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COPTS IN THE NATIONAL AND RELIGIOUS DISCOURSES: A NARRATIVE OF RESISTANCE IN SHADY LEWIS'S NOVEL *TURUQ AL-RAB*

Abstract

The focus of scholarly studies and literary works on Egyptian Copts as a persecuted or a faith community has diverted attention from seeing them as active agents who challenge hegemonic powers within the complex overlapping of national and religious discourses. As a diasporic Copt, Shady Lewis voices in his 2018 novel *Turuq al-Rab* (Ways of the Lord) a counter-narrative of resistance, scrutinizing the prevailing conformist culture fraught with control and repression orchestrated primarily by the state and secondarily by the church. This paper examines the ways in which Lewis offers a new paradigm for understanding Coptic identity in light of Egypt's socio-history that has produced this culture. It argues that the novel's interlacing of the twofold church-state and Copts-church asymmetries of power informs Coptic contentions of citizenship, belonging, and relation to the church.

خلاصة

إن تركيز الدراسات العلمية والأعمال الأدبية على الأقباط المصريين كمجتمع مُضطهَد أو ديني قد صرف الانتباه عن رؤيتهم كعناصر فاعلة تتحدى القوى المهيمنة في إطار التداخل المعقد بين "الخطابات الوطنية والدينية". باعتباره قبطياً في المهجر يُعبر شادي لويس في روايته "طرق الرب الصادرة عام 2018 عن سرديّة عكسية مقاومة، حيث يدقق في الثقافة الممتثلة السائدة والمليئة بالسيطرة والقمع التي تنظمها الدولة في المقام الأول ثم الكنيسة بشكل ثانوي. تبحث هذه المقالة في الطرق التي يقدم بها لويس نموذجاً جديداً لفهم الهوية القبطية في ضوء تاريخ مصر الاجتماعي الذي أنتج هذه الثقافة. وتجادل المقالة بأن التشابك في الرواية بين عدم توازن القوى ما بين الكنيسة والدولة وعدم مساواتها بين الأقباط والكنيسة القبطية هو الأمر الذي يساهم في تشكيل وبلورة الادعاءات القبطية حول المواطنة والانتماء والعلاقة بالكنيسة



INTRODUCTION

Copts, known for being one of the oldest ethnoreligious minorities that have preserved their heritage and rituals and maintained, in Egypt and

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the diaspora,¹ their loyalty to the Coptic Orthodox Church, rarely produce counter-narrative literary voices that challenge the church's conforming culture. While they are often studied as a persecuted minority in Egypt's national discourse, as a "'symbol,' . . . an inert 'victim,' in the story . . . of the struggle of the government and the Islamists for control of the state,"² Shady Lewis's 2018 novel *Turuq al-Rab* (Ways of the Lord) offers, through the lens of its diasporic Coptic author, a new paradigm for understanding Copticity in light of Egypt's social and national histories.³ Its opening biblical verse, "The parents have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge" (Jer. 31:29), sums up Lewis's characterization of Copts as "a product of a much bigger force, of a multi-generational institution."⁴ This bigger force suggests their trappings in the concurrent dual asymmetrical power between the church and the state on the one hand, and Copts and the church, on the other hand.

The novel's confession setting in a Coptic Orthodox priest's office conjures up a space that reflects this dual power hierarchy and raises questions about the church's tight grip over personal status laws. A non-observant Copt of the Orthodox faith, Sherif, the narrator, is forced to engage in weekly confession meetings in hopes of receiving permission to marry his German girlfriend, Esther, by convincing the priest that his disengagement from church was his ancestors' fault and that he has no restrictions – no prior marriage – that prevent him from marrying. This central Coptic grievance in Egypt and the diaspora exemplifies the church's authority over its community, mirroring the state's larger hegemony over the church, in a parallel struggle for control. Delving into the history of multiple generations, the confession meetings are a window through which Sherif interlaces the contributors to the "bigger force" that has complicated the Copts' national and religious belongings: Egypt's history of political turmoil, past interactions with the West, majority Muslims, the church's policies, and the state's limitations on Copts' rights.

This paper analyzes *Turuq al-Rab*'s unconventional nuancing of Coptic resistance to the church's hegemony and to a culture fraught with control and repression, orchestrated primarily by the state and secondarily by the church.⁵ The paper begins with a sociohistorical contextualization of the status of Copts within the contentious issue of minoritization and national unity to provide a framework for analyzing the novel's critical framing of intracommunal Copts-church relations as an inseparable outcome of the national discourse. It argues that, by interweaving the church-state discourse as a primary shaper of the Copts-church relations, the novel casts new light on Copts' complex

relations to the homeland and the church and on their self-understanding. This raises vital questions of relevance to diasporic and Egyptian Copts, as it broadens the purview of rethinking their citizenship, transnational and intercommunal Coptic-Muslim relations in Egypt, and challenges the church's hegemony over family laws. In rethinking the history that has complicated those relations and the Copts' status, Lewis's novel contributes to what Akladios describes as the "heteroglossia" or "overlapping chronologies differentiated by varied and opposing voices—of immigrant recollections to share their histories."⁶

COPTS AS MINORITY: FRAMING NATIONAL UNITY

To understand the status of Copts in the intersection between the national and religious discourses in question, it proves essential to examine first the contentious issue of their minoritization within the framing of national unity. Copts have embraced or rejected their labeling as a minority, adopting various narratives with regards to their equality to Muslims as a reflection of the state's and consequently the Coptic Orthodox Church's policies.⁷

Historically, the end of the ninth century marked a demographic decrease in the number of Copts who ceased to be a majority in Egypt two centuries after the Muslims' invasion in AD 641. The Pact, or Covenant, of Umar, written in the seventh century under Caliph Umar ibn al-Khattab (634–644), defined the Christians' status as *dhimmi* people or "people of the book" who ought to be protected. It included the Christians of Mesopotamia, Jerusalem, and North Africa, along with the Jews. Despite centuries of persecution and tension with Muslim rulers, the nineteenth century improved their status: Muhammad Ali abolished the oppressive *jizya* or tax among other discriminatory rules against them, allowed them to occupy many government positions, and brought wealth to many as landowners.⁸ The postcolonial Egyptian state rejected the narrative of Copts' classification as a minority in order to feed into the rhetoric of national unity, resisting the notion of separating majority Muslims from minority Christians. According to a Human Rights Watch report in 1994, the Egyptian state has argued that "applying the term minority even from a strictly numerical viewpoint to describe Christians in Egypt has negative connotations which we resent."⁹

The narrative of national unity resonated with the Coptic community who has, in turn, "refused for a long time to be called *aqalliya* or minority in favor of being considered equal citizens."¹⁰ While the estimated number of Copts in Egypt has been

subject to debate,¹¹ their resistance to being designated as a minority has also underpinned their ancestral connection as an indigenous group native to pre-Islamic Egypt. Despite their efforts to claim national equality, colonialism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries deepened divisiveness among citizens of the colonized Arab states “based on a differentiation of citizen rights in various categories, depending on people’s cultural assimilation, religion, ethnicity, and especially loyalty,” creating a sort of “foreign patronage” of Christians.¹² This held true in the case of Copts. Nonetheless, “in their rise against British colonialism, Copts united with Muslims during the 1919 revolution under the slogan ‘Religion is for God and the nation for all’ and were careful to express their loyalty and nationalism.”¹³ However, postcolonialism shifted the Muslims’ attitude toward their minority compatriots, holding bitter memories of past favoritism and associating them with imperialism and the previous feudal system.

To counter the Muslim majority’s sentiment, the patriarchs of the Coptic Orthodox Church became the voice of agency, speaking on behalf of the Coptic community in favor of national equality and holding close ties with the country’s presidents. Pope Kirolos IV expressed loyalty to Jamal Abdel Nasser, Egypt’s first president of the postcolonial republic, who “put the control of *Majlis al-Milli* in the hands of the Church and restrained the influence of the Secular Coptic elite.”¹⁴ In response to Anwar El Sadat’s public speeches that declared Egypt the “land of tolerance, love and fraternity” in 1977, emphasizing unity in stating that “our only criteria is our national interest,” Pope Shenouda III refused to call Copts a minority, announcing that the term “indicated segregation and discrimination”; instead, he dubbed all Egyptians “sons of a single homeland.”¹⁵ Sadat’s intentions were twofold: first, to solidify his image as a tolerant figure in the eyes of the international arena following his peace-making visit to Israel and, second, to set his expectations of the Coptic Orthodox Church’s subordination to the regime. In return, Copts, eager for protection and to reinforce their equal citizenship, espoused the church’s and the Egyptian state’s stances and followed suit in announcing, “We are not a minority in Egypt. We do not like to consider ourselves a minority and do not like others to call us a minority.”¹⁶ They advocated being “fully and harmoniously integrated into Egyptian society as to be indistinguishable from Muslims.”¹⁷ As for Coptic priests who have historically obeyed and trusted their patriarchs’ decisions, a few expressed their opposition, seeing in Pope Shenouda III’s alliance with Hosni Mubarak a return to the *millet* system and the “darkness of the Middle Ages.”¹⁸ Several Coptic elites vowed support to the regime, rejecting all venues of Coptic criticism of the state. For instance,

prominent billionaire Naguib Sawires refused to support a Coptic journalist to raise money “from élite Copts for the development of a newspaper page devoted to discussion of Coptic participation in political affairs,” among other examples.¹⁹

Nonetheless, the church-state relations were not consistently harmonious. Pope Shenouda III voiced his defense of Copts’ rights in defiance of Sadat’s announcement of Islamic shari’a law as the foundation of legislation in Egypt, which many viewed as a step towards supporting a more radical Islamic Egypt, contrary to Nasser’s secular ideology. In response to the escalation of violence and Islamists’ attacks on churches and monasteries beginning in 1972 and for a few years after, the pope expressed his concern with this escalating danger, raising the Copts’ consciousness of their rights. He held conferences demanding

government protection of Christians and their property; freedom of belief and worship; an end to the seizure of church property by the Ministry of Waqf; freedom from harassment to convert to Islam; freedom to disseminate information on Christian beliefs; the abandonment of all efforts to apply Islamic law to non-Muslims; and greater Coptic representation in labor unions, professional associations, local and regional councils, and the People’s Assembly (226).

In addition to these demands, Pope Shenouda’s criticism of the timing of Sadat’s peace treaty with Israel and his local policies cost him a forced exile to the Nitrian Desert in 1981 until he was reinstated by Mubarak in 1985, four years after Sadat’s assassination by Islamic extremists in 1981. The pope’s exiled experience called for stronger relations with Mubarak. Upon his release, he established better ties of loyalty and partnership with the president, expressing support for his leadership and emphasizing national unity, evidence of which showed decades later in his call for Copts to not join the protestors’ demand to oust Mubarak at the height of the uprising in January and February of 2011. Similarly, current Coptic Patriarch Tawadros II follows in Pope Shenouda’s footsteps by holding even closer ties with President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, the first president to annually join Coptic Christmas and Easter masses in person, unlike his predecessors who sent delegates on their behalf. In retrospect, al-Sisi has emphasized the importance of maintaining Egypt’s national fabric in order to continue tightening the regime’s grip: “In Egypt, we started a journey together and we pledge

to you to complete it together. The journey of the new republic fits all of us, so do not allow anyone to come between us.”²⁰ Consequently, as pointed out by Ibrahim, “the rhetoric of Muslim-Coptic unity has played an important and reoccurring role in the memory and imaginary of who was an ‘authentic Egyptian,’ subsuming minority rights to a question of ‘Egyptian rights.’”²¹

The absence of the word “minority” in al-Sisi’s *National Human Rights Strategy 2021–2026*, published in September 2021, aligns with the equal citizenship rhetoric.²² Instead, the strategy refers to the “citizens believing in heavenly religions” and their “right to practice religious rituals and build houses of worship.”²³ It addresses “anti-discrimination” only in the context of ensuring “equality” and “equal opportunities, and respect for the principle of citizenship” exclusively among “women, children, and persons with special needs.”²⁴ By eschewing the idea of assigning Copts a minority status, this narrative absolves the state of being held accountable for minority rights before the international community and prevents the Coptic pope from demanding more rights. Coptic activists who advocate for equal rights have faced arrests and sometimes prosecution.²⁵ These church-state relations have conditioned the Copts’ status, as Lewis describes in his novel. Their embracing of an illusionary image of equality as proof of loyalty and good citizenship, coupled with the state’s avoidance of addressing the question of minority rights, has shaped their submissiveness, causing their concerns to be disregarded and limiting them to the religious sphere.²⁶

COPTS IN THE NATIONAL DISCOURSE IN *TURUQ AL-RAB*

While *Turuq al-Rab* does not engage directly in the discourse of national unity and victimhood, the narrator’s stories are imbued with mockery of the absurdity of incidents of injustice against Copts as an outcome of history and of the church-state relations. For instance, the difficulty that a priest faces to receive “a permit to build a church within a short distance of another church” (*Turuq al-Rab*, 41)—despite his land purchase thanks to a rich Coptic donor whom Saint Mary called in a dream to move to Cairo and build a church in her name—informs the state’s legal restrictions on issuing such permits. The narrator’s interweaving of politics and religion in this story suggests the state policies’ exclusion of Copts from the political sphere, confining them to religion and the supernatural.

To help explain the limitations on Copts’ rights that left them to be seen only through the lens of religion as opposed to being participants in decision-making, an examination of the restrictions on

building or repairing churches, which are ingrained in state power and its discriminatory practices, is in order. These restrictions date back to the Hatt-i Hümayun, enacted in 1856 during the Tanzimat reforms that required the issuance of a sovereign authority of permission to build and restore Christian places of worship.²⁷ Sadat's era reinforced these restrictions, but Mubarak loosened them in response to Pope Shenouda III's solid relations with the regime upon his return from exile. Although al-Sisi ratified the law in 2016 to allow the legalization of the Christian places of worship that were built without the required permits in the past, Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies reports that "the state completely ignores the arbitrary closure of outlets for the free practice of religion and belief," calling al-Sisi's *National Human Rights Strategy 2021–2026* "a ruse to show international community and donor states that political reform is underway."

The novel subtly points to the effects of Egypt's colonial and postcolonial pan-Arab history on Copts' subjecthood in relation to Muslims. One vivid example points to the hostility they faced after the departure of the "Jews, Greeks, and Western Europeans, [which] left them potentially an exposed target,"²⁸ as Muslims grew warier of them, assuming their past privileged status under British imperialism. During Israel's attacks on Egypt in 1967, the narrator observes that a member of the Socialist Party falsely accuses Boulos's family of leaving their house light on to "send signals to the Jews' jets" (63). Similarly, Lewis recounts real-life incidents that echo those in the novel where the locals chase and dub a Catholic monk a "Zionist," stigmatizing Copts as traitors of the country.²⁹ In line with the aforementioned history of the Copts' endeavor to prove their patriotism and assume their equality to the Muslim majority, these stories raise questions about their belonging and citizenship.

Being accused of colonial patronage compromised the Copts' status in the novel, as it did in postcolonial Egypt, where some had to endure ostracism and discrimination. The narrator chronicles the impact of the Muslims' treatment of Copts as "foreigners" on the latter's integration. His grandfather Boulos loses his job after the 1956 nationalization of the Suez Canal company, which replaced "a big number of the Jews and Copts," considered "foreigners," with "Muslims, who previously constituted only 10 percent of its employees" (49). As Sherif puts it, this loss meant to his grandfather a dual punishment, adding to the departure of Westerners, and a disappointment in Nasser, which all left him "not Egyptian enough" (49). In light of the postcolonial societal reframing of Copts, the

individual unfolds as a product, to borrow Lewis's term, of the social and political histories of Egypt.

The novel's framing of the Copts' subjectification as an outcome of Egypt's turbulent history disfavored their image in the national imaginary, shaping intercommunal relations. As a result of the state-church power dynamics, as explained above, Muslims viewed Copts as an extension of the church. Guirgis observes that the Muslims' view of "the Coptic church as one of the corrupt regime's institutions" – claiming that wealthy Copts influenced the state by donating money "to secure a stable and good life for the Copts" – has "provided Muslims with another reason to be suspicious of Copts, which adds to sectarian tensions."³⁰ Film representation of Copts has sometimes reinforced this idea, portraying them as cunning and opportunists in pursuit of what secures their interests.³¹ Muslims have used the pretext of middle- and upper-class Copts' holding of stable professions – 80 percent of pharmacists and 30–40 percent of physicians – to convey the belief that they have "an effective social support system" and should not be considered a minority who suffers discrimination or lack of opportunity.³² Such preconceived notions inhibit Muslims from seeing that many Copts share the same dire economic living conditions as the majority. For instance, 90 percent of the inhabitants of Zaballeen or Garbage City in Cairo are Copts. Moreover, Copts have been denied access to high-ranking jobs in the government, as Pope Shenouda III has pointed out on several public occasions. Grievances at incidents of violence, discrimination, and inequality in the workplace were often undermined since historically only the pope was the direct liaison with the state for fear of conveying a message of disloyalty to the regime.

Lewis argues that the state instigates the schism between Muslims and Copts because it is in its "interest . . . to scare the Copts of [the Muslim] monster . . . [to] perpetuat[e] the belief that Copts are safe thanks to its security forces that protect them from falling prey to that monster."³³ This protection is set in a trade-off system, requiring loyalty to the regime. In this process, the state coerces the media into silencing the citizens, while instilling fear among them, rendering collective society a "scary monster with one thousand heads" (80), as Sherif exclaims. To describe the state's mobilization of the media to serve its agenda, Sherif recounts the arrest of his friend 'Alaa, a Muslim journalist, who is at risk of imprisonment during the random arrests of the *Kefaya* protests because of his profession. In another instance, Sherif and his German fiancée Esther are accused of espionage and betrayal of the country when a newspaper falsely calls them "Westerners in *Kefaya* movement" who are secretly trained to

overthrow the government (52). The false, deliberate identification of Copts with Westerners feeds into the conspiracy theory that oppresses them while it instills fear among dissidents. This narrative has caused Egyptian media in 2005, following numerous sectarian clashes in Egypt (2000–2005), to accuse Egyptian Copts of receiving financial support from diaspora Copts in Washington, DC, who “seek . . . to interfere in Egypt’s internal affairs and tarnish its reputation.”³⁴

Moreover, the novel suggests that the state’s dissemination of the Copt-Muslim schism has elicited latent religious tensions, causing the stigmatization of Copts and instigating them to exercise self-censorship. In *Turuq al-Rab*, Esther’s Muslim instructor labels Copts “infidels” and “the opposite of Muslim” (53), a common practice that derogates Christian children and hinders their integration in public schools.³⁵ Sherif points out that Muslim heads of tribes in Upper Egypt compete over the number of “*ahl aldhimmi*” (20), a term that signals the period where minorities were labeled second-class citizens following the Muslims’ invasion of Arab countries in the seventh century. This sense of dhimmitude permeates as a culture that informs religious hierarchy, forcing some Christians to hide their religious identity. Sherif recounts the story of Hanna, known as the bully of the local priests and the Coptic community, who abandons his Christian name and renames himself Gafar, after a powerful Muslim tribe leader. The change of name, as Sherif indicates, constitutes an acknowledgment of gratitude to the Gafars who vowed their protection and a way of empowering and elevating their family to be equal to their Muslim protectors in the village (21–23).

This story echoes the Copts’ customary survival practices driven by their societal marginalization. As *Turuq al-Rab* describes, one such practice is having two names, one Christian and another neutral (66), a “secretive” characteristic of Copts and “a natural desire for self-preservation,”³⁶ which reveals the fear of being religiously identified and a preference for public invisibility. This imperative practice challenges the Copts’ faith ingrained in the belief that a Christian “should not deny Jesus in public,” as Sherif tells the priest, but rather proclaim it despite adversities (19). Seeking her Muslim colleagues’ approval, Sherif’s mother, Maria, reminds them that she’s named after one of Prophet Mohamed’s wives (67). The random choice of Sherif’s family last name, ‘Awadallah, Arabic for God’s reward or compensation, is a cynical commentary on the Copts’ helplessness, awaiting God’s reward for enduring oppression. Consoling himself, Sherif wonders if its meaning will come true: “Though we knew nothing about ‘Awadallah, we have always found in his name an

acceptable familial association, perhaps due to its allusion to a story of loss and compensation of the person" (44). Destiny unfolds and his powerlessness is all the more apparent when the German embassy assigns him the last name Asad due to a "small bureaucratic mistake," which forces him to change his name "in all official documents to match the name which the Germans chose for me" (44-45).

The series of absurd incidents, by way of Sherif's telling the stories, contrasts with the harsh reality of their stigmatization. The priest's posing of the question "Who are you?" epitomizes Sherif's confusion about his identity and the bitter realization of his social absence. "I see myself for the first time," as he observes, because he was "never taught to answer that question" (16). As his confession meetings progress, he realizes his disempowerment in the hands of fate due to "some unfortunate experiences of the older generations and a destiny of which I did not take part, which left me . . . confused about my belonging" (106). The confession meetings become a space of existential becoming in the challenge to identify one's citizenship and Coptic identity against the two forces of authority: the state and the church.

INTERCOMMUNAL RESISTANCE IN *TURUQ AL-RAB*

In the state-church power hierarchy and the ensuing and necessary church control over its community, *Turuq al-Rab*'s protagonist expresses a defiant grievance against the church family laws and its sacraments of marriage, confession, and baptism.³⁷ Lewis's diasporic real-life experience of seeking the church's permission to marry his German girlfriend mirrors the protagonist's in an outcry against the Coptic Church's "increasingly restrictive" marriage regulations.³⁸

Turuq al-Rab especially points to the recent reforms in divorce laws initiated by Coptic Patriarch Tawadros II in 2016 which overlook cases of harm or mistreatment.³⁹ By raising this critical issue, the novel alludes to the continued suppression of Coptic women's rights in Egypt and the diaspora, shaming them for wanting to break what is believed to be a divine matrimony. His 2021 novel, *Tarikh Moogaz Lil Khaliqah wa Sharq al Qahira* (A Brief History of Creation and East Cairo) foregrounds gender issues, such as domestic abuse and gender equality in Coptic marriage, and raises awareness of the need to undergo more reforms that are inclusive of all Copts' needs. In the novel, Lewis sheds light on Sherif's younger years, where his protagonist poignantly narrates his childhood memories of his mother's beatings at the hand of his father and the local priest's refusal to help her. His mother "does not whisper one word of complaint, for she knows what the Bible says about Eve's

curse that was passed on to all women thereafter" (*Tarikh Moogaz Lil Khaliqah wa Sharq al Qahirai*, Chapter 3).⁴⁰ She also knows that divorce is not an option because, according to the Bible,

a man leaves his mother and father and attaches to his wife to form one body, so how can the body be divided? And how can she cut off the head and separate it from the rest of the organs, for the man is the head of the woman just like Jesus is the head of the church. (Chapter 2)

Therefore, she "must contently accept her fate" (Chapter 2). As an observer of his mother's desperation for help, Sherif shockingly observes the priest dismiss her complaints and focus on "the big matters, the great, old pains, and eternity" like "the bible, the penitents, God's people the salt of the earth and light of the world, and her image in front of others" (Chapter 2). His mother, on the other hand, talks about the "small matters" like "the fate she must endure daily, the swelling of her face, the bruises as a result of slamming her head against the wall" (Chapter 2).

In scrutinizing the Coptic Orthodox Church's authority in personal status regulations, the novel raises the pressing question of whether divorce would become permissible. Critics have portrayed the Coptic Church's restrictive rules as an endeavor to strictly control the Coptic community in an arranged agreement of quid pro quo with the state to prevent its intervention in the church's affairs, by vowing loyalty and subordination to the regime in return for exercising its absolute power over Copts' personal status matters.⁴¹ In family laws, the church has demanded the state to leave personal status matters to the church that has maintained a tight grip over marriage and divorce regulations to "consolidate its monopoly over communal affairs" so as not to leave them subject to the executive or legislative systems, as Ibrahim argues.⁴² Pope Shenouda III's book *Shari'at al-Jawja al-Wahida fil Massiheyya* (The Shari'a of One Wife in Christianity, 1958) asserted "the necessity of respecting Christian teachings and the authority of the church as the organizer of Coptic personal status laws," which helps explain his resistance to Sadat's reforms of these laws that aimed to grant Egyptian women more rights.⁴³ These laws remained reserved only to the pope's decisions. He amended the 1938 *Personal Status Law* on marriage and divorce in 2008 and restricted divorce to two cases – of adultery and conversion – in order to prevent the legislative branch from interfering. Limiting the right of divorce to the two cases of

adultery and conversion, under the guise of protecting the inviolability of the divine sacrament of marriage, intends in reality to preserve the Coptic Church's authority and jurisdiction. This "created a parallel legal system inside the church which was in charge of scrutinizing the divorce cases afresh and issuing an independent ruling based on the legal norms set by the church only."⁴⁴ These policies have also fended off any possibility of state support of Coptic secularists' demands for change.⁴⁵

Lewis's scrutiny of marriage laws echoes the demands to reform Coptic personal status laws that rose in the spirit of democratization and equality of the January 2011 revolution under the hashtag "for-a-uniform-civil-personal-status-code." These demands called for a rejection of religious laws in favor of civil regulations that prohibit gender discrimination in marriage and divorce.⁴⁶ They failed, however, to address Article 3 which states religious institutions as "the main source of legislation" for personal status matters, which was later consolidated by the Islamist government in 2012, leaving the church as the sole "ruler over Christians."⁴⁷ Secularist Copts led a series of conferences in 2015 with a broader agenda that discussed Coptic personal status laws and the selection and accountability of priests, which faced rejection by the church.⁴⁸ Meanwhile, amended divorce regulations led many Copts to convert to Islam, emigrate, or take advantage of living abroad to manipulate the church regulations and find a way out of marriage. Secularist diasporic Copts often face criticism from the Coptic community for their dissenting ideas or behaviors, often accused of being "Westernized" and no longer affiliates of Coptic conservative culture.⁴⁹

In addition to criticizing the church's gender disparity in family laws, Sherif's confessions insinuate a criticism of the church's elevation and deification of priesthood. Customarily, Copts kiss a priest's hand, considered holy for holding the Holy Body during communion, which can help fathom the significance of Sherif's derogative depiction. "The green door" of the priest's office derides, first, the church's reverence of Coptic priests as mediators between God and citizens and holders of the key to heaven. Moreover, confession, one of the Coptic Orthodox Church's seven sacraments, is portrayed as a venue for pressure and control where "power turns into routine" (*Turuq al-Rab*, 16). Sherif discerns in the priests' power a "hidden arrogance" coupled with "injustice" (16). To a non-Coptic reader, the description of Father Antonio as an ordinary "man [he] was supposed to meet" reduces him to an ordinary human and denies him the holiness that the church assigns priesthood. Moreover, using pejorative terms like "*ars*" (crook)

during the confession adds to this disrespect (43). Sherif further alludes to Father Antonio's pretentiousness, comparing him to familiar bureaucratic employees with a fake smile who hinder progress and deny him services (15).

While the entire novel centers Sherif's attempt to prove that his long absence from church does not signify that he disapproves of it, the stories he tells his confessor reveal a hidden criticism of clergy practices and hypocrisy. Father Asheya obtains an illegal permit to build a church while spreading the belief that the church was built thanks to a rich Coptic architect's "miracle" dream where Saint Mary asked him to build it. Sherif notes the priest's disregard for the architect's quick gain of wealth, sarcastically commenting that "stories of fast wealth . . . are not the type of miracles that preoccupy priests" (38). To further disparage the priest for his immorality, Sherif pungently compares him to his Muslim friend Abdel Azeem whom society condemns for his "immoral" polygamy although he never claims righteousness or virtuosity (73). Similarly, he mocks the Coptic Church's animosity toward other Christian denominations and its pretentious call for tolerance while competing with and condemning the local Catholic church for "seeking to secretly convert Muslims into Catholicism" (63).

To counter his marginalization and challenge the conforming narrative of priesthood's holiness and authority, Sherif seeks agency by turning the confession meetings into a "game". In response to the priest's repeated question "Why don't we see you at church?" (16-17), Sherif resolves to "manipulat[e] . . . the old man, after I proved to him and to myself that he's not the only one in control of the confession cards" (26). "Proud of his divine eloquence" (40), the priest's reiteration of some biblical verses on God's authority over the vengeful stirs Sherif's anger and drives him to imagine himself a monster mercilessly attacking its prey—the priest—observing that "no disappointment is crueler for those priests who cause confessors to mumble than to fall prey to a victim with an uncontrolled mouth" (16). Selective stories of the older generation inspire his empowerment. He boldly recounts to Father Antonio the story of his relative Gafar ridiculing of a priest who refuses to baptize his dying child Farawla at night, reiterating his words as if his own: "How did that idiot, who holds the keys to heaven on earth, deprive me from seeing my daughter after death, just for the sake of stubbornness because he disrupted his sleep" (24). He finds in Gafar's building of his own church "a memorial of his victory over Heaven and its guards" (62) to avenge for his daughter's death. In repeating Gafar's blaspheming of the name of God on his death bed, angry at the church and God due to the loss of his daughter, Sherif

derogates Coptic clergy in a manner that would rarely occur in a real-life interaction between a Copt and a priest.

Quibbling over the prevailing culture of control by means of religion, the narrator draws parallel analogies of the twofold priests' and state's authoritarianism to discredit priesthood. Through Sherif's eyes, the reader sees Father Antonio "hide during confession, listening only to let confessors face themselves and their impure stories," a self-glorifying imitation of God "hidden to, yet rejecting of, our senses" (61). Sherif compares his father Maurice's struggle to connect with the church to his mistrust in "the radio that was broadcasting songs of victory though [he] knew that Israelis were on the outskirts of Cairo" about to invade it in 1973 (93). In another instance, a deacon, who happens to be the doorman's son, informs the priest of Sherif's smoking and nightly late home arrival, contrary to Christian teachings that warn against gossiping. Behaviors of clergy members mark the church as a controlling, multifaceted institution in a collective system that subjugates and disrespects individual rights on the pretext of preserving Christian values.

Sherif's critical views of, and break with, the church raise the vital question of whether a secularist's voice within a social system heavily embedded in religion could bring changes. Traditionally, the church has maintained its power over the legislation of the Copts' personal status matters, combatting any changes proposed by Coptic secularists or *al-'almaniyeen*, often perceived as atheists.⁵⁰ Sherif fears being denied permission to marry given his long absence from church, which positions him as a possible atheist. Knowing the implications of uttering the wrong response to Father Antonio's question "So did you become atheist, son?," Sherif affirms his faith and immediately claims having completed the reading of the bible by the age of nine (113). However, his stories posit his Christianity as an imposed, inherited practice from his ancestors and his disconnect from the church as a result of his ancestors' perpetuation of the church's control over Copts' lives: "We carry the yoke [sin] of others whom we don't know, generation after generation" (62).

Lewis's diasporic voice conjures up the Egyptian regime's demonization of Coptic activism in Egypt, embedding it in what it calls the threat of "*aqbat al-mahjar*," or diaspora Copts, to Egypt's national fabric.⁵¹ In *Egyptian Diaspora Activism During the Arab Uprisings*, Müller-Funk notes that Egyptian transnational activism abroad is a minority phenomenon that emerges among immigrant communities triggered by particular events to "directly influence the political situation" and "act as a mouthpiece" in order to "influence public opinion in the

receiving country."⁵² Akladios pins the sectarian events in al-Khanka as the catalyst that "mobilized a [Coptic] diasporic identity in 1972" then turned into a political one in 1981 after al-Zawya al-Hamra's sectarian violence against Copts. The state's pressure on the church pushed for more control on Coptic activism, in hopes of preventing them from reaching US politicians' attention. Expectedly, Pope Tawadros's pressure on diaspora Copts to welcome al-Sisi and warn against protests during his visits to Washington, DC, has curbed dissident Coptic grievances.⁵³

THE WEST IN INTERCOMMUNAL RESISTANCE

The novel's engagement with older generational adherence to Coptic practices as a manifestation of the church's authority conjures up the Coptic Orthodox Church's protection of its institution against Western missionaries. Mahmood argues that the church feared the threat of "Protestant missionaries [who] came armed with the Enlightenment critique of ecclesiastical authority, espousing a privatized conception of religion whose proper locus was the individual, his conscience, and personal experience."⁵⁴ Pennington also highlights the church's concern with "the threat of Catholic and Protestant missions" and the reform movement in the 1930s and 1940s among Orthodox Copts who grew critical of the Orthodox priests' lack of education on religious matters, compared to Protestant and Catholic ones.⁵⁵

In the novel, Sherif's comparisons of the Coptic Orthodox and Protestant Church rituals evoke European and American missionaries' denigration of Coptic practices and their endeavor "to convert [Copts] to what they perceived to be a superior form of Christianity."⁵⁶ This perceived superiority seeps through Sherif's romanticization of Protestant churches; his feet drag him at the age of nine to a house where he could hear "hymns that come from Heaven" (110). In contrast, he decries the "boring and redundant" use of the Coptic language in the Orthodox Church services because he "never understood why we have to listen to hymns in a language that no one speaks or understands." The Coptic language disengaged him spiritually, instead preferring the new Protestant Church where "the sermons . . . were in a language which [he] understood" (107-10). The Coptic Orthodox Church's fear of other denominations transpires in the novel through the priest's harsh banning of Sherif's mother from taking communion upon learning of her Catholic faith, despite her dedication to the church and her regular volunteer work in assisting the needy. He dismisses her Catholic baptism and marriage as invalid, demanding she be rebaptized in the Coptic Church if she wishes to

continue attending church and volunteer work. Her ingenuous response that “the Bible teachings and the creed acknowledge one church and one baptism” sharply criticizes the church’s preaching of tolerance while not practicing it (84).

Notwithstanding these comparisons, the novel holds disparaging views of all religious institutions’ control and disingenuousness. In his recollection of the stark contrast between the well-dressed Protestant children and the miserable-looking children of other denominations, Sherif exposes the missionaries’ exploitation of the socioeconomically challenged by luring them with material gifts to join their faith. He realizes his childhood naivete in admiring their superiority, recalling his subjugation to the long hours of church services and bible reading in return for two full daily meals and for receiving summer and winter clothing annually. Poverty drove Copts to join the Protestant Church. His grandfather Boulos was provided “with shoes, a luxury he would not have afforded had he stayed in his village” (46). His great-grandfather Asad gave away two of his eight children to the Swedish missionary, relieved to have saved them from “the fate to which he and the rest of his children” are destined (46). Meanwhile, Copts endured punishment when expectations of commitment were not met. Yet, the narrator mocks the vanity of forced spirituality. Despite having been raised by the Western Protestant missionaries from a young age, Boulos did not grow as spiritual as they had wished and preferred math and grammar to singing church hymns. His lack of spirituality cost him a job as a grammar teacher in one of the missionaries’ schools in Tanta. “How could they give him up so easily for the simple reason that he never cried with tears during the nightly sermons, as the other children did, reminding them of their sins and their deserved eternal punishment,” Sherif wonders (47).

Moreover, the novel presents Copts’ self-understanding as a mirror of the presence of colonialists and missionaries in Egypt. The Copts’ consciousness of their racial purity, distinct from Arabs, stemmed from “the European discourse on race” (72) and its claim of uncivilized Islam, leading the Copts to see in their shared Christian faith with the West an imagined resemblance of a superior look. Lewis asserts that this interplay of race and politics psychologically impacted Copts, including him. As a child, his conviction that he “was *abyadani* [fair-skinned] with blond features,” physically distinct from Muslims, as he whimsically points out,⁵⁷ echoes Sherif’s childhood’s aspiration “to belong to those who looked like him or those whom he has to learn to resemble” (109). His parents, he recalls, fed him the belief that his family “resembled Westerners and belonged with them to one

denomination." Reflecting on his childhood confusion, he recounts his mother's mockery of his father's resemblance to Muslims and his father's aversion to everything Eastern:

I knew that Christians have a special look that distinguishes them from others and that, with some training, I could recognize them by looking at their features. The following day, I looked in the mirror and noticed that I was truly white, close to blond. . . . Though my eyes' colors were not blue or green as they were supposed to be, my mother proudly told me more than once that they were hazel, and in the sun almost green or grey. (109)

Adding to his confusion, he recalls the Muslim tribe's resentment of his grandfather Gafar's "slave black, not just dark" skin even though he descended from a fair-skinned family, which stigmatized him as a possible bastard and led them to oppose his adoption of their tribe's name (21). Only as an adult does Sherif realize he inherited his grandfather's African "dark-skinned" features, as a teacher once calls him. Ambivalent, he asks the priest: "Either my look does not resemble the Copts or they are simply dark-skinned. And if this is true, then why do they call us Westerners?" (115). In this construct of racialization, Copts lack agency and are subjected to societal racial classification.

The geopolitics of interactions with the West inform different dynamics of diasporic Copts' racialization. Whereas Copts in Egypt, as Lewis observes, formed a self-image of whiteness, these dynamics differ for diasporic Copts in the West. Lukasik argues that "the racialization of American Copts is a dual process oscillating between Christian kinship with white America and the optics of nonwhite suspicion."⁵⁸ In other words, faith positions Eastern and Western Christians as kins in the "global, moral imaginary," targeted for their religion within the persecution discourse. Simultaneously, diasporic Copts are caught in the imperialist thought of the "racialized other," which deprecates Muslims and indistinctly calls Copts Arabs. This resonates with Sherif's bemoaning of his girlfriend's father-in-law's prejudice against him post-9/11, warning her not to marry him and labeling him a misogynist Muslim. "Yes, he is not Muslim, but the culture in which he was raised is," her father warns her (33). Sherif's poignant observation that "Islam is after you no matter where you go" nuances Copts' reduced existence, enmeshed in Muslim predominant identity and the West's Islamophobia. It also suggests an aspiration to

be recognized as ethnically distinct from Muslims and Arabs, which is more prominent in the discourse of diasporic Copts who are less wary of embracing the national unity rhetoric and more vocal of their ethnic and cultural difference.⁵⁹

CONCLUSION

By interlacing Copts' interrelations to the church, to Muslims, and to the homeland as a construct of Egypt's social history, *Turuq al-Rab* broadens the limited scope of seeing Copts through the narrow lens of faith, persecution, and victimhood. Lewis's figurative observation that the Copts' younger generation's "teeth will hurt because of what their parents and grandparents ate" offers a new paradigm for understanding a Copt's introspection of their entrapment in the multilateral asymmetrical agents of power, beginning with the white Christian imperialist, followed by the state, then the church.⁶⁰ Sherif's, or rather Lewis's, dissenting, subtle yet pungent, voice shines a light on how a Copt, caught between Egypt and the diaspora, levels a critical eye of communal relations and navigates religious identity and transnational belonging. Setting its critique in the absurdity of hegemonic powers that destined Copts to a series of subjectification throughout history, this voice provides a counter-narrative that engages in the politics that inform Copticity today. *Turuq al-Rab* continues "the new consciousness wave of the Egyptian novel . . . [that] displays an expansive cultural purview that is grounded in anti-dominant and counter-essentialist depictions."⁶¹

The novel empowers diasporic and Egyptian Copts to rethink the predominant conformist culture supported by the common Coptic belief that "those who obey will be blessed." Although consigned to a marginal, national, and communal space, the narrator's scrutiny of the church's rules reverses power in evoking the need to revisit many rituals and the anachronistic nature of personal status regulations. This need becomes more significant given the political developments in Egypt in the last decade. The rise of Islamism and the attacks on churches and monasteries, which have prompted many Copts to fear for their existence, adhere more to their faith, and support the church, have silenced Coptic activists. Meanwhile, the state has used the escalation of Islamist violence against Copts to coerce the church and the community into submissiveness in return for protection.⁶² Such development has led the church to tighten its grip over its community, slowing down progress despite the Coptic secularists' demands to reform these regulations.⁶³ Within these dynamics that assert the Copt's trappings in the national and religious power disparity, which

are likely to silence activists and dissidents especially in Egypt, *Turuq al-Rab* resists these limitations and assigns agency to the Coptic voice in critically rethinking Coptic identity in light of Egypt's complex social history beyond religion and victimhood.

NOTES

¹ Copts are the largest Christian community in the Arab world, estimated around 10%—of Egypt's population of 107.8 million in midyear 2022, according to the U.S. Department of State ("2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Egypt," <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/egypt/>). While there is no accurate census of Copts in the diaspora, they are estimated to be between 1–2 million, according to Sebastian Elsässer, *The Coptic Question in the Mubarak Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), and between 91,200–750,000 in the United States, according to Brinkerhoff, Jennifer and Liesl Riddle, *Coptic Diaspora Survey* (Washington, DC: George Washington University, 2012), <http://www.copticorphans.org/sites/all/uploads/reports/CopticSurveyReport2-2012>.

² Paul Sedra, "Writing the History of the Modern Copts: From Victims and Symbols to Actors," *History Compass* 7, no. 3 (2009): 1049–63.

³ Shady Lewis, *Turuq al-Rab* [Ways of the Lord] (Cairo: Kotob Khan, 2018). The novel is published in Arabic and has not been translated. All translations in this article are my own. In this article, all references to "Coptic identity" include diasporic Copts who affiliate with the church in Egypt, follow its rituals, and abide by its personal status laws that are religion- and not civil-based.

⁴ Shady Lewis, "Egyptian Novelist Shady Lewis on Coptic Identity, Church-State Relations, and Citizenship," interview by Nevine Abraham, *ArabLit Quarterly*, 7 December 2021, <https://arablit.org/2021/12/07/egyptian-novelist-shady-lewis-on-coptic-identity-church-state-relations-and-citizenship/>.

⁵ For a survey on the representation of Copts in modern Egyptian literature, see Laila Farid, "Copts in Modern Egyptian Literature," *Studies in Coptic Culture: Transmission and Interaction*, ed. Mariam Ayad (Oxford: American University in Cairo Press, 2016), 143–53. On Coptic novelist Waguih Ghali as a misfit Copt in Egypt's nationalist discourse of Coptic believers in the 1960s, see Mina Ibrahim's "Christmas Misfits: Ethnographic Notes on the Coptic 'Waguihs,'" *Egypt Migrations*, 30 December 2018, <https://egyptmigrations.com/2018/12/30/christmas-misfits/>.

⁶ Michael Akladios, "Heteroglossia: Interpretation and the Experiences of Coptic Immigrants from Egypt in North America, 1955–1975," *Histoire sociale* 53, no. 106 (2020): 627–50. It is noteworthy to point out Copts' hybrid, religious practices and to warn against the over generalizations of these

practices. This hybridity has not been sufficiently conveyed in literary works, which renders the originality of Lewis's novel. Lewis's novel differs from works by traditional Coptic novelists, like Edwar Al-Kharrat for instance, and other Arab Christian writers, who had to "renounce all expressions of minority identity" in order to "acquir[e] the status of major intellectuals" in their countries. See Richard Jacquemond, *Conscience of the Nation: Writers, State, and Society in Modern Egypt* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2008), 97; Mary Youssef, *Minorities in the Contemporary Egyptian Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 2.

⁷ Sedra, "Writing the History"; Vivian Ibrahim, "Beyond the Cross and the Crescent: Plural Identities and the Copts in Contemporary Egypt," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 38, no. 14 (2015): 2584–97; J. D. Pennington, "The Copts in Modern Egypt," *Middle Eastern Studies* 18, no. 2 (1982): 158–79, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00263208208700503>.

⁸ Pennington, "The Copts in Modern Egypt"; Saba Mahmood, "Religious Freedom, the Minority Question, and Geopolitics in the Middle East," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 54, no. 2 (2012): 418–46, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417512000096>.

⁹ Human Rights Watch, *Egypt: Violations of Freedom of Religious Belief and Expression of the Christian Minority* (Human Rights Watch, 1 November 1994), <https://www.hrw.org/report/1994/11/01/egypt-violations-freedom-religious-belief-and-expression-christian-minority>.

¹⁰ Mahmood, "Religious Freedom," 7.

¹¹ David Zeidan, "The Copts – Equal, Protected or Persecuted? The Impact of Islamization on Muslim-Christian Relations in Modern Egypt," *Islam Christian-Muslim Relations* 10, no. 1 (1999): 53–67; Sedra, "Writing the History"; Pennington, "The Copts in Modern Egypt."

¹² R. Meijer, "Active and Passive Citizenship in the Arab World," *Middle East Journal* 73, no. 4 (2019): 612. See Roderic H. Davison, *Reform in the Ottoman Empire, 1856–1876* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400878765>.

¹³ Nevine Abraham, "The Complexity of Belonging: Reflections of a Female Copt," *Markaz Review*, 15 September 2021, <https://themarkaz.org/the-complexity-of-belonging-reflections-of-a-female-copt/>. In Egypt's *National Human Rights Strategy 2021–2026*, the first article under "Freedom of Religion and Belief" underscores, as a reminder to the church, the three Egyptian churches' launching of initiatives that "foster concepts of loyalty, belonging." Supreme Standing Committee for Human Rights, *National Human Rights Strategy: The Arab Republic of Egypt 2021–2026* (Supreme Standing Committee for Human Rights, September 2021), <https://sschr.gov.eg/media/gapb5bq4/national-human-rights-strategy.pdf>.

¹⁴ Mahmood, "Religious Freedom," 434.

¹⁵ Caryle Murphy, *Passion for Islam: Shaping the Modern Middle East: The Egyptian Experience* (New York: Scribner, 2007), 250.

¹⁶ Human Rights Watch, *Egypt*, 5. On the insistence of some Coptic activists on the benefits of embracing their status as a minority, contending that the Coptic elites' past rejection of the term was an outcome of the Muslims' adversity, see Saba Mahmood "To Be or Not to Be a Minority?," in *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 89.

¹⁷ Paul Sedra, "Class Cleavages and Ethnic Conflict: Coptic Christian Communities in Modern Egyptian Politics," *Islam & Christian Muslim Relations* 10, no. 2 (1999): 221, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09596419908721181>.

¹⁸ Sedra, "Class Cleavages and Ethnic Conflict," 229. See also P. S. Rowe, "Neo-Millet Systems and Transnational Religious Movements: The Humayun Decrees and Church Construction in Egypt," *A Journal of Church and State* 49, no. 2 (2007): 329–50, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcs/49.2.329>.

¹⁹ Sedra, "Class Cleavages and Ethnic Conflict," 228.

²⁰ Al-Sisi's speech during the Coptic mass of Christmas 2022 took place in the new Cathedral of the Nativity of Christ, the largest in the region, which he commissioned. "Sisi congratulates Christians on Christmas, Attends Church Mass," *Egypt Independent*, 7 January 2022, <https://egyptindependent.com/sisi-congratulates-christians-on-christmas-attends-church-mass/>.

²¹ Ibrahim, "Beyond the Cross."

²² Supreme Standing Committee for Human Rights, *National Human Rights Strategy*.

²³ "Believers in heavenly religions" (*National Human Rights Strategy*, 38) refers to Christians and Jews, although today it is estimated that there are only three Jews in Egypt. See "Cairo Jews Protest at Egypt's Seizure of Second Geniza," *Point of No Return* (blog), 29 March 2022, <https://www.jewishrefugees.org.uk/2022/03/cairo-jews-protest-at-egypts-seizure-of-second-cairo-geniza.html>.

²⁴ *National Human Rights Strategy*, 13.

²⁵ In January 2022, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom welcomed the release of Coptic human rights activist Ramy Kamel after two years of "detention on unfounded charges" for defending Copts' rights. According to the United Nations Human Rights Office, his detention coincided with his "application for Swiss visa so he could speak at the UN Forum on Minority Issues in Geneva" in November 2019. United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, "USCIRF Welcomes Egypt's Release of Coptic Activist Ramy Kamel," press release, January 2022, <https://www.uscirf.gov/news-room/releases-statements/uscirf-welcomes-egypts-release-coptic-activist-ramy-kamel>. See also Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, United Nations, "Egypt Must Free Coptic Christian Rights Defender Reportedly Held on Terror Charges, Say UN Experts," press release, 11 December 2019, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?News>

[ID=25419](#); Nevine Abraham, "Mobilizing Religious Differences and Terrorism, Negotiating Civil Rights in Egypt," *Digest of Middle East Studies* 32, no. 2 (2023): 84–101.

²⁶ See Magdi Guirgis's observation on the same idea of the church's suppression of the Copts' "presence outside [of the church's] context." Guirgis, "The Copts and the Egyptian Revolution: Various Attitudes and Dreams," *Social Research* 79, no. 2 (2012): 526.

²⁷ Mahmood, "Religious Freedom," 422.

²⁸ Pennington, "Copts in Modern Egypt," 165.

²⁹ Lewis, "Egyptian Novelist."

³⁰ Guirgis, "Copts and the Egyptian Revolution."

³¹ Egyptian films like *The Yacoubian Building* have reinforced this image. *The Yacoubian Building*, directed by Marawan Hamed (2006). See also Omar Kholeif, "Screening Egypt: Reconciling Egyptian Film's Place in World Cinema," *Scope* 19 (2011): 1–26; Elizabeth Iskander, *Sectarian Conflict in Egypt: Coptic Media, Identity and Representation* (Oxon: Routledge, 2012).

³² Guirgis, "Copts and the Egyptian Revolution," 526.

³³ Lewis, "Egyptian Novelist." For more on the Copts' status in Egypt, see Mariz Tadros, *Copts at the Crossroads: The Challenges of Building Inclusive Democracy in Contemporary Egypt* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2013).

³⁴ Khairi Abaza, "The Copts and Their Political Implications in Egypt," Policy Analysis/Policy Watch 1039, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 25 October 2005, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/copts-and-their-political-implications-egypt>.

³⁵ See Amr Salama's film *Excuse My French* (2014). Clinic, The Producers.

³⁶ Pennington, "The Copts in Modern Egypt," 178.

³⁷ The seven sacraments of the Coptic Orthodox Church are Baptism, Chrismation or Anointment with the Myron, Holy Communion, Confession, Priesthood, Marriage or Holy Matrimony, and Unction of the Sick.

³⁸ Lewis, "Egyptian Novelist." To further appreciate the significance of individual resistance to Coptic Orthodox culture, one must understand how its culture of obedience has been ingrained in the history of persecution since the Copts' mass execution in the "Era of the Martyrs" under Roman Emperor Diocletian in AD 284, which has forced them to embrace an attitude of humility and thus facilitated the church's authority in imposing a culture of obedience. "The clergy have successfully convinced the Copts that the church (that is, the pope) is guided by the Holy Spirit, so all Copts should submit and accept the church's decisions." Guirgis, "The Copts and the Egyptian Revolution," 527. Recognizing their compromised status while also living in a society where religion – specifically, Islam and Christianity – plays a considerable role, Copts have embraced the belief in God's justice for the oppressed, a belief shared by citizens under oppressive Arab regimes.

³⁹ Elsässer, “The Coptic Divorce,” 345.

⁴⁰ This e-version does not contain page numbers, thus the reference to the chapters.

⁴¹ Nathalie Bernard-Maugiron, “Divorce and Remarriage of Orthodox Copts in Egypt: The 2008 State Council Ruling and the Amendment of the 1938 Personal Status Regulations,” *Islamic law and Society* 18, no. 3–4 (2011): 385, <https://doi.org/10.1163/156851910X537829>. Also, under the category “Freedom of Religion and Belief” in the recent *National Human Rights Strategy 2021–2026*, the first article reiterates as per the Constitution that “citizens believing in heavenly religions . . . can refer to their own religious laws in personal status matters and religious affairs and select[ing] their spiritual leaders.” Supreme Standing Committee for Human Rights, *National Human Rights Strategy*, 38.

⁴² Ibrahim, “Beyond the Cross.”

⁴³ Pope Shenouda III, *Shari‘at al-Zawja al-Wahida fil Massiheyya* [The Shari‘a of One Wife in Christianity] (Abbasiya: Anba Ruways Press, 1978), accessed 22 November 2020, <https://st-takla.org/Full-Free-Coptic-Books/His-Holiness-Pope-Shenouda-III-Books-Online/09-Al-Zoga-Al-Wahda-in-Coptic-Church/Monogamy-in-Christianity-01-Sources.html>; Mohamad Afifi, “Reflections on the Personal Laws of Egyptian Copts,” *Women, the Family, and Divorce Laws in Islamic History*, eds. S. El Azhary and F. Warnock (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2020), 213.

⁴⁴ Sebastian Elsässer, “The Coptic Divorce Struggle in Contemporary Egypt,” *Social Compass* 66, no. 3 (2019): 336, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0037768619856295>.

⁴⁵ Hamied Ansari, “Sectarian Conflict in Egypt and the Political Expediency of Religion,” *Middle East Journal* 38, no. 3 (1984): 397–418, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4326854>.

⁴⁶ Marina Samir, “Intertwined Hierarchies: The Intersection of Religion and Gender in the Personal Status Laws of Orthodox Copts in Egypt,” *Rowaq Arabi* 27, no. 1 (2022): 63–80, https://rowaq.cihrs.org/intertwined-hierarchies-the-intersection-of-religion-and-gender-in-the-personal-status-laws-of-orthodox-copts-in-egypt/?lang=en#_ednref4.

⁴⁷ Salib Suriel, *Qawanin al-Ahwal al-Shakhsiya li-‘Aqday al-Khutba wa-l-Zawaj wa-Butlanih wa-Faskhih* [Personal Status Laws for Engagement and Marriage Contracts, Annulment, and Repudiation] (Giza: Clerical and Theological Seminary for Orthodox Copts, 1990).

⁴⁸ Ishak Ibrahim, “Azmat al-Harakat al-Qibtiyya bayn tasallot al-Dawla wa Abawiyet al-Kenissa” [The Crisis of Coptic Movements Between the State Authority and the Church Patriarchy], *Al-Mubadara al-Masriyya lil Huquq al-Shakhsiyya* [The Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights], October 2015, <https://tinyurl.com/39ejw4pz>.

⁴⁹ Munsif Najib Suleiman, “Hiwar Mustashar al-Katidra’iyya: Qanun ‘al-Ahwal al-Shakhsiyya’ al-gadeed yunsif al-Aqbat” [Conversation with the

Church's Consultant: The New Personal Status Law Does Justice to Copts], interview by Hayam Adam, *Akhbar al-Yum*, October 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/3y7x7e9p>.

⁵⁰ The term “*almani*” has slowly been substituted by the term ‘civil’ or *madani*” because it is “more palatable and does not derail discussions about individual and minority rights.” Ibrahim, “Beyond the Cross,” 2595.

⁵¹ Michael Akladios, “Critical Events and the Formation of a Coptic Diaspora in North America Between Al-Khanka and Al-Zawiya Al-Hamra,” *Routledge Handbook on Middle Eastern Diasporas*, eds. Dalia Abdelhady and Ramy M. K. Aly (London: Taylor and Francis, 2022), 52–65. Michael Wahid Hanna, “With Friends Like These: Coptic Activism in the Diaspora,” *Middle East Report* 267 (Summer 2013): 28–31, <https://merip.org/2013/06/with-friends-like-these/>.

⁵² Lea Muller-Funk, *Egyptian Diaspora Activism during the Arab Uprisings: Insights from Paris and Vienna* (London: Routledge, 2019), 117.

⁵³ Ishak Ibrahim, “Waqfat Aqbat al-Mahjar allati Aqlaqat al-Nizam” [The Stance of the Copts of the Diaspora that Worried the Regime], *Al-Mubadara al-Masriyya lil Huquq al-Shakhsiyya* [The Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights], August, 2016), <https://tinyurl.com/2vfvcv58>. For more on the influence of diaspora Copts on American foreign policy and on Muslim-Christian relations in Egypt, see 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): 208–32; “Hashd Aqbat almahjar da‘man lil Sisi: Al-Nizam Yal‘ab bi Waraqat al-Ta‘ifiyya” [Mobilizing Diaspora Copts to Support Al Sisi: The Regime Plays the Sectarian Card], *Al Arabi Al Jadid*, 2016, <https://tinyurl.com/mr5e78sz>; Aswat Masriya, “Coptic Activists Criticize Church’s Efforts to Mobilize for Sisi in New York,” *Egypt Independent*, 20 September 2016, <https://egyptindependent.com/coptic-activists-criticize-church-s-efforts-mobilize-sisi-new-york/>.

⁵⁴ Saba Mahmood, *Religious Difference*, 44. See also Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

⁵⁵ Pennington, “The Copts in Modern Egypt,” 161–62.

⁵⁶ Mahmood cites Coptic activists’ observations on Western missionaries. Mahmood, “To Be or Not to Be a Minority?” 97.

⁵⁷ Lewis, “Egyptian Novelist.”

⁵⁸ Candace Lukasik, “Economy of Blood: The Persecuted Church and the Racialization of American Copts,” *American Anthropologist* 123, no. 3 (2021): 565–77, <https://doi.org/10.1111/aman.13602>.

⁵⁹ Mahmood, “To Be or Not to Be a Minority?” 102.

⁶⁰ Lewis, “Egyptian Novelist.”

⁶¹ Youssef, *Minorities in the Contemporary Egyptian Novel*, 2.

⁶² Christine Hegel, "Copts and the Security State: Violence, Coercion, and Sectarianism in Contemporary Egypt by Laura Guirguis (review)," *Anthropological Quarterly* 90, no. 4 (2017): 1317–21, <https://doi.org/10.1353/anq.2017.0079>.

⁶³ Afifi, "Reflections on the Personal Laws," 214.