands of people to arson and attacks. To be passive is to weakly surrender and fail to express one's feelings because of fear. But to fearlessly yet cautiously speak out against injustice is a noble form of power and resilience.

El-Sadat took a hostile turn by delivering a fiery speech, where he disdainfully referred to the pope as "Shenouda" (excluding honorary prefixes), and said "He [Pope Shenouda] wants Copts to feel discriminated against<sup>18</sup>." Although this was symbolic of the church's grief for those who were killed without justice, Al-Sadat considered it demeaning and deserving of reprimand.

"In November 1972, arsonists in al-Khanka, Qalyubia, torched the local headquarters of a Coptic organization, the Holy Bible Society, part of which was being used, illegally, as a church. Kyrillos's successor, Pope Shenouda III, ordered an entourage of priests to visit the site and celebrate mass. His instructions, which the priests carried out, incensed Sadat—who perceived Shenouda as challenging his authority—and also aggravated some Muslims in the area. After the priests left al-Khanka, attackers burned half a dozen nearby apartments belonging to Copts. The incident marked a new nadir for Muslim Coptic relations since

1952.”

(“Violence against Copts in Egypt.” Jason Brownlee, 2013)

The pope of the Coptic Church is considered to be not only the head of the church and its congregation but its spokesperson in front of the government, and Pope Shenouda's response to the arsonists was one of calculated wisdom. His instructions to proceed and pray a mass contrary to retreating in weakness or protesting in anger is one of unruffled resilience. The primary goal of attacks against churches is to strip the people of a place of worship and to create unsettlement and chaos among them, and naturally, this would indeed result in further chaos and violence as seen within the Sunni-Shia sectarian conflict. In January 2016, ISIS, an extremist Sunni group, attacked Shia mosques in Iraq, killing at least 74 people, two of whom were journalists. In response to this attack, “at least 10 [Sunni] people and Sunni mosques [were] firebombed” in retaliation the following day<sup>33</sup>. This exchange of attacks gradually contributed to the major ruins of Iraq over the years, and brought no real conclusion to the conflict. However, this series is no surprise to the world; throughout the history of mankind, groups have constantly fought back and forth in reprisal. Pope Shenouda’s response to the attacks is an exception to this rule, and is one that mirrors the overall attitude of the Coptic Christian community towards hatred and assaults. They do not retreat in fear and passively give up their faith, rather, they courageously pray under roofs stained by blood, and follow the equation of resilience: forgiveness of aggressors, love of enemies, and strength through atrocities.

Such untroubled, cautious reactions aggravated Al-Sadat, who was reaching a tragic end with his Peace Initiative at the time<sup>23</sup>, leaving him with only desperate measures of detaining thousands of people, including the Pope himself<sup>23</sup>. Popular for his eloquence and careful



judgment, Pope Shenouda never fell prey to hate or vengeance; when asked after the death of Al-Sadat and his release from detainment to describe his relationship with the former president, he answered with utter respect:

“We began with a good relationship, and when we first met, he [Al-Sadat] hugged and kissed me on the cheek three times, and said ‘I know the history of my church well, and I want the church to retain its glory.’ But as we began to work on this process, he got upset. As I mentioned the increased attacks against Copts, he got offended, and considered this an interference with politics. I recall sending him a letter quoting:

‘Dear Mr. President, I continuously take you as a ruler and not as an enemy,’  
and indeed the years have proven that what we [the Coptic community] have complained about then, the entire country complains about today<sup>24</sup>.”

(“Pope Shenouda talks about his relationship with President Sadat.” Anwar Al-Sadat, 1981”)

Able to seize every chance to speak of the contempt by Al-Sadat, Pope Shenouda alternatively chose to respond with wisdom, while still acknowledging the president’s failure to take action against the persecution of Egypt’s Copts. This response was recorded on video.<sup>24</sup> One notable trait of Pope Shenouda when speaking of the former president who had exiled him for six years until the new president released him, is his calm and collected countenance even when recalling past mistreatment by Al-Sadat.

### **Love in Response to Hate**

On January 7th, 2022, Coptic Orthodox Christmas Eve, current Egyptian President, Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, visited the Cathedral of the Nativity of Christ in Cairo to greet the Pope and congregation during the mass. As Al-Sisi stepped foot into the cathedral, the congregation began a long standing ovation, with many yelling “benhebak ya rayes” (“we love you president”), and women uttering a loud Egyptian joyful ululation (“zaghrouta”) to express their love and appreciation for Al-Sisi. He was the first Egyptian president to attend a Christmas mass to portray unity, breaking a decades-long tradition of presidents sending a group of ministers on their behalf to perform an act of unity and harmony. Copts’ appreciation and fondness of President Sisi and any non-Coptic individual that shows any form of welcome, whether large or small, outweigh their past and ongoing experiences of discrimination. This, I argue, is reflected in the broader relationships of Coptic Christians and Muslims in Egypt. Despite being met with continuous demeaning treatment, Copts have persisted on meeting lukewarmness and hate with love and acceptance.

Every year, as Muslims prepare for Ramadan, the Islamic holy month of fasting, Coptic Father Yoannes Adeeb, a Coptic Orthodox priest, hangs a *fanous*, a traditional Egyptian lantern used to decorate streets and homes in the month of Ramadan, by the entrance of his church to join his neighborhood in their month of holiness and celebration.<sup>38</sup> In addition, he also distributes mini fanous lanterns to kids in the neighborhood. The *fanous* is only an external part of the priest's ritual; Fr. Adeeb packs boxes of staple food, and individually distributes them to needy individuals and families to provide them with foods to break their fasts with<sup>40</sup>. This practice goes beyond a kind, neighborly act of service, it also carries deeper meanings that reflect a profound amount of love and generosity that Coptic Christian priests carry. Egypt’s Coptic priests are not just spiritual mentors that guide Christians and non-Christians to the faith, but they are carriers of

burdensome crosses of tribulations. And this is what adds special nuances to Fr. Adeeb's service. Coptic priests in Egypt have continuously proven to be resilient and forgiving even when in the midst of a far larger population that suppresses their ability to freely practice and embrace their beliefs. Becoming a priest in Egypt means directly confronting mistreatment and struggles.

### **Ordained to forgive**

As recently as April 7<sup>th</sup>, 2022, Coptic Orthodox priest, Archpriest Arsanious Wadid, popular as "lover of the poor,"<sup>39</sup> faced violence. He was approached by a stranger while he was strolling along Alexandria's coast with some of his church youth, and was stabbed several times, once in the neck, leading to his death<sup>41</sup>. As atrocious an act this is, and even more horrifying that it occurred in 2022, well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this occurrence is not new to the Christian community in Egypt. This incident is a part of a repetitive pattern, mirroring several other terrifying events, such as:

- The murder of Fr. Gabriel Abd el-Motagaly in 1978 <sup>47</sup>.
- The shooting of 2 monks and a novitiate by a monastery's gate in 1990 <sup>47</sup>.
- ISIS' abduction and murder of Fr. Rofail Mousa in 2012 <sup>46</sup>.
- ISIS' shooting of Fr. Mina Aboud leading to his death in 2013 <sup>45</sup>.
- The murder of Fr. Youssef Asaad, after a truck consistently blocked his car's pathway until it got into a crash and left the priest dead in the 1990s <sup>44</sup>.
- The assault on a priest's home in 2016, killing one and injuring three <sup>42</sup>.
- The murder by stabbing of Fr. Samaan Shehata as he was collecting humanitarian aid for his church in 2017 <sup>43</sup>.



Clothing Coptic Orthodox  
priests

The persecution of Coptic priests is a phenomenon that is no secret around Egypt; by becoming a priest, one agrees to persevere through discrimination. A Coptic priest's black garment and cross make him easily identifiable as a target of attack, and intensify the hostility around him. Getting cursed by strangers in the street becomes just another background noise, and getting ignored by taxi drivers and occasionally getting spat on are burdens that priests often carry. This was, in fact, the case with both priests I interviewed. Both priests have been ordained in Orange County, California, and have gone back to Egypt only a couple of times for limited periods. Although they have not lived in Egypt as priests, discrimination still managed to become part of their days-long vacation periods. For example, both were obviously ignored by taxi drivers. One of them recalled hailing a taxi at night. When the taxi approached, the priest stood revealing his priestly garb. The taxi driver took a look at the priest's cross and drove off without uttering a single word. Another interviewee (#3) told his first experience of coming to realize

that Christian clergymen are not welcome in Egypt. Interviewee #3, at the age of 8, was with his uncle, a Coptic priest, on the side of the road standing next to their car as it broke down in Tahrir Square, Egypt's major town square, where years later, the 2011 Egyptian Revolution took place:

**Interviewee #3:** “It was a really busy street, with lots of public transportation buses ... I remember people in these buses were yelling insults at him [interview's uncle priest]. They saw him wearing a black gown and a big cross, people could clearly tell he's a Coptic priest. So I remember being at that young age thinking, ‘why do they keep cursing him out.’ They were really bad insults, and this was puzzling to me because he was one of the nicest priests I've seen in my life ... I didn't yet understand why every bus passing by would cuss him out.”

**Q:** “What was his reaction?”

**Interviewee #3:** “He's very peaceful and angelic, he just gave a gentle smile and did not say anything.”

-Interviewee #3  
*(Left Egypt at the age of 17 and was 52 at the time of the interview)*

This approach of non-retaliation is common among the great majority of Coptic Orthodox clergymen; going into priesthood they are well aware and informed about the increased susceptibility of being despised by strangers for the sole reason of being a Christian priest. In addition to being calm under pressure, the priest managed to give out a “gentle smile.” Fighting back is a relatively easy path to relieve one's anger and redeem their ego, but to hold back and smile while in the midst of being harassed requires much more emotional and mental strength. This strength is a skill that many people of the Coptic faith have honed over generations. They

tend to not be troublesome to their community, rather, they often embody humility and forgiveness as do Fr. Yoannes Adeeb and Interviewee #3's uncle priest.

Another recent portrayal of such traits was in Fr. Arsanious Wadid's funeral on April 8<sup>th</sup>, 2022, where Bishop Pavley, General Bishop of Montaza, Alexandria, Egypt spoke about the importance of forgiveness <sup>50</sup>:

“Let me give some words for those grieving, of whom I am one

What is our Christianity?

We are the ones that teach prisoners forgiveness.

We can forgive those who put us on a cross.

...

What is our Christianity? It is forgiveness.

We have this energy.

It is what signifies Christianity.

There is nothing that matches Christian forgiveness.

Our Christ the Lord, when in pain and agony on the cross said,

‘Father forgive them’

This is our Christianity that we need to practice.

Forgiveness changes people.

There is no law in existence that enforces forgiveness as much as Christianity does.

Our Lord says,

‘Forgive, and you will be forgiven’

Because of that, our Christianity is a religion of forgiveness.”

("His Grace Bishop Pavley's Word at the Funeral of Martyr Archpriest Arsanious Wadid, From the Great Cathedral of Saint Mark." Bishop Pavley, 2022)



His Grace Bishop Pavley delivering his word in the funeral of Fr. Arsenius Wadid<sup>51</sup>.



Large crowds attending the funeral of Fr. Arsanious Wadid on April 8<sup>th</sup>, 2022 <sup>52</sup>.

Bishop Pavley effectively summarized the Coptic community's beliefs which are rooted in resilience. No Christian individual, whether a layman or clergy, is obliged to display such immense emotions of acceptance and forgiveness in the face of undeniable hatred and persecution, but these aspects are key to the faith of Coptic Orthodox Christians. The bishop's

words have been paraphrased all throughout the last centuries by other numerous clergymen who have also been enduring through evil attacks. On the morning of May 8<sup>th</sup>, 2011, Father Sarabamoun Abdou, walked in between ash residue and destroyed furniture of his burnt church to pray the Sunday mass <sup>53</sup>. This was only hours after the congregation was finally able to put down the church fire that extremists had started the night before on May 7<sup>th</sup>. All of the church's flock, young and old, took it upon themselves to quench the fire and rebuild the church because as often happens, there were no first responders at the scene. Fr. Sarabamoun's insistence on praying a liturgy within hours of the fire is nothing but a real-life application of the community's power of resilience. He was taped making the following remarks:

“My loved ones, I'm reminding you that Christ's invitation for our disciples quoted: ‘You will be witnesses for me... not just verbal witnesses that will speak for me, but witnesses OF me and FOR me. You are witnesses of the truth, and the church seeks to present witnesses of Christ every day.’

**My loved ones, this is not the church \*points at the burnt walls,\* the church is you. You are His temple, you are of His body, you are His parts, and His bones.”**

-Father Sarabamoun Abdou <sup>53</sup>

Although left helpless by the government and society, Fr. Sarabamoun portrayed only strength and grit through his true belief of the power of his and the people's faith. This belief is what empowered the congregation to fearlessly walk into church the following morning after the fire. Attacks on churches are done to reach two goals: 1. Physically damage the church and 2. Create fear in the population. The first goal likely gets achieved, but is often only temporary until the church gets reconstructed into an even better version. The second goal, however, not only



does not get achieved, but it gives more reasons for worshippers to be more present in the church, and this has proven to be true in the case of Fr. Sarabamoun's church.

It is also worth noting that the examples of attacks mentioned earlier are only some of those that reached the public and acquired some recognition by Egyptian media. Although Egypt has been on the trajectory of urbanization over the last few decades, 57% of the population remains in rural areas where the poverty rate is “three times higher than [that of] urban poverty”<sup>48</sup>. There yet remains large portions of the country that have no access to the advanced resources that can spread awareness about issues that they are susceptible to. The mentioned attacks were able to surface due to external witnesses spreading information on different media platforms, making the denial of the events almost impossible. Numerous populations in Egypt's rural areas live below poverty lines- homes are built from mud, often made with natural and primitive resources, and villages have got only a few organized infrastructure and healthcare and social facilities<sup>49</sup>. Accordingly, a society whose homes are made of mud is most certainly going to have little to no access to technology. Thus, any cases of persecution that are bound to happen in a village in Egypt are likely going to remain within that village. The incidents that make it to the light are a result of a combination of luck and large efforts by witnesses to spread the word. The murder of Fr. Arsanious Wadid spread across national television and social media because the incident occurred in a busy spot in Alexandria, Egypt. It happened in the street, across from the beach, all while a youth group was present, and the road was busy. These factors energized enough momentum to require the government to take action against the perpetrator. These factors, however, are almost non-existent in many areas in Egypt, and therefore, it is crucial to recognize that aside from the hundreds of attacks and incidents that are noted in this or other research, there are also many other attacks that remain unacknowledged.

### **Subtle yet explicit prejudice: Christian students as a minority group**

Discrimination against Coptic Christians is more often displayed not through the physical attacks and murders, but through subtle, day-to-day interactions and conversations. Although allowed to exist and live in Egypt, Coptic Christians are reminded from the outset that they shall be treated as second-class citizens. This is made explicit for all Christian children before they even turn 10, because all students, beginning in elementary, are required to memorize Quranic verses as part of the Arabic language curriculum. This requirement places Christian students at a disadvantage of learning and having to do double the amount of work of their Muslim classmates, who already have much more thorough backgrounds in the Quran, to achieve good grades. This requirement applies to the Arabic curriculum across almost all schools in Egypt, whether private or public. Of all 25 interview participants, 100% had been required to memorize Quranic verses in their Arabic classes beginning in elementary school for the rest of their k-12 years. Quranic passages are embedded in most Arabic curriculum textbooks, and students ought to memorize them word for word to rewrite them on exams. This heightens the pressure on students who are not familiar with the Quran to invest greater amounts of time to memorize religious literature that they are not believers in. One interviewee (#4) stated:

“You’ve got to memorize them [Quranic excerpts] word by word with the references as well. Even though it [learning the Quran] gave me general knowledge, I was bothered. Like at least give me the option to not learn this. There is no option to study Christian Bible verses so why do I have to memorize this?”

The teachers were strict about memorizing the verse and this made the process very annoying. It's worth lots of points on the test, and this took so much time to just memorize, whereas my classmates already have knowledge on this from their religion classes and background. This made it harder for us to memorize, we had to memorize it just because we had to."

-Interviewee #4

*(Left Egypt at the age of 17 and was 21 at the time of the interview)*

"I was still a child, I thought I'd learn certain things but I had to learn others. The words [Quranic verses] were long and difficult for me, I was not used to them, so I would take time to learn, then fail the tests, then beg the teacher to retake the tests, it was difficult. Eventually, I had to cope and I learned to memorize but to begin with, it was hard."

-Interviewee #6

*(Left Egypt at the age of 27 and was 47 at the time of the interview)*

Interviewee #4 and #6 expressed their frustration about being offered no alternatives to memorizing a belief system that they are not part of, and this frustration, I believe, is but a common emotion amongst anyone who is made to memorize religious texts out of force. As interviewee #4 said, it is good that these excerpts offer "general knowledge," but if this is not applied to other religions, such as Christianity, which stands as the second largest faith in the MENA region after Islam, then why should it be compulsory for non-Muslim students to memorize them?

Although frustrated, Interviewee #4 continued to memorize the verses as required to do well on exams and graduate, as do many other Christian students to protect their grades. Not only is the content itself difficult to grasp, but one's chances of improving his/her grades depends on

the teacher's mercy. This was the case with interviewee #6, who had to plead with their teacher to allow them to retake exams as they are still getting familiar with the content. These testimonials show the personal struggles that Christians have to deal with because school resources and teachers are likely not going to be of much support in that aspect. Another interviewee (#5), also displayed similar frustration with the circumstances:

“I feel like we were very immersed into their culture and religion to the point where we were completely erased as a student body. And it didn't help that the school where I went already had few Christians.”

-Interviewee #5

*(Left Egypt at the age of 18 and was 22 at the time of the interview)*

Similar to interviewee #5, Christian students in the majority of schools are significantly outnumbered by their non-Christian classmates, and of course, their administrators and teachers as well. These factors help to create an environment where not only do Christian students feel overwhelmed by always being in the minority, but they are also restricted in freedom to live in their identities as Christians. Christian students' identities are depressed into private homes and churches because in society and public institutions, they are forcibly immersed into a different culture. In some cases, this process does not end in high school, but rather intensifies in higher education as was the case with Interviewee #6, who found herself required to take an Islamic Philosophy course as part of her Philosophy and Society major in university:

“I went into philosophy thinking I'll study Plato and world-level philosophy only to find that

I have to take Islamic philosophy. I wanted to change the class but found that there was no way to do so. I had to buy a Quran for the course. And for exams, not only do we have to memorize and be tested on Quranic verses, but we have to know every detail including the verse references.

If you were to write the verse correctly but get the reference wrong, the professor would take this as an offense to the religion and may resort to failing you. I studied everything to bits so luckily, I didn't experience this, but I've witnessed my Christian classmate fail the class as a result of writing the wrong reference number.

Also, some of the chosen excerpts were referring to the infidel Christians, seriously ... I remember several verses that referred to Christians as infidels.”

-Interviewee #6

*(Left Egypt at the age of 27 and was 47 at the time of the interview)*

College institutions ought to be large milestones in a student's journey of discovering new ideas and engaging in thought-provoking discussions. This process is hindered when religion is enforced as part of the curriculum. President Sisi, allegedly proposed omitting religious verses from Arabic language curriculums.<sup>54</sup> However, the public strongly opposed the change and criticized this suggestion as<sup>55</sup> offensive. The rejection of this alleged proposal reveals the complete dismissal of the existence of Coptic Christians in Egypt. Christian students are allowed to work and succeed only if they leave aside their Christian identity to become submerged into a different faith at school.

Courses such as that which Interviewee #6 was required to enroll in do not merely teach general knowledge about the philosophical aspect of Islam but to attempt to indoctrinate students. Indoctrination requires internalization of the beliefs and strict memorization without

understanding, and this is precisely what these classes seek to accomplish. All students in that class, including Christian students, were required to memorize every detail within the excerpt. Failing to do so as a Christian student may not just result in lower grades but failure of the entire course as this may appear as an offense against the religion. Failing the course in this situation is not based on a student's failure to achieve certain benchmarks or standards, but on the professor's personal bias. This bias is present in several other college courses and certainly numerous k-12 schools.

### **The Exodus**

This curriculum is not the only system through which Coptic Christians students are robbed of fair opportunities. Religion classes (Islam for Muslim students and Christianity for Christian students) are required across a majority of schools; however, these classes are not offered with equal resources. All 25 interviewees have said that during their religion periods, they were required, as Christians, to be the ones to step out of class to attend their Christian studies classes. 23 of the 25 recalled that they never had designated classrooms; they followed their teacher to find any empty space available on campus. These spaces range from any empty classroom or a teacher's cubicle to corridors or even the outdoor court, where the students and teacher would be seated on the ground while their counterparts are on proper desks in classrooms. This exit naturally develops a feeling of being unacknowledged and led to worries about favoritism among some Christian students:

“We would be the people who would leave their chairs and class to sit somewhere else outside, which did not feel good. I felt like we were a minority, we were not that important or that our class was that important.”

-Interviewee #7

*(Left Egypt at the age of 20 and was 39 at the time of the interview)*

“It was not formal. It was alienating to walk out of the classroom while they stayed and their teacher came in.”

-Interviewee #5

*(Left Egypt at the age of 18 and was 22 at the time of the interview)*

“Because the Arabic teacher also taught the Islamic class, the other students [non-Christian] spent more time with that teacher while we left for our class, so I was worried there is going to be some favoritism. And of course, we were not as familiar with the Quran, I just had to memorize it.”

-Interviewee #8

*(Left Egypt at the age of 10 and was 20 at the time of the interview)*

What can be drawn from these experiences is that even though Coptic Christian students show complete compliance by the rules and requirements, some students' emotional and mental states are gradually getting negatively impacted. I chose to call the process of Christian students walking out of class for their religion period, the *exodus*, in reference to the story of the liberation and departure of the people of Israel from Egypt. Contrary to the Israelites, Christian students are not getting liberated in this departure; rather, they are subjected to a system that is

built on partiality. One could argue that this departure is just because Christians are the minority group, thus it is more convenient to have them leave the classroom, and this I agree with.

However, this argument could be valid only and only if those Christian students are provided with well-equipped classrooms that are designated for their Christian studies classes. Providing these conditions would imply that the school recognizes not only the presence of Christians in their student body, but their right to fair and equal resources. A designed and equipped classroom optimizes the learning ability of the students, and increases their motivation to understand and learn the class material. Furthermore, a designed and equipped classroom fulfills the requirements held by the Egyptian Constitution, which states that:

“Every citizen has the right to education with the aim of building the Egyptian character, maintaining national identity, planting the roots of scientific thinking, developing talents, promoting innovation and establishing civilizational and spiritual values and the concepts of citizenship, **tolerance and non-discrimination.**”

-The Constitution of Egypt, Article 19 <sup>56</sup>

The standards of tolerance and non-discrimination are far from realized when Christian students and their teacher have got to sit on the ground in the outdoor basketball or soccer court to begin their class. These standards are not realized when Muslim teachers insist on pronouncing a student’s Christian name in an Islamic, Arabic manner.

“He would always pronounce my name in the Arabic, Islamic way and it annoyed me to the core. He would not write my name as it should be, but he would say it and write it according to the Arabic way. Even the pronunciation he used! He wanted to say it according to the Islamic



way. He refused to say it in the foreign English way, so he always insisted on saying it in the Arab way.”

-Interviewee #9

*(Left Egypt at the age of 21 and was 38 at the time of the interview)*

“There is something that happened to me in elementary school that bothers me to this day. My name is \*\*\* on government papers, but I hate that name. That name means “gift,” and I had a teacher who would always call me not my name, but a name that translates into “gift of the Prophet [Muhammed].” He would pronounce it in a different way as well. I hated my name. I would go home and ask my parents ‘why didn’t you name me so?’ Until today, I don’t go by that name.”

-Interviewee #13

The bias is not only in the structure of the system, but also among the treatment of many teachers. Calling students by different names is one way to dismiss that student's Christian identity. Teachers are free to do so, and can be assured that he/she will not be held accountable. As was the case with Interviewees 9 and 10, they dared not complain about this issue. When asked why not, they answered that in doing so, one of two things are likely to happen:

1. Their teachers or administration may begin creating further inconveniences.
2. Their complaints will be dismissed as unimportant.

The same question was posed to other participants who discussed their personal experiences of discrimination within school, and their answers are one and the same with the

answers above. It is an unspoken rule among Christian students and parents to not raise complaints on any issue regarding religion because in most cases, the consequences will not be in their favor. One interviewee's parents learnt this rule the hard way:

“I had one Arabic teacher that hated me. I was the only Christian in that class. A couple of days before passing back the graded exams, she'd say

‘everyone passed, except \*\*\* [the interviewee's name], she wrote a horrible essay, horrible.’

She would go on to say how bad my answers were, then I'd go home in a terrible mental state and cry to mom. Then, I'd receive back my graded exam at the end of the week, and find that I passed!

This scenario happened several times. She'd speak to the entire class, and say I failed then turns out that I didn't. She would mess with my feelings for the entire week. She'd come on Sunday to say that tests will be passed back on Thursday, and until then she'd walk around and call me out by name in front of everyone and say how terrible of a student I am, but I always found out that I actually passed.”

**Q: Did you try complaining?**

“My parents were always terrified of complaining. I remember an incident that happened with my older sister in elementary school. My parents complained about something that happened, and since then, my sister suffered until she got to middle school. She got hit, she was given low grades that did not reflect her work, and was bullied. Because of this, my parents would tell me ‘don't say anything, if any Muslim tells you anything, be quiet and God will forgive them.’”

-Interviewee #6

*(Left Egypt at the age of 27 and was 47 at the time of the interview)*

Although disappointed and found helpless, the parents insisted on carrying on to teach forgiveness through pain.

### **April 2022- A Month of Assaults**

As demonstrated, criticizing the system is likely to have an adverse effect on the reporter of the incident. Interviewee 6's story is a sub-story in the pool of hundreds of other stories of Coptic Christians that were deemed unworthy of protection. Another example of this occurred as recently as April 27th, 2022: Nevine Sobhy, a 30-year-old married Christian mother, entered a pharmacy in the city of Menoufia, Egypt and was assaulted. Upon walking into the pharmacy with her young son to pick up his medication, the pharmacist who was present, Ali Mahmoud Mohammed Abu Saada, was triggered by the fact that Nevine was wearing a short-sleeved t-shirt and was not wearing a veil to cover her hair during the Islamic Holy month of Ramadan. In response to his inability to control himself, he violently slapped her and cursed her. When Nevine responded that she is not Muslim and needs not to dress as such, he slapped her once again, all at the presence of her young son, who naturally began crying in fear.

Nevine immediately proceeded to tell her family, who took her and went to the local police station to file a complaint. The reaction of the officer at the police station, however, was unforeseen; Nevine received a third slap, which of course meant that no formal rights were to be granted to Nevine. Rather, a reconciliation session was held between Nevine, who was accompanied by her family and priest, and Ali, who was accompanied by his family and friends. To effectively summarize how the session ended, below is a picture of the conclusion of the session; Nevine is pointed at with the blue arrows, and Ali is pointed at with the orange arrows.



Glaringly and disturbingly obvious, the reconciliation session was rather an appointment of bigotry. The aggressor was granted victory while the victim was granted nothing but humiliation and dishonor. As pictured, Nevine stands broken next to her father and a priest on the

left, while the assaulter and his friends stand smiling from ear to ear. Often when assaults take place with Christians, the law is unevenly applied. Ali Mahmoud Mohammed Abu Saada is a criminal protected by the government. Christian students who are unprotected minority students grow up to also become unprotected minority citizens. As interviewee 6's sister suffered humiliation after her parents complained about discrimination, so did Nevine Sobhy and thousands of other Coptic Christian women whose stories remain untold. This incident and Father Arsanius's murder are only two among several others that occurred in April 2022.

Also in April 2022, another Coptic woman was under threat. On April 5<sup>th</sup>, 2022, Coptic Orthodox Christian mother, Mariam Waheeb, went with her 18-month-old daughter Julie, to the health bureau to get her daughter's due vaccine shot. Mariam and Julie went missing, and their family had no news of where they were. A week later, a video was posted on Facebook, showing Mariam wearing an Islamic head veil announcing her conversion to Islam with audible baby screaming in the background. In the video Mariam said:

“Peace be upon you and the mercy and blessings of God [Islamic greeting]. My name is Mariam Waheeb Youssef, now my name is Mariam Ahmed Mohammed. I announce my conversion to Islam with my full mental sanity. No one forced me and this is my conversion certificate \*shows certificate\* [crying baby sounds in the background]. I'm asking the government and national security to protect me from any troubles or threats that I may be faced with from my family. My protection is now your [government's] responsibility and it will be your responsibility if anything happens to me. I'm not abducted and I am living in a safe place, and again, I am asking the government to protect me from any danger that I may face.”

-Mariam Waheeb <sup>58</sup>

Looking at Mariam’s face (screenshot below on the right), it is easily inferred that her message was an under-pressure plea for someone to save her. With every word Mariam uttered, she meant the contrary; her repeated calls for the government to “protect her” from her Christian family was an SOS. Mariam was abducted and forcibly converted, and Mariam’s story is not an individual occurrence. Moreover, the conversion certificate that Mariam held during the video was dated the day of her kidnapping.<sup>57</sup> This incident is the story of numerous Coptic Orthodox Christian women who have been either abducted or deceived into conversion. Fortunately, the government stepped in to save Mariam from the group that abducted her, and returned her back to her family as people launched an online campaign to save Mariam.



Mariam Waheeb and her 18-month-old daughter pictured before the incident



A screenshot of Mariam Waheeb’s face from the video of her conversion announcement

Coptic Orthodox Christians around the world spread Mariam’s story on social media and news outlets until Egyptian authorities stepped in. But there are other Egyptian Christian girls whose stories never made it to the public’s attention. In a 15-page-report, “Jihad of the Womb:

Trafficking of Coptic Women & Girls in Egypt,” there are numerous stories of Coptic Orthodox Christian women who have been abused and at times even converted under coercion. <sup>59</sup> There are 26 governorates in Egypt, and in just one of them, the Governorate of Minya, at least 15 Coptic girls go missing every year. One priest in the governorate reported that most police have been either complicit or “at the very least bribed into silence.”<sup>59</sup> These bribes or threats are possible because these crimes are not committed by merely individuals, but groups. A former kidnapper admitted that “in the era of President Sisi... A group of kidnappers meets in a mosque to discuss potential victims. They keep a close eye on Christians’ houses and monitor everything that’s going on. On that basis, they weave a spider’s web around [the girls].” The kidnapping and abuse of Egyptian Christian girls is a real issue that rules the decisions that Christian girls and women in Egypt make every day. There are daily questions that most Coptic women have got to decide on before leaving their house; which street are they going to take, will they have to wait for a male to walk with them to keep them guarded, will they put on their cross necklaces or tuck it in their shirts, etc. Sexual harassment is an epidemic specific to Egypt: 99.3% of women in Egypt get subjected to a form of sexual harassment. <sup>61</sup> However, Coptic Christian women do not just face harassment for their gender, but also for their religious identity.

One interviewee (#10), retold two disturbing experiences that she went through before she left Egypt :

“In front of my pharmacy I worked at, there was a mosque. A man came inside the pharmacy and pretended to ask me a question then snapped a photo of me. I snatched the phone from his hand then walked out of the pharmacy and yelled. Keep in mind that people are walking out of their prayer from the mosque, and this man is a Muslim. He kept saying “I’m swearing by the

Quran, I didn't take any photo.” He knew that by doing this, the people walking out of the mosque would believe him over me because I cannot swear by the Quran, I’m Christian! It’s his word over mine. But God suddenly gave me wisdom, and I said this “don’t lie using the Quran, it’s a valuable holy book.” This sentence made the people believe me, and indeed they opened his phone and found the photo. But until we got to prove this point, it was such a disturbing, difficult situation for me. People were not on my side, but God didn’t leave me. It is not my wisdom, it is His [God’s]. He saved me and gave me the words.”

-Interviewee #10

*(Left Egypt at the age of 28 and was 38 at the time of the interview)*

“I used to work in a pharmacy that was 10-15 minutes away from home. One time, I was walking home and I noticed someone following me. I kept paying attention then suddenly he disappeared. I get to my apartment building, and I begin to go upstairs and I notice someone behind me again, the same man. I found him behind me.

He dropped his pants. Can you imagine?

My husband was in America at the time, and my grandmother was the only one at home and she is very old. I have no idea how, but God granted me a loud voice and I suddenly screamed really loud and he ran away. I highly doubt that he didn’t know that I’m Christian since he was following me from my workplace; he knew. He would not dare to do what he did with a Muslim woman. I don’t have proof of this, but when you live in Egypt, you will know and be sure that this only happens to Christians. He easily did that because he will not feel any guilt since to him, Christians are going to hell anyway; they deserve it. However, if he were to do



that to a Muslim woman, he'd have been guilty. He finds it easier to harass Christian women. I didn't leave my house for the next 5 days, I didn't feel like I owned my body ... I quit work and didn't work in Egypt any longer until I left to come to my husband here [in California].”

-Interviewee #10

*(Left Egypt at the age of 28 and was 38 at the time of the interview)*

Throughout her recollection of these two stories, Interviewee 10 continuously attributed her strength and moments of wisdom to God. Her faith, as she stated, is what gave her the ability to face both challenges, and this, to her, is enough to provide her with peace. As she walked through the second story of the man who followed her, she began crying. However, despite being traumatized and frustrated, she did not resort to anger; not once during the hour and twenty minutes interview did she express hatred or negativity towards any of her harassers. This strength is a perfect demonstration of resilience: positive adaptation to negative and painful experiences. In fact, the comment she gave me before we started the interview is an even great display of resilience. All she knew about the topic of the interview and research is that it is about Coptic Orthodox Christians and discrimination. Before I had begun the interview, Interviewee 10 first said “I'm happy you chose me but I never experienced discrimination.” I explained that this is fine, and one of the goals of the interviews is to assess whether discrimination is truly common.

Towards the middle of the interview, she was in tears; after concluding my questions, she smiled and said “maybe I have been discriminated against.” She was not oblivious to the prejudicial incidences that she went through. Rather, because these experiences are frequent, and are present in the daily lives of the overwhelming majority of other Christian women, she did not consider her experiences to be out of the ordinary. As a matter of fact, she added that in

comparison to the mother who lost her two daughters in St. Mark's Church bombing, her experiences are only small challenges.

In December 2015, St. Mark's Coptic Orthodox Cathedral in Egypt was bombed, leaving 27 killed, 1 of whom was 10-year-old girl (Magy) and 2 of were sisters (Marina and Veronia).<sup>60</sup> The responses of the families of Magy, Marina, and Veronia cannot be summarized in a term other than resilience:

“I will miss Maggie. Her departure is difficult and her laughter does not leave me. Her voice is in my ears ... But my condolences are that she is now in heaven laughing and playing with angels ... she is now my intercessor.”

-Mo'men, Magy's father

“We bring forth our children to send them up to heaven, and Magy has ascended.”

-Nermeen, Magy's mother



Magy's mother, walking into her daughter's funeral while supported by a nun holding her hand.

Magy's parents' response to the

horrible manner in which their daughter died transcends any expectations. They did not passively accept the events, but they comforted all mourners around the country with their peace and words about their daughter. Similar to this was the peaceful and astonishing reaction of mother of the two sisters who were also murdered in the attack:

“Our Lord took both of them together so as to not favor one over the other.”

-Nahla, mother of the two murdered sisters (Marina and Veronia)

Interviewee 10 and several other interviewees did not consider the challenges they overcame to be significant stories of prejudice and persecution because of stories like Mo'men's, Nermeen's, and Nahla's; the three of them lost their kids in their place of worship. The three of them have shown incredible forms of resilience; they acknowledged what they believe to be blessings that resulted from the attacks.

As having been contiously demonstrated, the vast majority of Coptic Orthodox Christians face discrimination with strong faith. A 100% of all interviewees that have shown forms of resilience (love, strength, and/or forgiveness) have attributed this adaptation to their faith:

“They [mothers of the 21 martyrs] are really anchored in their religion that is based on the Bible and the scripture. They are living it [the scripture].”

-Interviewee #11

*(Left Egypt at the age of 25 and was 47 at the time of the interview)*

“If you love your Lord God, you will love your brother. Who is your brother? Anyone is your brother. That’s why you’re here: to love like Christ.”

-Interviewee #12

*(Left Egypt at the age of 42 and was 64 at the time of the interview)*

“I believe that Muslims are close to God, He [God] is willing to reveal himself to them in miraculous ways because some of them are seeking them. So I believe we [Christians] need to love them and reach out to them. I truly believe that many of these people have a good heart.”

-Interviewee #3

*(Left Egypt at the age of 17 and was 52 at the time of the interview)*

“Their [21 martyrs’] heads were cut off as if they’re animals. Someone who doesn’t have Christ in their heart would not survive this news, it would kill them. But because Christ really chose the people who have faith to be witnesses of Him, the mothers then came out to speak of Christ. These are not normal people, they’re angels. No matter how much anger I can have in response to these incidents, God will take it away. He gets rid of those feelings of hatred or anger because you are of His name.”

-Interviewee #10

*(Left Egypt at the age of 28 and was 38 at the time of the interview)*

The statements made above reflect the overall belief system of the Coptic Orthodox Christian Church in Egypt, which essentially is rooted in the Bible. All interviewees who have shown resilience through their experiences of prejudice have accredited this strength to their faith and God. They also base this on their scripture, i.e. “Even though I walk through the darkest

valley, I will fear no evil, for You are with me” Psalm 23:4. For many Coptic Orthodox Christians, this verse could be literally applied and understood; for many, a walk from home to church could indeed be a “dark valley,” as seen in two stories of Interviewee #13 and Interviewee #10’s husband:

“During Eid Al Fitr and Al Adha, as Christians, we dared not to go down the street. We could be hit with pebbles or thrown at anything. They would rent a carriage and go around the village and sing a specific song that I could never forget; it too traumatized me. This is how it went:

*‘You made our streets dirty you Nazarenes.’*

They would go on and repeat it on and on. I even remember its tune, and of course by Nazarenes, they mean Christians. Because I lived in a small village, everyone knew each other and they could tell who is Christian. So I would never go down the street during their three days of feasting because I’d get thrown things at.”

-Interviewee #13

“My husband, when he was a servant in Sunday school, would stop by the kids’ houses to walk them to church with him. And for most of the time, people would throw pebbles at them. Every single time. And one time, one person was sent to the hospital because of this.”

-Interviewee #10

*(Left Egypt at the age of 28 and was 38 at the time of the interview)*

These stories above are only two real examples from millions of other Coptic Orthodox Christian stories. To make it to church was a risky venture that Interviewee 13 and Interviewee

10's husband and his church kids frequently undertook. Even with the awareness of the danger and risks, they persistently went to church without fail. Certainly, not all Coptic Christians get pebbles thrown at them on their way to church; in fact, the majority of Christians do not experience this. Discrimination takes different forms based on various factors, especially socioeconomic factors. Both interviewees 13 and 10 lived in governorates in Northern Egypt, which are generally known to be lower on the socioeconomic scale than cities and suburbs around Cairo. The prejudice they experienced was in the form of pebbles and threatening songs. In contrast, an interviewee who lived in a gated community in of Egypt's affluent areas and attended the church nearby her neighborhood, experienced prejudice in the form of being touched by men:

“This might make me emotional, it actually makes me sad. A couple of times in my time in high school, a couple of Muslim boys would come into my church just so they can lurk and harass girls. They would come and stand very close, touching us.

When they seemed suspicious, security would ask to look at their ID because Egyptian IDs identify one's religion. They would turn out to not be Christian. No matter where we go, there is no safety. It's demoralizing how we don't have any safe spaces. Especially not in even in churches because they keep on getting bombed. That was so common. It was a big fear. My parents put me in such a sheltered environment to try to protect me, but they felt like they could never fully do that with the way things were: churches getting bombed and people walking churches in to harass girls ...

The guys would get extremely close, not just stand from afar. They would stand close enough to be touching the girls.”

-Interviewee #5

*(Left Egypt at the age of 18 and was 22 at the time of the interview)*

Whether in a sheltered, affluent community or a far-flung suburb, the majority of Coptic Orthodox Christians experience discrimination. As heavily demonstrated all throughout the research, it manifests in different forms ranging from large-scale attacks to *subtle yet explicit discrimination*. Discrimination is present in every detail of the lives of Coptic Orthodox Christians: present in conversations, interactions, schools and government systems, work environments, neighborhoods, and lastly, culture. The more destitute an institution or environment is, the more prevalent discrimination is. Yet all throughout the different forms of discrimination, Coptic Orthodox Christians have often proved to remain steadfast in their faith and resilient in the face of ongoing negativity. The Coptic Orthodox Christian community's positive adaptation is not a political strategy of survival; in fact, it has cost thousands of individuals their lives over the centuries. Their positive adaptation is an obvious reflection of what they believe their faith to be: a faith of forgiveness.

A culture or society are not modifiable elements, but systems and policies certainly are. Policymakers and organizations in charge of creating frameworks of education systems and curriculums need to take rapid action against the biases and favoritism that are present in schools. Educational institutions are where young students begin to create their understanding of the world and their society; to a great extent, schools impact the mentality and beliefs of children and young adults. The exclusivity and negativity in schools catalyze the creation of discriminatory society and environment. Thus, investing efforts to eliminate discrimination and decrease exclusion in schools would cause young students to grow into impartial and inclusive. Those efforts will create a ripple effect that would spread impartiality and tolerance to the rest of

society. It is within the power of the government and legislators in Egypt to address those issues and ensure a secure and just learning and growing environment for all their students.



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