

## Social relations between the Christian communities of Alexandria: Re-examining social boundaries in times of decline

*Les relations sociales entre communautés chrétiennes d'Alexandrie : une révision des frontières sociales en période de déclin*

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**SOCIAL RELATIONS BETWEEN THE CHRISTIAN  
COMMUNITIES OF ALEXANDRIA:  
RE-EXAMINING SOCIAL BOUNDARIES  
IN TIMES OF DECLINE**

ABSTRACT

Between the late 19th and mid-20th centuries, Alexandria was known as a multicultural hub and a vibrant port in the Southern Mediterranean, and was home to a number of foreign communities, each with its own cultural institutions, schools, and places of worship. Since the Egyptian revolution of 1952 and the Suez War of 1956, most of these communities have seen a dramatic decline in local numbers, and the city of Alexandria has gone through dramatic social changes. This article will focus on the remnants of cosmopolitan Alexandria and the small church communities that struggle to maintain a local existence in the city. I will look at some of the ways in which members of these communities have adjusted to present-day realities and sought ways to maintain a sustainable presence in the city. In particular, I will reexamine how social relations are structured along ethnic and sectarian divides in Alexandria's Christian communities.

INTRODUCTION

Alexandria has a rich history as a Southern Mediterranean multicultural hub (Halim. 2013), and has a Christian community that according to local tradition was founded by St. Mark the Apostle (Kamil. 2002:60). Beginning in the late 1800s, the city saw an influx of foreign groups that established their own churches. Following the revolution of 1952 and the Suez War of 1956,

however, Alexandria underwent significant social changes, and most of these foreign communities have since seen a dramatic decline in local numbers. Meanwhile, Alexandria's Cosmopolitan Era has become a subject of nostalgic romanticism that has been hailed by writers, reporters, and scholars as a beacon of tolerance, diversity, and multicultural hybridity, in contrast with a contemporary reality that is characterized by increasing cultural homogeneity, sectarian strife, and the rise of Salafi Islamism as the dominant social current in the city (Traub. 2014). This binary representation distorts both the city's past and its present circumstances. On the one hand, it celebrates a kind of sectarian tolerance and co-mingling that may have been more limited and confined to elite circles than has been commonly assumed (Mabro 2004, Fahmy 2013), while on the other, a firm focus on Salafi-Islamism tends to overshadow the relative diversity that may be found in present-day Alexandria along regional, rural-urban, ethnic, religious and ideological lines.

This article will look at the remnants of these small, foreign church communities that still retain a modest presence in Alexandria. Rather than emphasizing experiences of loss and decline, however, I will look at some of the ways in which members of Alexandria's smaller church communities have adapted to modern circumstances and endeavored to maintain their presence in the city.

It will first be argued that an earlier period of inter-confessional openness among local Christians was followed by a period of retreat and boundary maintenance within each denominational community throughout the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Later, I will contend that the last two decades have seen a new period of inter-confessional openness, partly in response to a new reality in which some communities are struggling to maintain a sustainable presence in Alexandria.

This article, which is based on brief periods of fieldwork conducted in Alexandria in 2014, 2015, and 2017,<sup>1</sup> seeks to address the following questions:

*What kind of prospects for the future can be found among local Christians in present-day Alexandria? How does this inform social relations between members of various church communities in the city? How are these relations reflected in marriage patterns and social rules associated with inter-sectarian marriages among Christians in Alexandria?*

Before these questions can be addressed, a few words on the Christian communities of Alexandria and their history are in order.

## THE CHRISTIAN CHURCHES OF ALEXANDRIA

Alexandria has a special place in the histories of Christianity, Egypt, and Africa at large. According to local traditions, it is the city where St. Mark the Apostle established the first Church in Egypt, in around 42 AD. It then became the start of the Coptic Church, which later spread to other parts of Egypt and the African continent. After the split between the Eastern Orthodox and the Oriental Orthodox Churches at the Council of Chalcedon (451 AD) and the Arab invasion of 641 AD, the Coptic Church emerged as the dominant church in Egypt, representing indigenous Christians in what would gradually become a Muslim majority society (Kamil. 2002:6-7).

Alexandria was then reduced to a backwater city of 8,000 people by a millennium of neglect until the rule of Muhammed Ali (1805–49), when it emerged as a prominent port city and trading center. Foreigners from various

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1 In April-June and October-December 2014, February-March 2015, and April 2017, I conducted fieldwork in Alexandria, primarily focusing on the Coptic communities of El-Mansheya and Mhattet-el-Raml. During these periods, I also spent a good deal of time visiting several other churches and socializing with members of these smaller church communities, mainly in the same neighborhoods. I attended one or more church services at all the churches mentioned here, followed by informal gatherings. I interviewed their local priests and ministers, as well as older, well-informed members of the churches, and young adults or people who had just married and started their own families. Depending on their English skills, unstructured interviews would be conducted in English, Arabic or a mixture of both languages (though all the interviewees quoted here were interviewed in English). Some of the information on informal, social relations between members of different churches was based on more informal conversations and personal observation among young Christians in Alexandria whom I would socialize with on a regular basis, and who made an effort to help me understand the subtle nuances of their social worlds in Alexandria.

parts of Europe and the Levant settled in Alexandria on invitation from the rulers, establishing their own communities and houses of worship in the city (Awad and Maktaba. 2006:11).

Beginning in the early 1800s, Eastern Orthodox Christians from Greece, Lebanon, and Syria began migrating to Egypt and other parts of Africa. From the 1840s on, a large number of Greek immigrants settled in Alexandria, joining a small group of merchant families of Greek origin that had already been in the city for generations. Those identified as the Greeks of Alexandria would soon constitute the city's most prominent foreign community.<sup>2</sup> The Greek Orthodox Patriarchate for all of Africa was located in Alexandria, reflecting the city's prominence as a center of Christianity. In 1920, it was agreed that all Eastern Orthodox churches in Africa would answer to the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Alexandria.<sup>3</sup> Throughout the 1800s, factions split from the Greek Orthodox, the Coptic Orthodox, the Syrian Orthodox, and the Armenian Orthodox churches, aligning themselves with the Eastern Catholic Church instead. In addition, the Latin Church established a strong presence in the city with several churches and high-quality schools funded by European governments. The influx of churches during the early 1800s also included various Protestant groups that sought to win over local Copts on an individual basis, much to the dismay of the Coptic Orthodox Church (Mahmood, 2015:44–47).

## THE COSMOPOLITAN ERA

Beginning in the 1880s, Alexandria was home to sizeable communities of Greek, English, German, Italian, French, Lebanese, Armenian, and Moroccan Jewish immigrants, each with their own houses of worship and schools that

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2 In general, the Greek community of Alexandria referred primarily to those who were seen as being of Greek origin, whether or not they settled in Alexandria after 1843 or came to Egypt long before that. In some contexts, it could also refer to those who belonged to the Greek Orthodox Church and later the Greek Catholic Church, including Arab speakers who had their origins in Syria and Lebanon. Being Greek was associated with certain privileges, and as such, the label was subject to contextual manipulation, as well as negotiations between the Ottoman and Egyptian authorities (Will Hanley 2017). Today, Greek is a term primarily denoting a person's ethnic and linguistic background. Alexandrians of Levantine origin, who have Arabic as their primary language, may be proud members of the Greek Orthodox Church, but they will not identify as Greeks or be identified as such by others.

3 Though the Coptic Orthodox and Coptic Catholic Churches have moved their headquarters to Cairo (albeit formally retaining their patriarchal seats in Alexandria), the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria still functions as the home base for the Greek Orthodox Church in Egypt.

bolstered their cultural presence and standing in the city (Awad and Maktaba. 2006:10–11). These schools were funded by foreign governments and run in close association with various churches, and they soon became the preferred academic institutions for local elite families, both Christian and Muslim. Cosmopolitan Alexandria has been mythologized through the literary works of Lawrence Durrell, P. C. Cavafy, E. M. Forster and others as a city of tolerance, diversity, and intermingling across cultural and religious divides (Halim. 2013). To a large extent, however, this cosmopolitan experience was limited to a rather small, elite fraction of Alexandria's foreign communities that never made up more than a quarter of the city's population (Fahmy, 2013). The vast majority of local inhabitants, predominantly Egyptian Copts and Muslims, were excluded from this milieu, and the cultural openness associated with these foreign communities was rarely extended to encompass the local Egyptian population (Ibid.). This is well reflected in literary accounts of cosmopolitan Alexandria, in which the city's Arab population, particularly its Muslim majority, is rendered almost invisible (Halim. 2013). Alexandria's foreign communities, by contrast, were characterized with a cultural confidence that allowed for social interactions and even intermarriages unimpeded by any sense that the communities themselves were threatened. This confidence, and the seamless intermingling it seemed to enable, did not last.

#### POST-1952: DECLINE AND REORIENTATION

A series of historical events – namely the Egyptian Revolution of 1952, the Suez War of 1956, and the expropriation of foreign properties and financial assets in 1961 – spelled the end of the Cosmopolitan Era. Foreigners fled the country in droves, and within a few years, Alexandria's foreign communities were reduced to a fraction of their earlier numbers (Awad and Maktaba. 2006:12). Since then, the smaller Christian communities of Alexandria have been in continuous decline. Though foreign nationals with attachments to various non-Coptic churches have left the city, thousands of internal immigrants, primarily Egyptian Muslims from villages around Alexandria and from the Delta region, have settled in Alexandria, as have thousands of Egyptian Christians from villages in Upper Egypt. This has further transformed the social makeup of Alexandria as a city (Ali Abdelmonem. 2016:9).

For members of the smaller church communities in Alexandria, these changes have been disruptive. With each decade, they have seen their own numbers decline as their own surroundings and the city as a whole have grown more homogenous. Alexandria has seen a steady influx of migrants from the largely rural Delta region, dominated by Sunni-Muslim residents who are widely ascribed to hold conservative religious notions and social mores, and whose exposure to non-Muslims may have been limited. In response to these changes, some of Alexandria's minority groups have turned

inwards, becoming more focused on preserving the boundaries of their own communities. Until the 1990s, even the smaller communities seemed to contain a few thousand members,<sup>4</sup> and young people were often expected to find suitable partners from among their own. Since that time, however, members of these communities have continued to emigrate in large numbers, and among those who remain, relationships with the city's Muslim majority population have been strongly informed by the relative decline of their own communities.

## ONGOING EMIGRATION

The turbulence that followed the Arab Spring, particularly during Mohamed Morsi's year in power, served to accelerate these developments. Between 2011 and early 2014, thousands of Egyptian Christians left the country or intensified their efforts to migrate to other parts of the world.<sup>5</sup> This was particularly noticeable within the smaller church communities of Alexandria, where the departure of a single family or individual would have a deep impact. The 2013 ouster of President Morsi and the election of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi as Egypt's next president in 2014 were met with some relief, and temporarily stemmed the tide of emigration among Egyptian Christians.

Those who emigrate are often young adults or recently married couples who leave behind communities of elderly people. Hany,<sup>6</sup> a parish priest from Alexandria's Maronite population, said, "We are a dying community! But we will fade away gracefully."<sup>7</sup> To him, what mattered most was that the younger members of his community could find good lives for themselves in Alexandria or other parts of the world and that those who stayed put could "live their lives in accordance with the word of God."<sup>8</sup>

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4 This assertion is based on statements from school representatives, church leaders, and older members of the smaller church communities. Owing to a lack of reliable available statistics, it is difficult to determine the exact number of members within each community at any given time. Using church, kindergarten, and school attendance as a reference, however, members of each of these communities insist on having had a few thousand members as late as the early 1990s.

5 This was not unique to the Christian communities, of course. Thousands of Egyptian Muslims fled, or tried to flee, the country at the same time. For obvious reasons, however, their departure has not affected the demographic sustainability of the Muslim community at large.

6 The names of all the interviewees and other individuals mentioned have been changed (except for well-known public figures).

7 Interview, May 11, 2014.

8 Interview, May 11, 2014.

While some, like Hany, have reconciled themselves to the dwindling of their own communities, others insist that their communities will grow and flourish again, even though they may never reach the numbers they had in the mid-1900s.

#### A SURVIVAL STRATEGY: RENEGOTIATING SOCIAL BOUNDARIES

Members of these communities have experienced a continuous decline since the 1950s, and yet they are not necessarily characterized with a spirit of defeat. Within these communities, one can find plenty of bittersweet nostalgia, together with a determination to evolve and adjust to changing circumstances in ways that allow them to hold on to their cultural heritage and retain socially sustainable communities. Historically, members of some communities have barely interacted with each other, while others have fallen out with each other for shorter periods of time. According to older members of their communities, relations between Orthodox and Catholic Greeks and between Orthodox and Catholic Armenians were severely strained during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which is otherwise viewed as a time of cultural tolerance.

Today, Orthodox and Catholic Greeks and Armenians all get along fairly well. Children from the Greek Catholic Church attend the Greek Orthodox School, and Armenian Catholics attend the Armenian Orthodox School.<sup>9</sup> On an everyday basis, the Greeks of Alexandria make up a single linguistic community with a shared language, cultural heritage and history and ongoing links to their country of origin. Whether they belong to the Orthodox or the Catholic Church is a minor detail.<sup>10</sup>

This playing down of denominational divides relates to the harsh demographic changes these communities have gone through. The Greek community was once Alexandria's largest of foreign origin. At its peak in the 1930s, it

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9 This goes for some, but not all children belonging to the Greek Catholic Church. Like its Orthodox counterpart, the Greek Catholic Church also includes both Greek and Arabic-speaking members, the latter being mainly of Lebanese origin.

10 This is further underlined by the fact that there is limited social interaction between members of the Greek churches that are of Greek origin and those of Levantine origin, with Arabic as their first language.



numbered close to 40,000 people (Dalachanis, 2017:83).<sup>11</sup> Today, fewer than 600 Greeks still live in Alexandria. The Armenians, once a community of more than 6,000 people, now number fewer than 400. These cultural enclaves with their own languages and cultural traditions are on the brink of disappearing from the city.

For generations, these communities partly preserved their traditions through Greek and Armenian schools, which provided generations of children with quality education in their own languages from pre-school through high school. As of 2015, however, the Armenian school, which is known as the Boghossian-Melkonian, had only 23 students, though it had provided for up to 800 students in the early 1940s.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, Alexandria's only remaining Greek school, Averofio High School, had only 45 students.<sup>13</sup>

Social unity among Greeks and Armenians in Alexandria is also reflected in church attendance. The Greek Catholic church is open to visitors every day, but their only service in Greek is at 6:00 a.m. on Fridays.<sup>14</sup> For many people, this is far too early to be in church, especially on their one day off work. Instead, some Greek Catholics attend the Greek Orthodox Church, which is located only two hundred meters away and holds services much later in the day. Jiries, a retired teacher who belongs to the Greek Catholic church, confessed to attending Greek Orthodox services and explained matter-of-factly that "they don't follow the Catholic rite, but the mass is held in Greek. That's what matters."

The same dynamics can be found among the Armenians. Since 2011, the Armenian Catholic Church in Alexandria has shrunk to fewer than 100 members. The church has also lacked a resident priest for several years, so services have grown less frequent over time. In 2014, according to members of the congregation, a Cairo-based priest visited Alexandria and held a church service roughly once every two months. Other Christians have viewed the church as being closed for some time, and the Armenian Orthodox Church has

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11 According to local Greeks and official representatives at the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate, the Greek population in Alexandria exceeded 100,000 people in the 1930s and 1940s. The official censuses at the time only included individuals who were registered as Greek citizens, so the actual Greek population in the city may have included people who for various reasons were not registered as Greek citizens. In any case, popular assumptions about these peak population numbers are in no way supported by available statistics.

12 Interview with Father Gregory from the Armenian Church in Alexandria, October 30, 2014.

13 Interview with an official spokesperson for the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate in Alexandria, October 28, 2014.

14 At the time of enquiry (June 2014), the church service was held this early because the Greek priest had to hold a second service in another city on the same day.

warmly welcomed Armenian Catholics who wish to attend Orthodox services. Informally, church-going Catholics now attend the Orthodox Church regularly, and are becoming increasingly involved in the social activities of the other congregation.

With this level of integration between congregations, marriages between Orthodox and Catholic members of the same ethnic communities are uncontroversial, and outside these communities, distinctions between the Orthodox and Catholic branches of the same ethnic groups are largely ignored. Joseph, a young man who formally belongs to the Greek Orthodox Church but volunteers at the Latin Church, described the situation in this way:

When you say "Greek Catholic," I just think of them all as Greek Orthodox. Those who belong to the same national community are all the same; even their church rituals are almost entirely the same. It's the same with the Armenians, even the Copts. The Coptic Catholics may have a big community, but as I see it, they are simply Copts. There's no difference.<sup>15</sup>

Joseph's comments were informed by his intimate knowledge of two distinct church communities, as well as his social engagement with several other churches. Initially, this sounded like a rash dismissal of the importance of doctrinal differences. These sentiments were widely echoed by other local Christians, however: within a community of local Christians, ethnicity and language tend to outweighs denomination as a line of social division.

This becomes quite clear when one looks at relations between Greek and Arabic-speaking congregations within the Greek Orthodox Church. Central Alexandria is home to two Arabic-speaking churches that answer to the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate. One is located in Mansheya, and its members have Syrian roots; the other is located in Shatby and has a congregation with Lebanese roots.<sup>16</sup> A third church in Sidi Gaber caters to members of both Syrian and Lebanese heritage. These churches are believed to have around 800 members between them. Extensive co-mingling and intermarriage arrangements take place between members of these churches, who essentially regard themselves as belonging to the same family.

In contrast, interactions between members of the Greek and the Syrian and Lebanese Greek Orthodox churches are cordial but limited, and marriage unions are quite rare. When I enquired about these marriages, I was told that

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15 Interview with Joseph, April 20, 2017.

16 Families belonging to these churches trace their origins to specific localities in today's Lebanon and Syria, with relatively little distinction being made between them. While the Mansheya and Shatby churches as referred to as 'Syrian' and 'Lebanese', and are formally regarded as such within the Orthodox Patriarchate, many people attend services in both churches, and largely view themselves as one large community.

although they might not be controversial, they are not common. Members of the Syrian Greek Orthodox congregation could not recall even one example of such a union in the last three decades. No families from the Levantine community send their children to the Greek school, which primarily prepares its students for further studies in Greece. Instead, they send their children to the German school or to one of the French schools associated with the Catholic Church.

## THE ARMENIANS

The Armenians of Alexandria are believed to number fewer than 400, including those who belong to the Armenian Catholic Church. Cairo, which is still home to some 5,000 Armenians, attracts some of the younger Alexandrian Armenians, but most leave Alexandria with the aim of building new lives for themselves in other parts of the world. Those who stay behind want to keep their own community alive and pass on their heritage to their children. At the same time, they realize that the community has passed the brink of sustainability, that many young Armenians feel compelled to leave the country altogether, and that those who stay behind must find partners either among the Armenians of Cairo or among non-Armenians in Alexandria.

Michael is a young engineer from a well-connected middle-class family in Alexandria. He is single and an only child, and at the age of 27, he has been accepted for emigration to Quebec, Canada. He plans to go to Montreal, where he has relatives who can help him. He will leave behind two aging parents, and he feels badly about this, but he is intent on doing well for himself financially and plans to take good care of his parents from Montreal to the best of his ability. His parents are not willing to leave Alexandria, and for him, the city has nothing to offer in terms of career opportunities or a social life.

His friend and former classmate, Peter, is also Armenian, and has just returned from three years of studying in Greece. Unlike Michael, he is determined to stay and start a family in Alexandria. Both men talked about their families' desire to see them marry Armenian girls. In Alexandria, this is impossible because they either know the eligible girls too well or are closely related to all the girls of appropriate age. In Cairo, it is possible to meet someone, but finding a woman who is willing to settle in Alexandria is another challenge. To Peter, this poses a dilemma:

I would love to meet an Armenian girl who shares my culture and can raise our kids as Armenians. But finding someone in Cairo who is willing to move to Alexandria is hard... and I'm not moving to Cairo.<sup>17</sup>

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17 Interview with Peter, May 15, 2014.

Their male peers who stayed and married in Alexandria have found girls from other churches, while other young men have taken different approaches to meeting Armenian women. For instance, since the early 1990s, a few Alexandria Armenians have travelled to Yerevan, Armenia, to study or simply to visit the country. Hoping to connect with some notion of authentic Armenian culture, a few of these men also meet and marry Armenian women from Yerevan and then seek to bring them back to Alexandria. These marriages have not been without complications. Those who have made this leap have all experienced the significant cultural differences between Yerevan and Egyptian Armenians. One challenge is the language barrier: Yerevan Armenians speak a version of the Armenian language that differs phonetically and grammatically from the language spoken by Egyptian Armenians. Furthermore, when it comes to gender mores and religious observances, Alexandrian Armenians find their Yerevan counterparts to be far more conservative than they are, and this can create a great deal of friction.<sup>18</sup>

Father Gregory, the parish priest at the Armenian Orthodox Church, is himself a Yerevan Armenian, and spent many years serving as a priest in Russia. He is deeply skeptical of these unions. He argues that local Armenians are not aware of the significance of the cultural differences, which often leaves these couples trapped in miserable marriages.

In the local context, he is very accepting of mixed marriages between young Armenians and persons belonging to another church community. At the same time, he realizes that marriages such as these mean that Armenian culture and language will be lost for new generations:

If an Armenian girl marries a non-Armenian, she and her children will belong to another church community. She may teach them the language and pass on parts of our culture, but they will belong to another church, another set of traditions. They will be lost for us. On the other hand, if an Armenian man finds a non-Armenian girl, they will marry in the Armenian Church and the children will be a part of the Armenian Church, but they will not learn the language, they will not learn the culture, and they will not see the church as their home because this is something that passes through the mother. They will not learn the culture and

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18 According to my young Armenian interlocutors, their peers who had married Armenian girls from Yerevan found them to be submissive in a way they struggled to relate to, as well as shockingly ignorant about intimate matters. This was the experience of a handful of young Armenian men, and may be specific to the women they married. Differences in educational achievements and socioeconomic position may also play into this, as the Armenians of Alexandria belong to the city's upper-middle class, and are largely well educated.

history of the Armenians, and our community will not be home to them. Without an Armenian mother, they will lose the Armenian culture.<sup>19</sup>

Within the Armenian community, the issue of cultural preservation is of particular urgency. Thus, older members of the community have struggled to come to terms with the fact that their children can no longer find partners who share their background. This struggle illustrates a broader development among the Christian communities in Alexandria: three generations ago, these populations accepted inter-sectarian marriages out of confidence. Today, they seem to accept these unions partly out of necessity.

More broadly, many young Christians have come to see themselves as part of one diverse Christian community rather than one distinct church. For various reasons, many young people find that their personal lives and networks span more than one church community, and they take for granted the notion that they can marry someone from another church.

Joseph, the young man who was quoted earlier, is in his late 20s and does a good deal of volunteer work for the Latin Catholic Church (from now on referred to as the Latin Church) in Alexandria. He organizes social events, and spends most of his spare time with other young people who belong to the church. Though his personal life revolves around the Latin community, he does not formally belong to the Latin Church: Joseph and his brother, like their father, were baptized into the Greek Orthodox Church, and their mother originates from the Coptic Orthodox Church.

Joseph's maternal and paternal grandmothers, however, both belonged and were strongly committed to the Latin Church. Partly because of their influence and the encouragement of friends and relatives while he was growing up, Joseph became involved in the Catholic Church, which he now considers his social and spiritual home.

At the same time, he does not wish to challenge social conventions by formally converting to the Latin Church. On this topic, he said, "When I get married, I will marry in the Greek Church, but my kids will spend their time at this [Latin] church."<sup>20</sup> As far as his family's expectations are concerned, he is free to marry whomever he desires, but he would not mind finding a Latin Catholic girl, in light of his own attachment to the Latin Church.

In one sense, Joseph's situation is a common one. It is not unusual among local Christians who are not members of the Coptic Church to have a sense of belonging within more than one church based on family links. At the same time, marriages across denominational lines were much less common among his parent's generation. As Joseph explained it, his parents married at a time when sectarian boundaries were being guarded, and mixed marriages were

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19 Interview with Fader Gregory, Alexandria, October 30, 2014.

20 Interview with Joseph, May 21, 2017.

discouraged. Because they came from families that had always embraced diversity, however, their union was supported on both sides of the family. Joseph, like his mother before him, has made the Latin Church his own even though he is formally a member of the Greek Orthodox Church. His brother, in contrast, has drifted between Greek Orthodox and Latin social circles. The freedom to choose a partner independent of her church affiliation is also quite common for someone of Joseph's generation. His circle of friends includes people who belong to several different churches and who in some cases have married interdenominationally.

While doing my fieldwork, I spent several evenings with Joseph and a group of his friends. Sitting at a café in Alexandria, I was surrounded by four men and four women, all in their mid-20s, who belonged to four different church communities. They are all single, but have reached an age when the social pressure to marry is mounting, and so the conversation drifts to social rules and expectations regarding whom it is acceptable to marry. Each one of them stressed that they are in no way expected to marry someone who belongs to their own church. Zara, a bubbly Catholic girl, dismissed this as an option altogether:

They [her parents] would love that, but our community here in Alexandria is too small. I can marry anyone I want, as long as he is a decent guy with a good job, and he is a good Christian. I can even marry a Protestant!"<sup>21</sup>

Among their parents' generation, however, this sort of intermarriage was more unusual. Thirty years ago, young people were expected to a greater extent to find spouses within their own church, and most of Joseph's friends have parents whose families belonged to the same church community. Today, this selectivity is no longer possible within many communities. Local members of the Greek Orthodox, Latin, or Armenian Church in their 50s and 60s are quick to describe the same development: while they were expected to find spouses within their own communities – and most often did – their own children enjoy greater freedom in their choice of partners.<sup>22</sup> Unlike the younger generation, those in their 50s and 60s are divided on how they feel about this development. To some, this represents a healthy and open-minded

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21 Fieldwork notes, May 19, 2017.

22 I do not have hard statistics to back this up. When I spoke with church clergy, I was told that information about mixed marriages can be found in some church registers, but is considered rather sensitive, and thus is not easily volunteered. My claim is based on the accounts of numerous Christians of different denominations and from different generations. Their descriptions of these developments are remarkably similar, while their views on whether broader acceptance of mixed marriages is a good thing varies widely, both within and between generations.

adjustment to new realities, and a return to an inter-confessional openness that they believe was once a hallmark of 'Cosmopolitan Alexandria'. To others, this new openness to mixed marriages is a regrettable development, and in some cases even a sign of the social and moral disintegration of their own communities.

## CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

While this article explores inter-sectarian relations among Christians, these people also relate to a Muslim population that constitutes more than 90% of the Alexandria's citizens. Christians from the smaller churches will stress that they also have Muslim friends, though their closest friends often tend to be other Christians. In some cases however, young Christians describe their social circles as consisting of far more Muslims than Christians. This appears to be far less common among the Copts of central Alexandria. With robust church-centered infrastructures, including extensive educational programs, sports clubs, youth clubs, scout groups, kindergartens, etc., their church communities constitute self-contained social universes, which allows many young Copts to have almost exclusively Coptic social circles. Dina El-Khawaga describes how these processes have clericalized the laity, making them engage more strongly in the organization of the church and its various services (El-Khawaga 1997). Not only older members of the Coptic community, but also the smaller church communities, decry what they see as a growing social gulf between Christians and Muslims, often reminiscing about another time, only a few decades ago, when Christian-Muslim relations were more cordial, and less characterized by mutual distrust, at least as they themselves remember it. While inter-religious bonds of friendship are not at all uncommon, marriage unions across the Christian-Muslim divide are almost universally condemned, and therefore quite rare. In the case of mixed marriages, the most severe social sanctions are mostly reserved for woman. However, as marrying a Muslim usually involves religious conversion for a Christian man as well as a woman, such marriages are considered grave betrayals of one's own people, and often involve a total break with one's community.<sup>23</sup>

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23 I heard of a few cases in which a Christian had converted and married a Muslim, only to leave the city almost immediately to go abroad or settle in Cairo, officially having no further contact with his or her family in Alexandria.

## THE SOCIOECONOMIC DIVIDE

Although people interact and marry across denominational lines easily, socioeconomic boundaries seem to have a much more profound influence on relationships and choices of marriage partners. When talking with young people about marriage and what they look for in a partner, I found that many stressed the possibility of marrying someone from a different church, but also viewed socioeconomic equality as essential. Fadi, a young Coptic Catholic who was on the lookout for a suitable partner, emphasized the importance of being at the same social and economic level:

If she's from a wealthier background, she will not be satisfied with the kind of lifestyle you can provide for her. At the same time, someone poorer and poorly educated will make you think about what kind of mother she can be to your children.<sup>24</sup>

In this context, the most important social divide is between those who attended private schools and those who had to settle for public, government-funded schools. Many old reputable schools in Alexandria are run by or in association with various churches. They are partly funded by foreign governments and thus can hire highly-qualified teachers and offer premier educations.

The public schools, in comparison, are critically understaffed and underfunded, and are often unable to provide a decent education for their students. Most of the private schools charge very high tuition fees that are financially beyond the reach of most Egyptian families. Church funds and other financial sources enable many Christians to secure private school educations for their children. Nonetheless, in most congregations, only a sizeable minority have access to private education, whereas the majority must attend public schools.

This creates a massive social divide, even within small church communities. Those who share the privilege of private education tend to band together and create their own social circles within the congregation. A few churches even offer separate church services for those with public school educations.

Under these circumstances, friendship ties and romantic connections emerge easily among Christians who attend the same types of school and in other ways identify as being at the same socioeconomic level even if they do not belong to the same church. Also, in a society where socioeconomic differences are viewed as highly important, young people face strong familial pressure not to marry below their station. As such, when young Christians talk about what they look for in a potential spouse, they tend to highlight the importance of economic standing and education rather than denominational belonging. This focus on economic standing is found among Egyptian Muslims

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24 Interview with Fadi, May 20, 2014.



as well, as is evident from much of the recent ethnographic work (Ghannam, 2013, Naguib 2015, Schielke 2015). However, among local Christians, this serves to dramatically reduce already limited pools of potential partners.

### PATRIARCHAL PRIVILEGE

When it comes to mixed marriages, the Christians of Alexandria follow the general rule of patriarchal privilege: they marry in the groom's church, and the couple and their children belong to the same church. This principle generally allows mixed marriages to be negotiated smoothly: when the families involved meet, the most contentious issue has already been resolved.

On the one hand, this reflects a broad reverence for patriarchal principles and a social emphasis on patrilineal family ties. On the other, the justification for these rules and their social effects places broad emphasis on the powers women can possess within a patriarchal family structure. In families where the men are the main breadwinners and the women take care of the house and look out for the children on a day-to-day basis, the mothers are seen as the ones who shape the minds, identities, and characters of the children.

Ibrahim, a minister in an Evangelical church in Alexandria and the father of three girls, is very explicit about this structure. He recognizes that their own church community of some 300 members is too small to provide every member with a suitable spouse, so most members of the church must find partners outside their own community.

To him, this is quite natural and should not be seen as a loss. In Ibrahim's view, the primary mission of his church is to instill Christian faith and values in its members rather than to promote an official identity as members of the church. As such, when a female member of his church marries a man from another church, he takes comfort in the idea that she will instill in her husband and children the faith and mindset she has developed as a part of his congregation and community. Sometimes, a wife even brings her husband and children to Ibrahim's church on a regular basis, even though she now belongs to her husband's church.

Ibrahim was eager to stress the flexibility shown within his own church as well as others, and pointed out that in the case of mixed weddings, the bride and groom often have joint wedding ceremonies at which the marital union is blessed by both the churches involved. When female members of Ibrahim's church marry Catholic men and the church service is held in a Catholic church, he is granted permission as a minister to offer his own ritual blessing during the wedding ceremony.<sup>25</sup>

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25 Interview with Ibrahim, April 22, 2017.

Similar arrangements have been described for intermarriages between members of the Armenian Orthodox and Latin Churches. This flexibility reflects a mutual recognition of equal standing between members of different churches and a wish to emphasize the couple's commonalities as Christians rather than their differences.

### THE COPTIC EXCEPTION

In general, when members of different church communities want to marry, their wishes are generally treated with goodwill and flexibility by the families, churches, and religious leaders involved. One important exception to this principle is the Coptic Orthodox Church. To be clear, the Coptic Orthodox Church is not opposed to seeing its members marry persons from other church communities; however, Coptic families and church leaders do impose conditions for these marriages that are widely seen as unreasonable by other churches. If a Coptic Christian wants to marry a member of another church, the other party must convert to the Coptic Orthodox Church, and the wedding itself must be a Coptic Orthodox wedding, regardless of whether it is the man or the woman who originally belongs to the Coptic Church.<sup>26</sup>

The Coptic Orthodox Church is by far the largest church in Egypt and Alexandria. According to its own estimates, there are more than 600,000 Copts living in Alexandria, constituting more than 90% of the city's Christian population. Among members of the other churches, the Coptic Orthodox Church's rules on intermarriage are thus seen as an expression of superiority and a willingness to aggressively assert its own dominance as the largest and oldest church community in Egypt.<sup>27</sup>

This is one of several ways in which Coptic Orthodox Church leaders are seen as acting arrogantly in relation to other churches. According to other church leaders in Alexandria, the late Coptic Pope Shenouda III was notorious for his contempt toward other Egyptian Christian groups. Under his leadership, the Coptic Church shifted between ignoring smaller churches and actively trying to marginalize them in relation to the Egyptian authorities.

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26 An exception is made if the Coptic woman comes from a family of lower socio-economic standing than the non-Coptic man. In such cases, patriarchal privilege, combined with the groom's superior social status, trumps the dominance of the Coptic Orthodox Church, and the bride's family allows her to join and marry in her husband's church.

27 Efforts have been made to establish the mutual recognition of marriages between members of the Coptic and Greek Orthodox Churches. At a local level, however, Coptic priests and families in Alexandria take the same position, even if the prospective groom is of Greek Orthodox background.

According to several Alexandrian church leaders, this policy of domination changed significantly with the succession of Pope Tawadros II. Under his leadership, the Coptic Orthodox Church has begun to approach smaller churches with newfound respect and humility. When it comes to mixed marriages, however, the position of the Coptic Orthodox Church remains unchanged, and is viewed as especially offensive by members of the other churches, not just because it asserts the dominance of the Coptic Orthodox Church but also because it sets Coptic dominance above patriarchal privilege.

Fadi, a 25-year-old Coptic Catholic, recalled his own romantic involvement with a girl who belonged to the Coptic Orthodox Church. They spent a year getting to know each other before involving their families, and according to Fadi, they were both very committed to being with each other. Her family insisted, however, that he had to convert and that they had to be married in the Coptic Orthodox Church. As a deeply religious man with a strong commitment to his own church, Fadi could not bring himself to convert. Thus, he and his girlfriend believed they had no choice but to break up. Two years later, the girl married someone else, but Fadi is still not over her. At the same time, he insists that he made the right decision.

The Coptic Orthodox Church also operates a near total ban on divorce, which is seen as excessively strict by many non-Coptic Christians.<sup>28</sup> Though many non-Copts are ready to marry outside their own church, they are nevertheless skeptical of marrying someone from the Coptic Orthodox Church.<sup>29</sup> The dramatic imbalance in institutional power between churches and the willingness of the Coptic Church to act on this imbalance is seen as a complication.

Aside from institutional factors, Egyptian Copts are widely perceived as being more socially conservative than other Christians in Alexandria. In some cases, the Copts are described as being “more like the Muslims”, among non-Coptic Christians. Joseph and his circle of friends, who come from five or six different churches, make frequent jokes about how the Copts are arrogant and socially conservative in ways that set them apart from other Christians.

Rami and Mary are both Copts and part of Joseph’s group of friends. They play along with these jokes and argue that this is why they prefer to spend time with non-Coptic Christians. They find their Coptic peers to be narrow-minded, socially conservative, and pious in ways they have difficulty accepting. Rami and Mary are both 25 and engaged to be married next year.

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28 This position is a topic of fierce opposition within the Coptic Church itself.

29 Members of other church communities are also subject to the Coptic personal status law; however, it is enforced with greater flexibility in some other churches. Evangelical Churches stand out here, in that they apply the Coptic personal status law of 1938, which allows divorce to be granted on a variety of grounds. A new, unified personal status law for all Christians is in the making, and is expected to be finalized in early 2018.

They attend church on a regular basis, and Rami's father is a Coptic priest. In spite of this, they simply feel much more at home with their multi-sectarian and more liberal circle of non-Coptic friends,<sup>30</sup> a group of men and women in their mid-20s who can interact with each other without the presence of family chaperones, are non-judgmental about pre-marital romances, allow themselves the occasional drink, and share a rather edgy sense of humor. Within this group, Rami and Mary find a lightheartedness that they rarely experience among their Coptic peers. This particular set of 'liberal' qualities they find within this circle of friends probably stems from a combination of socioeconomic background, as privately educated middle class urbanites, and their belonging to small church communities on the brink of extinction. Armed with a certain middle class confidence, these young Christians view themselves to some extent as the last remnants of a "Cosmopolitan Alexandria" and as standard bearers of certain liberal values for which they see no place in present-day Alexandria. As such, Joseph and some of his friends try to preserve a small social world of their own, while remaining open to the idea of leaving the city and the country altogether. An enduring estrangement in relation to Alexandrian Copts serves to strengthen their sense of disconnect with the broader society.

#### UNITY IN TIMES OF DARKNESS

While relations between the Coptic Orthodox Church and other churches can be contentious, points of mutual tension are swept aside in times of great adversity. The Spring and Summer of 2017 was a tough period among Egyptian Christians. In different parts of the country, Copts have been the targets of several brutal attacks by ISIS-Egypt, an Egyptian branch of the Levantine extremist organization, that have claimed more than 100 Coptic lives. These terrorist strikes included a Palm Sunday attack on St. Mark's Cathedral that took the lives of eight local Copts. These developments have triggered a heightened sense of shared destiny among local Christians in general. On the occasion of Pope Francis's visit to Egypt, ISIS directed threats toward Catholics, while undetonated bombs were found at non-Coptic churches in Alexandria and Cairo, reminding local Christians that they were all potential targets.

At times, Coptic Orthodox leaders are willing to show some flexibility in dealing with other church communities. For instance, in April 2017, St. Mark's Cathedral was the scene of a wedding between a local Coptic man and a woman who belonged to a Latin family. The bride's uncle was a brother in the Franciscan Order based at St. Catherine's Cathedral in Mansheya, Alexandria.

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30 While a relatively diverse group, it does not include any Muslims, only Christians belonging to half a dozen different church communities.

The wedding ceremony was a Coptic ceremony led by a Coptic priest. However, a number of monks from the Franciscan Order took part in the wedding ceremony alongside a Coptic Catholic priest, and they contributed by singing a hymn while the bride's uncle recited the Lord's Prayer. According to one of his colleagues, he was allowed to recite the Catholic version of the prayer, which deviates a little from the Coptic version. This was noticed and appreciated by the Catholic guests at the wedding as a gesture of generosity on the part of the Coptic clergy.

Members of Alexandria's smaller churches are making efforts to establish new bonds of friendship and trust with other Christian sects based on mutual respect and a sense of being on an equal footing. With time, they hope the Coptic Orthodox Church will join them in these efforts.

## CONCLUSION

Central Alexandria is dotted with large, beautiful, but mostly empty churches. These houses of worship serve as reminders of a time when Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant communities of different national origins had a significant presence in the city. Today, these groups are struggling to survive. Whatever their motivations, members of these communities are looking beyond the confines of their own congregations to build friendships and establish marital bonds with members of other churches. Under new circumstances, they are returning to practices that are believed to have been more common a few generations ago, when marriages between people of different backgrounds were more broadly accepted. In the past, this openness may have been an expression of a certain communal confidence within communities, whereas today, the acceptance of marriage unions such as these may be seen partly as an expression of a 'chosen openness' under new circumstances, and partly as a strategy for survival. Rather than clinging to their own small churches as distinct cultural enclaves, Alexandria Christians are creating small social worlds in which members of different churches interact and see each other as part of a broader religious community. This movement can be seen not as a signal of defeat, but rather as a defiant adjustment to new realities, one that taps into values and ideals associated with a not-so-distant past.

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