Toward a Coptic Liberation Theology: Christians in Egypt

BY

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A Study

Presented to the Faculty

of

Wheaton College

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for

Graduation with Departmental Honors

in Peace and Conflict Studies

Norton, Massachusetts

May 13, 2012
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I. Introduction

During the Egyptian Revolution, which began in 2011, the media was flooded with images of riots and demonstrations. Through the chaos, what caught my eye were the images and stories of Muslims keeping watch over Christians during services, and then those Christians protecting Muslims during their daily prayers. The idea that such different religious groups might actually be working together for democracy was something that my utopian ideals and optimistic heart hoped was indicative of a larger movement within Egypt. However, my research shows that while some individual Christians and Muslims may have been able to look past their differences during a revolution, Christians on a larger scale in Egypt are systematically oppressed by the government and many of the Muslims citizens.

My thesis seeks to develop some of the conditions necessary for a Coptic\(^1\) Liberation Theology. I argue that the Coptic Church should develop a Coptic liberation theology through which the clergy, acting as the voice for its people, will directly face the government. This liberation theology will be based on the needs of the Copts to fight for liberation from unjust political structures, liberation from biased education and legal standards, and liberation from the fear of violence.

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\(^1\) The term “Coptic Christians” here describes Egyptian Orthodox Christians. There will be a more detailed discussion of identity and terms later. However, for simplicity’s sake in this paper I will use “Copt” to describe Egyptian Orthodox Christians and will specify those cases where I refer to a Protestant or Catholic Egyptian. I will use “Egyptian Christians” to describe all denominations.
In order to substantiate this thesis, my paper begins by determining the types of violence felt by the Copts in Egypt. Johan Galtung’s theory of types of violence will inform the central theoretical framework by which I analyze events taking place in Egypt. While I will look at some recent, post-revolution examples, as well as the longer historical context of Muslim-Copt relations, this paper will draw primarily from the period between the 1971 constitution and the most recent Egyptian revolution in 2011.

Once I show the lived situation of the Copts, I will explore some of the Coptic responses. This discussion will be framed by the competing arguments of national unity and persecution theories. The former believes that Christians ought to see themselves and be seen as an integrated part of a larger Egyptian identity, whereas the latter argues that the “foreign” Muslims are completely distinct from Christians and are intentionally persecuting them in order to drive them out of Egypt. These positions, which have been reflective of different classes of Copts over time, are essentially grassroots responses. While several of the Coptic popes could be classified into these categories, neither national unity nor persecution provides a prescriptive answer for the Church leadership to use in to combat the struggles of the Copts in Egypt.

A Coptic grassroots liberation movement will be difficult to form because of the structural violence in place embedded in the constitution and legal standards. Each constitution since the 1970s has increased the Islamic influence on the government. In a chapter devoted to constitutional rights, I will
explore the development of Egyptian constitutions and compare them with the
constitution in the Kingdom of Bhutan. Bhutan offers a helpful comparison
because it uses similar language to establish a state religion while also claiming
to provide freedom of religion.

Finally, I will use Chapter V to explore the Coptic Orthodox Church’s
theology and its relationship with the government as an institution. This chapter
will be primarily devoted to the development of a Coptic liberation theology.
Using the themes that come from liberation theology’s history in Latin America, I
will contextualize this theology for application in Egypt. I will then conclude with
some closing remarks about the application of my work and the challenges that
face Christians post-revolution.

In order to argue what I have proposed above, it is first important to begin
with some basic historical understanding of Egypt and the Christians who live
there. According to Coptic tradition, the apostle Mark came to Egypt after the
death of Jesus and founded the Coptic Orthodox Church in 64 C.E. The Coptic
tradition also holds that it was the ancient Pharaonic people whom Mark
originally reached and converted in Egypt.² It is important for Egyptian
Christians to align themselves with such a lengthy legacy, especially in the face
of the cultural shift to Islam in the Middle Ages. In 639 C.E. ‘Amr ibn al-’as led
the Arab Invasion into Egypt which began this change. During this early phase

² Randall P. Henderson, "The Egyptian Coptic Christians: The Conflict between Identity and
10.1080/0959641050059664.
of Muslim control, there was relative tolerance given to the Christians. They were allowed, like other “people of the book” to maintain their beliefs under Muslim law.

After several centuries with different Arab and Ottoman rulers, Egypt was conquered by the French in 1798. Following Napoleon and a brief occupation by the Turks, Muhammad Ali, an Albanian of the Ottoman empire, took over control of Egypt in 1805. He brought relative freedom and prosperity for the Copts, but his successors were somewhat less tolerant of the Christians. In 1882, the British empire arrived and colonized Egypt.3

The independence movement in Egypt is notable because it brought together Christians and Muslims for a united cause. This unification was crucial because the British had often used divide-and-conquer tactics to separate Egyptians by religion. The Wafd party, the central force fighting for the independence of Egypt, had many notable Copts among its ranks. Otto Meinardus, an important Coptic scholar, writes that “the Wafd was a short-lived yet highly significant movement, in which for the first time since the seventh century, the Copts could openly manifest their nationalist feelings and play a decisive role in the patriotic struggle for freedom and independence.”4 In fact, several sources identify the support and good nature of the Muslim-Coptic

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3 Otto Friedrich August Meinardus, Two Thousand Years of Coptic Christianity (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1999), 64-75.

4 Ibid., 76.
relationship as one reason why the Copts were not concerned by some of the potentially Muslim-centric language in the early constitutions.

Upon earning independence from the British, Egypt had a brief period of monarchy from 1922 to 1953, when a revolution led to a republic being formed. The Copts played an important role in this revolution, uniting with their Muslim compatriots to create a religiously free state. In the chapter on constitutions, I will discuss this recent history in more depth by investigating the changes to the constitutions between 1953 and today. The interpretation and application of the constitutions began in 1953 by creating religious freedom and protecting pluralism, but over time the constitutions instituted more extreme expressions of Islam with decreasing tolerance for Christians and other minorities.

This radicalization was thrust forward in 2011 by the Egyptian Revolution, which allowed the Muslim Brotherhood to increase their influence and control over Egypt. As referenced at the onset of my project, the 2011 Egyptian Revolution was an expression of this continuing influence of Islam in Egypt. A thorough analysis of the so-called Arab Spring is outside the focus of this project; however, I argue that the basic elements of my thesis can be applied to an analysis of the movement. The scope of this paper will focus on the religious rights of Copts, as well as the relationship between Muslims and Christians as reflected in both anecdotes and structural legal or constitutional systems.
II. Violence against the Copts

In order to develop a Coptic Liberation Theology, we must begin by recognizing that there is something from which the Copts need to be liberated. This chapter demonstrates that the Copts in Egypt experience violence in various ways. Using a theory put forward by Johan Galtung, I will outline three different types of violence: direct or personal, structural and cultural, and present examples of each type of violence against Copts in Egypt.

Johan Galtung is one of the founding fathers of peace studies as a field, with a special focus on the Middle East. His most important contribution was to distinguish between direct, structural and later cultural violence. Direct violence is the classical or straightforward definition of violence as one person or group hurting another person or group. Galtung creates a typology of direct violence which describes the anatomical and physiological violence one could endure. Furthermore, Galtung analyzes direct violence through the following dichotomies: intended versus not intended, physical versus psychological, and without objects versus with objects.\(^5\)

The second major type of violence defined by Galtung is structural violence. The most definitive distinction between structural and personal violence is “whether or not there is a subject (person) who acts.”\(^7\) In direct


\(^6\) Figure 1. Ibid., 173.

\(^7\) Ibid., 170.
violence, one can clearly identify an actor and a subject (or person being acted upon). Structural violence, however, does not have an identifiable actor. Galtung explains this by saying that while no person may be causing the violence, the systems of society or a government are causing harm. Specifically, Galtung writes that “the violence is built into the structure and shows up as unequal power and consequently as unequal life chances.” Therefore, an example he gives of structural violence is unequal distribution of resources, which causes harm to those with a lesser share of wealth and resources.

Finally, in a subsequent article expanding on his theory of different forms of violence, Galtung defines cultural violence as “those aspects of culture, the symbolic sphere of our existence — exemplified by religion and ideology, language and art, empirical science and formal science (logic, mathematics) — that can be used to justify or legitimize direct or structural violence.” Galtung makes a point to separate culture as a whole from specific aspects of culture. He is not saying that any particular culture is inherently violent, but he does admit that it is possible for there to be “a set of aspects so violent, extensive and diverse… that the step from talking about cases of cultural violence to violent cultures may be warranted.”

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8 Ibid., 171.


10 Ibid., 291.
Galtung’s underlying theory, that an aspect of culture can actually have a role in violence, especially structural violence, is important for understanding the religious tensions and possible solutions for Egypt. He briefly describes the opposite of cultural violence -- cultural peace. Galtung defines cultural peace as “aspects of a culture that serve to justify and legitimize direct peace and structural peace.”

All of this seems fairly straightforward and self-evident, but his conclusions are problematic. This theory of cultural violence, as Galtung describes it, is so extreme that it eliminates the possibility of a cultural peace, particularly a peace which allows for religious expression.

Specifically, Galtung uses a western-centric approach which implies that secularization is a requirement for cultural peace. There were two fundamental errors to Galtung’s analysis of religion. First, he defines religion as requiring a god and interpreting the divine role from a distinctly western bias. There is no place for an individual’s beliefs and his/her interactions with others. Religion, on the other hand, can be understood more clearly for this subject in terms of the practices they take part in, which reflect the beliefs adherents hold. In contrast to Galtung’s argument, many find religious beliefs (or specific ethical beliefs based in one’s culture) to be a moral guidepost.

Second, Galtung develops his theory around a god which chooses an in and out group. Rogers Brubaker discusses the problems inherent with the use of groups as a basis for analysis. He argues that too often scholars assume

11 Ibid., 291.
homogeneity of groups. In the case of Egypt, this is assuming all Christians and all Muslims have the exact same perspective on a particular issue. In this thesis, I seek to show some of the divisions and differences between Christians, as an example.

In speaking of a cultural peace, especially in terms of religion, the individual is incredibly important. I would challenge Galtung to follow through with his logic. In the same way that a culture, as a whole, is not inherently violent, an aspect of culture is not inherently violent. Instead, an aspect of culture, such as religion, becomes violent when an individual (or enough individuals for it to become structural) uses that aspect in a violent way.

As we investigate the claims of violence against the Copts, then, this framework of direct or personal, structural, and cultural violence will allow us to classify and establish what kind of violence is being perpetrated. We can say that Copts are being oppressed because all three of these types of violence are present in Egypt. This claim has been explored by many within and outside of Egypt.

An important conference was organized to bring awareness and to share both stories and analyses of the situation for Copts. The First International Coptic Symposium was held in September of 2004 and resulted in a book of the


13 See Meinardus, Hasan, Karas, Henderson, Makari, Hanna and Sedra.
papers presented entitled *Copts in Egypt: A Christian Minority Under Siege*. The conference was organized by Adly A. Youssef, a Copt, who sought to bring together Egyptians and foreigners, Christians and Muslims, and men and women to discuss the issues of Coptic rights. In addition to hosting the conference, he also shared a paper entitled “Tragedies and Sufferings of Egypt’s Copts (Manifesto).” Youssef’s message is that Copts are not afforded the rights, safety and freedom given to Muslims in Egypt.

To defend this thesis, Youssef listed a large number of incidents of persecution, violence, or inequality suffered by the Copts. Some of these instances are clearly direct violence. They include over thirty examples of what Youssef defines as “Attacks on and the massacre of Copts.” He also writes about cases of kidnapping and sexual assault perpetrated against Coptic women, and five specific accounts of direct violence against Coptic clerics.

These specific incidents are highlighted by critics as strictly anecdotal and not representative of a larger systemic problem of violence. These claims will be discussed later, but Youssef counters this criticism by also including examples of structural and cultural violence. First, he argues that Christians have no right to build religious structures or churches and that there are no Coptic premiers of provinces, university presidents or provosts, police or army

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15 Ibid., 32.
generals, or newspaper chief editors. Youssef continues, writing that less than 3% of cabinet ministers are Coptic, and that despite 20% of the population consisting of Christians, only 1.3% of the members of Parliament are Copts. It is important to recognize that these statistics were written in 2004, before the revolution, and are from a somewhat biased source. Nonetheless, Youssef does show that the number of seats in Parliament held by Copts has been rapidly shrinking. Despite Youssef’s bias, his arguments are affirmed by general statements from other authors like Meinardus, as well as multiple speakers from the conference who would agree with Youssef’s assessment. Concurring with Youssef, the Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA) give Egypt an 8.3 out of 10 on their Government Favoritism of Religion Index where 10 is the most favoritism.

The structural and direct examples of violence given by Youssef are fairly consistent with other sources, but he also identifies instances of cultural violence often overlooked by other writers. Cultural violence, because it is so embedded in individuals and society, is often not seen as violence at all.

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16 There are significant variations in the total number of Copts in Egypt. I use 20% here because that is what Youssef argues.

17 All statistics are from a table from Youssef’s paper on page 31 of *Copts in Egypt: A Christian Minority Under Siege*.


However, any time a culture’s values are so hegemonic that they prohibit the freedom to hold conflicting beliefs, cultural violence occurs.

For example, Article II of the current constitution, though it has existed in all constitutions since 1971, institutes Islam as the state religion. In so doing, the writers of the constitution use Islam as an aspect of culture to prevent the practices of Christians. One way this is done, Youssef writes, is by requiring that “religion must be mentioned on all official documents, including university and job applications.”

Personal status laws in Egypt allow, on the positive side, for Egyptians to have different legal standards and responsibilities based on the requirements of his/her religion. However, Egypt’s government and individuals in power have used the required identification of religion as a violent force in Egypt, using the knowledge to separate groups. Youssef also identifies media, educational programs, and educational texts as promoting a negative view of Christianity.

There is a bias toward Islam on all levels of analysis, from individuals, to state systems, and within the state itself. While I am certainly not arguing that Islam is inherently a violent aspect of culture, some interpretations of the Qur’an have been used to justify violence against the Copts. One of the most measurable examples is an interpretation that only Muslims should be given leadership positions, particularly over other Muslims. Meinardus described the

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21 Ibid., 32-33.
phenomenon in Egypt wherein Copts are given civil service positions but only those which had no absolute power over Muslim citizens. Youssef used his statistics mentioned above to make the same point.

Finally, in a work entitled *The Copts since the Arab Invasion: Strangers in Their Land*, Shawky F. Karas seeks to prove broadly that Christians are “being exposed to systematic religious suppression and discrimination.” For example, Christians are limited in their ability to construct churches. The permits required to build a church are difficult to obtain and even when a community gets a permit, the church may not be built. If Muslims quickly build a mosque near to the proposed sight, the church may no longer be built there.

Karas goes one step further from identifying the results of cultural violence, that Copts are not being given leadership positions in the country, to asking the question of why. Karas answers by elaborating on the positions of sheikhs within communities in Egypt:

> The mosques’ sheikhs who dominate all aspects of the Egyptian life exhort their followers not to give a leadership position to the Christians — the infidels — because it will be a shameful sign on the face of Islam. Thus qualifications and efficiency are ignored in appointments, promotions, admissions, and political leadership for the sake of being a Muslim.

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24 Ibid., 109-110.

25 Ibid., 98.
For sheikhs to take such a hard stance against Christians is certainly a clear example of cultural violence. These sheikhs are using Islam to defend the subjugation of Christians by Muslims in Egypt.

Another more strictly cultural example that Karas26 writes about is the use of loudspeakers to read verses of the Qur’an. This cultural practice has become ubiquitous throughout the Middle East and is an important part of the practice of daily prayer. Karas, however, offers a controversial objection to their use on the grounds that the volume and time of the recitations are blind to the fact that not all people want to hear them. The issue, for Karas, is that of consent. Unlike a sermon in a Church, which an individual chooses to attend or not, and unlike a Friday service at a Mosque, which is also an individual choice, these recitations are heard by anyone and everyone in the town.27 Karas would argue that imposing this religious practice onto non-Muslims without consent is potentially an act of cultural violence, especially if, as Karas claims, the loudspeakers are being used to project intentionally anti-Coptic verses from the Qur’an.

Regardless of one’s opinion on loudspeakers, an aspect of culture like their use offer an illustration of Galtung’s theory of the three types of violence.

26 Karas was the only writer I found to use loudspeakers as an example in this way. His argument is clearly coming from a place of bias against Muslims; however, he does offer an insider perspective about how loudspeakers are perceived. I recently spoke to a friend who had stayed with a Jordanian Christian family for several months. They talked to her about negative feelings toward the loudspeakers, saying that the speakers and other cultural practices contributed to their feeling marginalized in Jordan.

27 Ibid., 99-100.
Galtung develops what he describes as a “vicious violence triangle.” He argues that each type of violence is bolstered by the use of the other two against the same object. In the case of Egypt, one way to understand violence against Christians is not necessarily beginning with direct violence, but by seeing that cultural and structural violence actually legitimize direct violence. Using loudspeakers as a potential example, Christians may feel cultural violence because they are forced to hear verses from the Qur’an. This promotes the idea that Islam is the state religion because there are no legal ways for Christians to contest their use -- a form of structural violence. Individuals who feel justified by structural and cultural forces in their favor are more likely to act violently toward another community like Christians.

From the Muslim perspective, the rising sectarian tensions are not caused by inherent enmity between Copts and Muslims or by Muslim violence against Christians. In fact, they seem to argue that the tensions with Copts are a by-product of tensions between those advocating for Islamization, and those seeking to promote secularization. Sohirin Mohamas Solihin, writing a pamphlet published by the Islamic Foundation titled *Copts and Muslims in Egypt: A Study on Harmony and Hostility*, makes the claim that rising Islamic movements were a result of attempts in the 1920s to secularize Egypt. From his perspective, apparent culturally violent acts are not targeted at Christians, but rather at secularists.

For example, Solihin argues that President Sadat altered the constitution in 1971 to make Shariah a main source of legislation with the purpose of “appeasing the growing Muslim demand for overall constitutional changes.”

Furthermore, according to Solihin, the Muslim Brotherhood was founded as a response to the secularism promoted by the government. He writes that those secularists actually tried to use Copts as a political tool to prevent Islamization. Solihin would argue that Islam “guarantees free choice of religion,” and therefore Christians do not need to worry about losing their rights.

The Copts, see a very different history. They believed that the Muslim Brotherhood, and the government to some extent, were encouraging Islamization through Article II and other avenues. Milad Iskander, a speaker at the Copts in Egypt conference, writes that “Politics and religion are two sides to the same Islamic coin.” For Iskander, Islam is used in Egypt to promote structural violence through the government while simultaneously used as a cultural justification for both structural and direct violence. All three of these varieties of violence are present in Egypt; however, cultural violence is arguably the most dangerous and difficult to change.

Galtung agrees that cultural violence is a key to complete peace. He writes:

30 Ibid., 7.
31 Thomas, Copts in Egypt, 41.
This triangular syndrome of violence should then be contrasted in the mind with a triangular syndrome of peace in which cultural peace engenders structural peace, with symbiotic, equitable relations among diverse partners, and direct peace with acts of cooperation, friendliness and love.\footnote{Galtung, “Cultural Violence,” 302.}

He concludes that due to the relational character of the triangle, all three aspects will need to be addressed in order to achieve peace. How then, can we develop a plan for the development of peace in Egypt?

First, it is crucial to question Galtung’s assessment that religion is antithetical to peace. However, it is important for prominent individuals, especially sheikhs and Coptic clergy, to intentionally decide not to use their beliefs to justify violence against the other group. The influence exerted by religious leaders over their communities, especially in less educated people groups, must not be ignored. Karas describes, in a quote above, that the Muslim sheikh sought to separate Muslims and Christians to the point that leadership positions were shameful to Islam if given to Christians.\footnote{Karas, \textit{The Copts since the Arab Invasion}, 98.} Unless religious leaders, on both sides, decide to stop using their religion to create an in and out group justifying direct and structural violence, Galtung will be correct that religion is a tool of violence violent in Egypt.

Next, changes must occur within the constitution and government. The structural persecutions of Christians, such as the challenges of building churches and the refusal to allow Christians to serve in the military, are not in
line with the stated goals of the new (or old) constitutions. These constitutions claim to promote freedom of belief and expression; however, the laws passed in conjunction with the constitution proves otherwise, as we will discuss in Chapter V.

Beyond the strictly political sphere, there must be a change in the political theology of the Coptic Church. By choosing to avoid confrontation with the government, the Church has lost its power to be the voice of the Christians in Egypt. In a milieu where opposition to the government is seen as anti-Islamic which is a punishable offense socially and legally, the Church is the only non-violent avenue for political change. In the next chapter, I will explore the development of political theology in the Coptic Church and conclude by outlining a potential Coptic Liberation Theology.
III. The Coptic Response: A Theoretical Framework

In response to the situation of violence against Christians in Egypt, the Coptic community has developed two drastically different reactions. Some identify the historical roots of Christianity in Egypt as being important within the context of Egypt as a whole. Others believe that the violence is a reflection of the stark differences between Christians and Muslims, even identifying Muslims as foreigners in the Copts’ land. This chapter will explore these different perspectives. Furthermore, I will show that the divide among Copts contributes to the need for strong Coptic leadership to guide the changes necessary for peace in Egypt.

Various scholars’ perspectives on the contemporary situation of Copts since Egypt became a republic in 1953 identify two dominant schools of thought: the integration or national unity discourse and the persecution discourse. These conflicting positions are outlined by Paul Sedra in *Class Cleavages and Ethnic Conflict: Coptic Christian Communities in Modern Egyptian Politics*. The author argues that the division caused by differing opinions across Coptic communities will prevent a stable and healthy relationship between the Christians and Muslims in Egypt.34

Beginning with national unity, Sedra explains that some Copts believe that they represent a necessary piece of the cultural make up of Egypt.

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Furthermore, they disapprove of calling Copts a minority, claiming that while Copts may not have the greatest number of adherents in Egypt, they are “so fully and harmoniously integrated into Egyptian society as to be indistinguishable from Muslims.” In so doing, national unity Copts deny the need for special treatment. Many do not believe that there is an overarching attempt to oppress Christians in Egypt, and those who do see oppression call for integration as the solution.

In his book, *The Seven Pillars of Egyptian Identity*, Milad Hanna, a Copt, puts forward a theory for understanding Egyptian identity through seven pillars: three geographic and four historical pillars. As Hanna explains, Egyptian history has been irrevocably affected by layers of civilizations that Egypt has seen through time. He argues that the Coptic period began in the 2nd century C.E, overlapping with the end of the Greco-Roman period. This period was characterized by the development of the Coptic language and a wide spreading of what would be come to be known as the Christian faith throughout Egypt. During the first few centuries, the Romans were seeking to quash any movement counter to the state-based religious practice. Christianity, therefore was seen as any other rebellious movement and Rome tried to stop their practices. Facing persecution for what amounted to political insurrection, Egyptian Christians characterized this capital punishment as martyrdom. However, when

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35 Ibid., 221.

36 The Coptic calendar is based on the martyrs from this period.
Christianity became accepted politically, the Coptic church began to be recognized for its significant theological work. In the early centuries of Christianity, the influence and prestige of the Coptic Church, then known as the See of Alexandria, is recognized by some authors as being superior to the Roman See. For Egyptians, the Coptic church boasts one of the oldest and most preserved theological doctrines, having split from Catholicism at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 A.D.\(^37\)

Unfortunately this key theological split in 451 led to the devaluation of the Copts in the view of other Christians around the world. The Byzantine empire conquered Rome in 476 and later took control of Egypt from 629 until 639. During this brief occupation, the Byzantine governor, loyal to the Eastern Orthodox church based in Constantinople, persecuted the Copts in Egypt to the point that the Coptic pope had to leave his post, evacuating to Upper Egypt.\(^39\) This occupation represented a practical and felt separation between the Coptic Church and the remainder of the Christian world.

In this context, ‘Amr Ibn Al ‘Aas saw an opportunity to obtain Christian support for his invasion of Egypt which began in 639 C.E. He offered the Coptic

\(^{37}\) This author, Hanna, spells this council “Chalcydonia,” but it is most often spelled “Chalcedon”


Patriarch freedom to “administer the affairs of his people without constraint.”

Hanna argues that this Islamic period is unique in Egypt because of the way Islam came to the country. Amr provided freedom for the Copts and allowed them to continue under their creed without seeking to control or manage their affairs.

Furthermore, as Islam began to split into several different sects, the Copts did not choose sides. Hanna gives several reasons he believes the Copts took this position. First, the Copts’ central concern was that the Arabs had removed the Byzantines from power. Second, for the first few centuries after the Arab invasion Copts continued to speak Coptic, and therefore most of them were probably unaware of or poorly versed in the difficult political and theological discussions happening within the Muslim community. Finally, Hanna argues that after seeing the struggle the Christians had to face in Egypt because of their theological schisms, the more educated Copts were aware of the splits in Islam and believed the most peaceful position would be to maintain as much neutrality as possible.

All of this history contributes to Hanna’s belief that an Egyptian identity invariably involves both Christian and Muslim heritage. He argues that people in Egypt transitioned from speaking Coptic to Arabic around the same time that

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40 Hanna, *Seven Pillars*, 113.

41 Ibid., 115-116.

42 Ibid., 115-117.
Islam increased in popularity and that there was relative peace between the two religious groups for the first four to five centuries after Islam came to Egypt. While Hanna admits that later aspects of the Islamic era have damaged the relationship between Copts and Muslims, he still believes that both the Christian and Muslim periods are important aspects of Egyptian identity.\textsuperscript{43}

The integration theory, as an intellectual discourse, was born out of the 19th century as the idea of citizenship materialized in Egypt. Under Islamic law, Christians are considered “people of the book” and therefore a “protected minority.” According to the Qur’an, these groups, while still seen as “infidels” and not-Muslims, are somewhat accepted. The protected groups are referred to as dhimmis and often must pay an additional tax when compared to their Muslim compatriots.

The dhimmi status of Christians led the government and Coptic patriarchy to develop the millet system whereby Christians were allowed to continue their own rites and beliefs and the Coptic clergy were able to have authority over Christians. Elite Copts saw this status, though, as preventing their rights to advance in Egyptian society. They argued that Copts should not take the meager settlement given as a dhimmi population, which was not an equal status to the Muslims. Elite Copts believed that they must seek to integrate into the Egyptian population, working towards positions of high value.

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 109-128.
and prominence. However, poor Copts would then be stuck in a cycle of poverty and would have little opportunity to advance because of the difficulty of earning promotions or appointments as a Christian.

While elites were trying to fight this millet system of “protection,” the Orthodox Church was seeking to hold onto the system. In the millet system, the Coptic patriarch held the power to administer almost all Christian affairs. Pope Cyril IV believed that this protection was in the best interest of the Copts. The elites, however, fought with the Church’s approach, believing it was too equivocating with the Muslims. Elite Christians believed that the separation created by the millet system prevented Christians from having full rights as Egyptians. The elite Copts during this period sought to become fully integrated and not be separated. In this way, they represent the national unity theory.

The Copts espousing the persecution discourse are impressively distinct from the national unity discourse. These communities emphasize the differences between Christians and Muslims in Egypt, specifically citing “religion,” “history, culture, and often race.” These Copts argue that in the areas of freedom of religion, “civil service appointments, political representation,

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45 See Karas and the discussion of Muslim approach to Christian leaders on page 15 of this thesis.

46 Ibid., 224.

47 Ibid., 221.
personal status law, education, the media, and security,” Christians are not afforded equal rights and respect.\textsuperscript{48} Writers from this perspective provide lists upon lists of violence or moments of oppression against the Copts.\textsuperscript{49}

For example, persecution theory highlights the extremely limited role Copts are allowed in the government. Sedra writes that “Coptic participation in political life is widely viewed as a privilege accorded by the President,” especially because most of the few positions actually held by Copts are not democratically elected, but presidentially appointed.\textsuperscript{50} Whereas some may see any Coptic participation in government as a sign that the Copts are being treated equally, persecution theory argues that the Coptic role in government is both minor and marginalized.

While Pope Shenouda became less political and more in line with the national unity discourse, middle class Copts became more politicized. Sedra writes:

Shenouda has discovered that he cannot reverse the political mobilization of the Coptic Middle class. Middle-class Copts have come to expect a role in church, community and national affairs -- a role denied them by the hegemonic control of political life...\textsuperscript{51}

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 222.
\textsuperscript{49} eg Youssef, Karas, and Meinardus.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 222.
\textsuperscript{51} Sedra, \textit{Class Cleavages and Ethnic Conflict}, 233.
There has been a shift in ideology between the elite and middle class Copts. Previous to Shenouda, the elites led the push for political change but the middle class Copts are now working towards change.

These theoretical perspectives can be seen in external (non-Egyptian) sources as well. Paul Marshall, a prominent US diplomat to the Middle East, had this to say about the situation of the Copts:

The Copts are persecuted by radical Islamic groups and at times by local police and other security officials and they are discriminated against and have their freedom to worship hampered by the Egyptian government.\textsuperscript{52}

In his view, as articulated at the conference “Copts in Egypt: A Christian Minority under Siege,” Copts are the central Egyptian civilian target of Islamic extremists.

At the same conference, Milad Iskander wrote about the role Islamization has had on the Copts.\textsuperscript{53} Iskander, like Marshall, argues that persecution against the Copts comes from the dual force of the government and Islamic fundamentalists who, in his words, “are waging war against the Copts.”\textsuperscript{54}

Milad Hanna, a Copt himself, is a particularly interesting case of the intersection between these two discourses. Sedra lists him as an example of the national unity perspective based on Hanna’s work \textit{The Seven Pillars of the Egyptian Identity}. In this book, Hanna argues that every Egyptian has all seven pillars within him/herself. The pillars are: “the Pharaonic, Greco-Roman, Coptic,

\textsuperscript{52} Thomas, \textit{Copts in Egypt}, 24.

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 36-44.

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 41.
Islamic, Arab, Mediterranean and African.” For Hanna and the national unity discourse, it is impossible to separate any of these pillars. Any individual Egyptian, therefore, has within his/her identity each of these influences.

Hanna confirmed his beliefs in an integrated Egypt in an interview in 2004 where he rejected the idea that the Copts should ever have their own political party. Hanna argues that such a party based on religion “immediately means that Egypt has been divided.” This statement fits within the national unity framework. However, when the interviewer pressed him on the possibility of such a party, Hanna responded with strong words:

A very few number of people [Copts] would back this political party. Only 200 would subscribe to it because Copts are smart and not dumb. They know that whoever stands in the ranks of this political party would be killed, especially under current conditions. My loyalty is to the poor and the Copts because my loyalty is to all weakened and partly or totally oppressed groups anywhere in the world. That is why I demanded that one or two governors should be Copts. I also endorsed the Nubian issue and their right to have a specific language and culture.

If the persecution discourse outlines the differences in political and social rights between Christians and Muslims, Hanna here fits the description.

Sa‘id Shu‘ayb, the interviewer, then asked Hanna, “Do you believe that Christians are second-class citizens?” to which he responded, “Yes, and they

55 Sedra, “Class Cleavages and Ethnic Conflict,” 222.


57 Ibid.
know this well.”\textsuperscript{58} While Hanna seems to hold onto hopes that the Copts would maintain their Egyptian identity over a religious one, he also recognizes that Christians are separate. He sees national unity as the goal, the ideal for a secure and free future, and shows this through his theory of seven pillars that make up Egyptian identity. Hanna realizes, though, that Copts are not currently treated as an integrated part of the Egyptian nationality. The integration Hanna promotes through his pillar theory is a way to convince the government and the Muslims to view Copts in a more unified way.

A major challenge to understanding the Christian response to persecution in Egypt is that different parts of the community will choose to support either integration or persecution theory. Class has a significant effect on one’s perspective, and has led to ideological division within the Coptic community itself. Sedra describes Copts as “an unranked ethnic group,” meaning that they are not part of just one economic class, but that there are Copts in both the upper class and middle/lower classes.\textsuperscript{59} Copts, Sedra argues, must therefore not be understood as a single community, but as sub-communities.

This class division is clearly shown through various Coptic reactions to human rights movements that began to gain popularity in the 1980s. Specifically, the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights (EOHR) was founded in 1985 with great support from elite Copts. However, the strongest advocates for

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{59} Sedra, “Class Cleavages and Ethnic Conflict,” 220.
human rights in general were from the middle class, supporting the persecution viewpoint. On the other hand, elites sought to maintain moderate political dialogue, holding onto the national unity discourse.\textsuperscript{60}

This moderate position by the elites represented a major shift from the more radical activism for Coptic rights among the elite classes in the mid 1800s. Under the patriarchy of Pope Cyril IV from 1854 to 1861, there was an attempt to strike down the protected status of Copts in favor of a more equal and free idea of citizenship. As part of this macro-vision for the Church, Cyril IV instituted a variety of church reforms centered on the training of Coptic Clergy.\textsuperscript{61}

However, the elite Copts in this period were not satisfied with the changes. Sedra writes that “their indictment of the Church was stinging: they saw the clergy as incompetent, unable to meet the challenges of the modern era.”\textsuperscript{62} One of their central concerns was that many of the clergy came from a particular lower and uneducated group of people. They did not trust the clergy to act effectively, which resulted in the clergy choosing to become more conservative and defensive after the death of Cyril IV.\textsuperscript{63} The criticisms from the elites are in response to the way the clergy have interacted with the government and each Pope has led the church in his own way.

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 231.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 224.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 224.
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 224.
Pope Cyril VI, a crucial patriarch who ruled during the transition from President Nassar to Sadat, fought hard for the national unity perspective. He tried to keep Christians’ status as a protected minority, rather than fight for equal citizenship with Muslims. Sedra writes that “Whereas Kirollos was an unabashed advocate of the national unity discourse, the activist tenor of Shenouda’s (Bishop of Education who later became the Coptic Pope) lessons hinted at criticism of the régime.” In fact, Cyril tried to prevent Shenouda from gaining in power by seeking to place Shenouda at a monastery. The public reacted so strongly that Cyril took back his orders.

Shenouda, when elected Pope in 1971, “refused to pledge his loyalty to the régime- particularly one that declared ‘the principles of Islamic law constitute a major source for legislation.’” Shenouda is known to have been significantly more politically minded. Cyril had become worried by the politicization of the Sunday School Movement, where education in Churches began to take a political tone. A trademark of orthodox theology is its ability to maintain theology and doctrine throughout time. While theology may remain almost entirely untouched, Pope Shenouda created a drastic shift in political policy that greatly affected the Coptic communities in Egypt.

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64 Kirollos VI and Cyril VI are two different spellings for the same Pope.

65 Ibid., 225.

66 Ibid., 225.

67 Ibid., 226.
An important innovation by Shenouda, beginning before his election but continuing during his reign as Pope, were his “lessons” which later came to be called “General Meetings.” These meetings were intended to bring together an entire community “by reformulating the sermon into a freewheeling give-and-take between the preacher and his audience.” The talks Shenouda gave became an important platform to discuss politics. Hasan argues that the central purpose was to show Copts that “through the knowledge and appreciation of their heritage, the faithful will acquire the self-confidence to be more assertive in taking on the Muslim supremacists.”

It is still unclear exactly what approach Pope Theodoros II will take because he was only elected in November of 2012. Theolodoros II has said that “the Church will not become a place for political debates,” yet His Holiness does show that he intends to be involved in political issues in Egypt. According to the Arab West Report, Theodoros II recently met with the Egyptian Minister of the Interior, the President of the Palestinian National Authority, and the Iranian Foreign Minister. Furthermore, according to Catholic World News, Theodoros


69 Ibid., 228.


has come out against the newest version of the Egyptian Constitution in an interview with the Associated Press. He said that “We must and will actively take part in any national dialogue in which we see a benefit for the nation…”\textsuperscript{72}

In Chapter V, I will discuss some of the important national discussions about constitutional rights and articles about religious rights. However, within the context of the conflicting theories presented here, Theodoros here promotes the value of national unity very strongly. Pope Theodoros II says “national dialogue” and calls not only for Coptic rights, but for solutions that will be “a benefit for the nation.”

In evaluating the national unity and persecution discourses, I have shown their temporal development alongside Egyptian history. While Islam began as a peaceful influence in Egypt, Muslim people have used it in later years to justify the persecution of Christians. Some Copts still believe that their identity is uniquely tied within all Egyptians’ identity. However, many have seen recent events, including church attacks and Shari’a legal systems, as an indication that Christians are no longer free to worship in Egypt. It is important also to recognize class differences and the issues over which the lay-people differ from the clergy.

Despite differences in opinions between lay-people and the clergy, the Coptic Popes must provide leadership that challenges the government to

recognize Christians in Egypt. In a socio-political situation which is violent
toward Christians both directly and structurally, individuals are increasingly less
likely to fight back. The Coptic patriarchy must be the voice of the community
which cannot speak for itself at the risk of personal harm. This is especially
important as we explore the legal and constitutional situation of Copts in the
next chapter.
Chapter IV: Constitutions

In the preceding chapter, I outlined two Coptic attempts to understand the Coptic situation: as fully integrated or as a persecuted minority. In this chapter, I give an explanation for why neither of these paradigms offers an effective solution to the oppression of the Copts. How can a group with no agency within the government and insufficient numbers to violently overthrow a government, actually create change?

In this chapter, I discuss the evolution of the most recent Egyptian constitutions, particularly clauses relating to freedom of religion. I will also compare the case of Egypt with the case of Bhutan, showing how constitutional and legal constraints affect a Christian minority broadly, and the Copts specifically. While my overarching goal is to show that, due to legal barriers, a liberation movement will need to be based in the Church leadership, this chapter focuses on describing the situation as it is.

In 1922, the United Kingdom recognized Egypt as an independent state under the monarchy of King Fuad I. The constitution drafted for this Kingdom was the first to declare Islam the state religion in Egypt. The Copts, at the time, were in what Hasan describes as “the climate of the Muslim-Christian honeymoon.” None of the Christians who were in a position to influence the

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74 Ibid., 38.
writing of the constitution objected to the naming of Islam as the state religion. A more contested issue was actually that of parliamentary elections. Some believed that the Copts should be assigned a certain number of seats. However, the Coptic members of the Wafd party believed that it was more important to have the parliament split by political issues rather than by religion. The Copts apparently were confident that they could be elected by Muslims with more regard to their expertise, rather than their religion.75

Throughout the various provisional and fully instituted constitutions, starting in 1923, there was a common theme of naming Islam and Arabic as the religion and language of the state, respectively. However, in the 1971 constitution, Article II was introduced which stated, “The principles of Islamic shari‘ah are a main source of legislation.”76 This article was amended in 1980 to state that “shari‘ah is the main source of legislation,” and it has remained in the constitution ever since. It is important, though, to note that in 1971 Article 40 stating that “Egyptians are equal before the law… without discrimination” and Article 46, that “The state shall guarantee the freedom of belief and protect free practice of religious rituals,” were also included as safeguards to freedom of religion.77 Article 40 survives only in meaning through the current Article 3 (see below) which allows for Egyptians to be governed by the principles of their

75 Ibid., 38-39.

76 Nabil Ahmad Hilmi et al., “Article II of the Egyptian Constitution Book” (unpublished manuscript, July 31, 2012), 177.

77 Ibid., 177.
respective religions. Article 46, however, is very closely related to the existing Article 43 (see below).

The current constitution includes the following clauses:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Article</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>Article 2: Islam is the state’s religion, and Arabic is its official language. The principles of Islamic law (sharia) form the main source of legislation.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Article 3: For Egyptian Christians and Jews, the principles of their religious law will be the main source in regulating their personal status, matters pertaining to their religion, and the selection of their spiritual leadership.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Article 6 (part 2): No political party may be based on discrimination of gender or origin or religion.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Article 43: The freedom of belief is inviolable. The state guarantees the right to practice one’s religious rites and establish places of worship for the heavenly religions. Details are specified by law.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Article 219: The principles of Islamic law (sharia) include general evidence, the foundational principles of Islamic jurisprudence (usul al-fiqh), the reliable sources from among the Sunni schools of thought (madhahib).</td>
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These clauses represent the most important aspects of the constitution concerning Christian-Muslim relations. Article 2 is particularly notable because it has been carried over since the 1980 amendment. In addition to the examples above, several clauses discuss the Islamization of education, specifically the requirement of Islamic religious education for all regardless of creed.78

In the debates surrounding the adoption of this most recent constitution, Article II has remained at the center of the discourse. According to surveys from

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78 All Constitutional references are from an English translation by Nivien Saleh, available at [http://niviensaleh.info/constitution-egypt-2012-translation/](http://niviensaleh.info/constitution-egypt-2012-translation/).
the Arab West Report, *Article II of the Egyptian Constitution Book*, 29.3% of Christians believe that Article II should be altered, compared with just 1.3% of Muslims. Arguments against Article II, from the perspective of Christians, are fairly straightforward: sharia law should not be applied to Christians or other faiths’ adherents, and the article is not reflective of the diversity which defines Egypt. However, the more interesting arguments are those in support of Article II.

In *Conflict & Cooperation: Christian-Muslim Relations in Contemporary Egypt*, Peter E. Makari defends this use of sharia as the main source of legislation each time he mentions sharia. The first mention of Article II is on page 56 and is described in a discussion of President Sadat’s approach to the Copts. Makari writes that “Islam, for Sadat, was a means of legitimization.”79 Sadat sought to prove his religiosity as a way of inspiring loyalty and gaining power. Makari places Article II in this context, then, implying that it was not intended to create an “Islamic State,” especially in light of the complaints against Sadat about giving preferential treatment to Christians. Instead, Article II may have been an attempt, albeit a failed one, to both quash any Coptic hope of rising up against the government, while also appeasing the Muslims. Interestingly, Sadat is described by Makari as having angered both the Muslims

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79 Peter E. Makari, *Conflict and Cooperation: Christian-Muslim Relations in Contemporary Egypt* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2007), 56.
and Christians before his eventual assassination. Yet, Article II remains present in every successive constitution.

Nonetheless, Article II is not the only aspect of the constitution that is controversial for Christians. According to an article summary from Arab West Report, the current Coptic Pope, Theodoros II, “described Egypt’s new Constitution as racist and discriminatory.”\textsuperscript{80} He is not talking only about Article II, but the constitution more broadly. The same survey by Arab West Report that focused on Article II also asked some interesting questions about the constitution as a whole. The most striking finding is that 37.5% of Christians believe that the constitution needs to be amended in some way. Furthermore, 57% of all those surveyed, from any religion, believed that the entire constitution needed to be changed for some reason.\textsuperscript{81} This survey was looking at the draft resolution in 2011. It would be interesting to see if this overall number dropped after the referendum in which the draft resolution was voted on by the entire Egyptian population. Theoretically, one would expect that a constitution could not pass a general election if 57% think it needs to be changed.

However, the current constitution has been heavily contested by many Christians and more liberal speakers because of the very way it was written and approved. According to a 2012 article from Reuters, thousands of Egyptians


\textsuperscript{81} Hilmi et al., “Article II of the Egyptian Constitution,” 45.
protested the acceptance of the draft constitution because it was not written by a representative group. President Mursi claimed that the speed of ratification was imperative to prevent continuing “dictatorship,” but his critics argued that too many people with conflicting views had dropped out of the drafting assembly because “their voices were not being heard.”82

The Kingdom of Bhutan offers an interesting comparative case study83 because it, too, recently passed a new constitution which seeks to walk the line between having an official religion while also preserving freedom of religion. Also passed by referendum, Bhutan’s constitution was adopted in 2008 after the King voluntarily abdicated the throne to allow his son to begin ruling, not as an absolute monarch, but as part of a constitutional monarchy with an active parliament. Although Bhutan and Egypt share few cultural similarities, the political atmosphere from which their constitutions, and practical approach to minority religions, are similar. By comparing these two constitutions, I hope to highlight the contradictory language in both countries as they seek to balance religious majority and minority rights.

There are some important differences between Egypt and Bhutan which must be recognized before proceeding with the comparison. First, rather than


83 Unless otherwise notated, specific information about Bhutan comes from my personal field work and interviews in the country. I used my paper, “Freedom of Religion in Bhutan: The Case of Christianity” as a central source for this section.
seeking to create an Islamic state, Bhutan boasts of being the last independent Buddhist (specifically the Vajrayana school) Kingdom in the world. Next, Bhutan has the unique experience of a “democracy” imposed by the rulers, rather than demanded by the people. Finally, Christianity in Bhutan is often seen as an external or foreign religion. In Egypt, by contrast, Christianity is recognized as having existed before Islam came to Egypt.

Nonetheless, there are some impressive similarities. For example, in Egypt’s constitution we have seen the combination of one article which defines Islam as the state religion, and another article promising freedom of belief. In the Bhutanese constitution, Article 7.4 says, “A Bhutanese citizen shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.” However, Article 3.1 states “Buddhism is the spiritual heritage of Bhutan.” Throughout the constitution and legislation there are implied preferences given to Buddhism, in arenas from holidays to education. Furthermore, both Egypt and Bhutan prohibit the construction of churches (specifically new churches in Egypt).

Next, regarding the Religious Organizations Act, some of my sources in Bhutan believed that if Christian churches were ever allowed to register under the act they would be required to submit to the authority of the Je Khenpo, the Buddhist spiritual ruler. Copts in Egypt have dealt with a similar issue. Meinardus writes that “The major difficulty for the Copts under Muslim rule,

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84 This act is used to legislate all religious organizations but is inherently problematic. For example, it requires that no religious organization “violate the spiritual heritage of Bhutan,” which is Buddhism.
however, was their responsibility and their obedience to two social orders: the church, and the state... Meinardus continues to explain that often the instructions of the church and the state were at odds with each other, requiring a choice in loyalties. Some of the Christians I interviewed in Bhutan in 2011 felt a similar pressure. In particular, there was an incident where a church decided not to worship through music on the weekend of the royal wedding. This decision was made to avoid drawing attention to and presenting the image that these Christians believed that their practices were more important than celebrating the King’s wedding.

If, as we see in Article II of Egypt’s constitution, sharia is to be the basis of Egypt’s legal system, the equivalent comparison in Bhutan is the Vajrayana political system. The dual system is based on the Tibetan idea of “Chosidnyi,” and divides power between the King or Druk Gyalpo, who is the political ruler, and the Je Khenpo, who is the spiritual ruler. In Bhutan, this system is so deeply embedded in their understanding of governance that in the Dzongs (or fortresses which act as regional government offices) one half of the structure is dedicated to political offices such as governors, tax collectors, etc, while the other half houses the regional sangha or community of monks.

This is where there must be a distinction between Bhutan and Egypt. Bhutan, while at least symbolically supporting freedom of religion, does not claim to be a secular state. The government and the people recognize that

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85 Meinardus, Christian Egypt, 345.
Buddhism is not just the majority religion, but is inherently tied to the governance of the state. In Egypt, though, the question of the government’s nature as secular or religious is nuanced, not clearly defined, and changing.

One contributor to the Arab West Report on Article II argues that the ambiguity inherent in Egypt’s constitution is detrimental to both interreligious relations and the government as a whole. He writes:

No state may call itself civil when it assigns an official religion for itself. It is time for us either to be a civil state and to remove the text on the official religion of the state from the constitution or, if we wish to keep the text as it is, to acknowledge that Egypt is a religious state and not a civil one. Remaining in the grey zone between the civil and the religious state results in nothing but revolving in a vicious cycle.\(^{86}\)

The author continues to tear apart the idea that a religious state will be successful, arguing instead that “the future in the age of globalization is for a modern, civil, multi-religious state which separates religion from politics and the state.”\(^{87}\) The author cites the laws against apostasy as an example of the destructive role that both Article II and the creation of an Islamic state can have on Egypt.

Apostasy is the conversion of an individual from Islam to any other belief system. It is characterized by Maurits Berger, in his article “Apostasy and Public Policy in Contemporary Egypt: An Evaluation of Recent Cases from Egypt’s Highest Courts,” as applying only to Muslims who “abandon or renounce [their]

\(^{86}\) Hilmi et al., “Article II of the Egyptian Constitution,” 112.

\(^{87}\) Ibid., 113.
religion. 88 Under sharia, apostasy is a crime punishable by death. However, Berger explains that apostasy holds a “limbo status” because statutory law does not legislate against apostasy. 89 Therefore, in order to analyze the legal status of apostasy, one can only look at case precedent.

Unlike the United States or other governments under which religious identity is an individual issue, there are important personal status laws in effect in Egypt. For example, there are different marriage laws based on the individual's religion. Berger explains that “Religion -- and hence conversion -- therefore are not private matters of the individual, but bear significant legal consequences. 90” Most often, apostasy is applied in issues of family law because an apostate must divorce his/her spouse, loses all rights to inheritance, and causes legal issues for any children. 91

In Bhutan policies about conversion differs. There is no strict Buddhist legal code criminalizing conversion. Nor does the government require through personal status laws that an individual’s religious affiliation be formally registered with the government. However, there are intentional legal, political and social controls against evangelism and therefore conversion. Legally, article 7, section 4 of the constitution states that “no person shall be compelled to belong to

89 Ibid., 722.
90 Ibid., 723.
91 Ibid., 723-724.
another faith by means of coercion or inducement.” Similarly, in the Religious Organizations Act, a clause says “No RO shall compel any person to belong to another faith, by providing reward or inducement for a person to belong to another faith.” These clauses are somewhat ambiguous as there is no clear definition of inducement; but my interviews with Christians in Bhutan revealed that they believed these clauses could/would be used against a Christian who discussed tenets of Christianity with a Buddhist.

In Egypt, the law is designed to prevent the conversion itself, while in Bhutan the law actually seeks to prevent the opportunity for conversion to happen. However, there are similar political pressures in both which contribute to the goal of keeping majority-religion adherents loyal to their religion. Meinardus writes that “the Coptic Church was given some safety at the price of abstaining from proselytizing Muslims.”

In Bhutan, the Prime Minister gave an interview with a Christian news organization called “Compass Direct.” In the interview, he said, “I view conversions very negatively, because conversion is the worst form of intolerance.” Almost all the Christians in Bhutan that I interviewed expressed fear of being open about their faith. They worried that openness about their beliefs with their neighbors, friends, or coworkers could be construed as Christian proselytizing. Similarly, the social pressure against

92 Meinardus, Christian Egypt, 346-347.

apostate Egyptian Muslims is extremely strong and can even include family members disowning apostates.

In the socio-religious context of Bhutan, the pressure against Christians does not result in large scale attacks on churches or the death penalty if someone were to convert. However, Christians do not feel that they are equal or have equal rights. They are not permitted to practice openly nor are they able to build or register churches, but they also feel significant social pressure from their communities.

For Egypt, the development of the constitution has led toward increased Islamic influence, despite pressures from the international community to protect freedom of religion. Meinardus and Hasan argue that the relationship between Muslims and Christians has actually deteriorated in recent history. Whereas Christians originally were pleased by the Arab invasion because they believed it would relieve oppression from the Byzantine empire, they are now the victims of both structural and social oppression within Egypt. Article II is a particularly troubling constitutional amendment because it institutionalizes Islam over Christianity in the governance.

If the government continues to appease the Islamists by supporting sharia and suppressing Christian rights, Egypt will never be able to become a free democracy that it claims was the aim of the Arab Spring. An effective constitution, for Bhutan or Egypt, that actually seeks to promote equality and
freedom, must work to combat social attacks on freedom, rather than remaining ambiguous and creating structures that support these harmful social norms.
V: Toward a Coptic Liberation Theology

This thesis began with an exploration of the three types of violence perpetrated against Christians in Egypt. Due to structural and cultural violence, Christians are prevented from contesting the Islamic movement in Egypt. Neither the national unity, nor the persecution theory, provide a clear picture of the situation in Egypt. It is important to recognize the patterns of violence against the Copts while also seeing national unity as an important goal for the pluralistic society of Egypt. I conclude, therefore, that the Coptic Church as an institution must step in to protect the rights of its adherents. This chapter, then, explores an active approach the Church could take to achieve this. For a church to take a concerted political stand, it must be based in an effective theology. Therefore, I will begin by outlining some fundamentals of Coptic theology and then will move on to develop a potential Coptic Liberation Theology. Such a liberation theology, virtually nonexistent in Egypt, seeks to provide a contextually relevant political approach to the government for the Coptic Church.

Before the ecumenical Council of Chalcedon\textsuperscript{94} in 451 C.E, the Roman Catholic and Coptic Orthodox church were united in theology. However, at this council a distinct theological issue of Christology emerged from an important question about the nature of Jesus’ humanity and divinity. S. S. Hasan, in his book \textit{Christians Versus Muslims in Modern Egypt}, argues that this split between

\textsuperscript{94} For more information on the council as well as early church theological splits, see Henry Chadwick’s \textit{The Early Church}, p 205-211.
Chalcedonian and pre-Chalcedonian (those who did not adopt the creeds put forth there) Churches contributed to the marginalization of the Coptic Church by other global Churches.

At the Chalcedonian council, an understanding of Christ’s nature called “diphysitism” was accepted. Church leaders at the council believed that Jesus was fully human and fully divine, but that these two aspects of his being were separate. Most Christian churches today support this belief, while the Egyptians are a notable exception. Meinardus explains the Coptic theology of monophysitism like this:

The Incarnation as explained by Monophysite theologians is the mutual permeation of two natures, appropriation of our nature and the communication of His in one Person, the Son of God appropriated the human nature to Himself and communicated Himself to man. All that concerns Christ should be applied not to the one or the other nature, but to His entire Person in its unity.\(^95\)

This Christological doctrine argues that Jesus’ humanity and divinity are fully fused into one.\(^96\)

While this may seem minor to those outside the community, the distinction has major ramifications on other areas of theology, Christology, and even political differences between Egypt and the Vatican. Hasan writes that “This hairsplitting doctrinal difference became the basis of a permanent rift

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\(^95\) Meinardus, *Christian Egypt*, 200.

between the Church of Egypt and the rest of Christendom.’” Similarly, Otto F. A. Meinardus, an important scholar of Coptic Christianity, explains how the Coptic patriarch was exiled after his refusal to adopt the Chalcedonian creed. He says the results of the split were manifested in two groups, the “Chalcedonians or Melkites,” and the “non-Chalcedonians or Monophysites,” both seeking the patriarchy over the Coptic Church. Ever since the schism, there have been two Christian leaders in Egypt, one is the Coptic patriarch and one is a Roman Catholic Bishop.

In part due to this doctrinal split, the Coptic Church was a persecuted Church, even before the Arabs invaded, as noted above. The Roman Catholic Church rejected the Coptic Church after Chalcedonia. Previously, the Patriarch of Alexandria (as the Coptic Pope is sometimes called) was recognized for his contributions to Christian theology and thought. However, as the split grew, the Copts were further and further alienated from their Catholic brethren. As we have seen, Hanna argues that the Copts welcomed the Arab invasion because they believed that their positions as a “protected minority” would be preferable to the oppression they faced under the Byzantine Empire which refused to recognize the Copts’ pre-Chalcedonian theology.

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97 Ibid., 28.
98 Meinardus, Christian Egypt, 198-199.
99 Hanna, Seven Pillars, 100-127, particularly 119.
As the Coptic Church faced internal persecution from other Christian Churches, they were forced to actually take the church further and further toward conservatism.\(^{100}\) Hasan echoes this point, arguing that the rift between the Churches led to the demotion of Alexandria as an intellectual force. He believes that Coptic writings post-Chalcedonia became more and more conservative and even “defensive” or reactionary.\(^{101}\) It is conceivable, then, that the Coptic Church may have maintained this defensive posture toward the Arab invaders. They believed that they could maintain an inward focus, that by remaining separated from the Muslims, they could avoid confrontation with the Muslims. However, the increased islamization in Egypt over the last hundred years has necessitated a more active response from the Coptic church which can be described by looking at their political theology.

Meinardus, in order to describe Coptic political theology, begins by first recognizing several difficulties scholars face. First, he writes that there is no “systematic moral philosophy,” which means that the study of Coptic political theology must be surmised from particular events that were recorded.\(^{102}\) Second, though related, Meinardus points out that while we have some primary

\(^{100}\) Murad Kamil, *Coptic Egypt*, 27.


\(^{102}\) Meinardus, *Christian Egypt*, 342.
sources of specific events that have happened in the history of the church, there is no broader source which has synthesized these events.\textsuperscript{103}

Nonetheless, Meinardus offers us a helpful guide to begin to systematically understand political theology for the Coptic Orthodox Church. The Copts seek, primarily, to ground everything in the Bible. Therefore, Meinardus describes three different political doctrines founded in the New Testament. The first comes from Romans 13:1-7. In this passage Paul is urging the Romans to abide by the regulations and authority of the state. Specifically, he says the state is “instituted by God,” and “what God has appointed.”\textsuperscript{104}

Meinardus describes this perspective as “seeing in the state a divine institution.”\textsuperscript{105} For this doctrine, the state is perfectly in line with the purposes of God and cannot be questioned or critiqued.

Meinardus describes the second approach as “that of opposition to the state.”\textsuperscript{106} While there are numerous passages in the New Testament which call for overthrowing oppression, this second doctrine is based in Revelation 13 for Meinardus. Cloaked in the apocalyptic language of Revelation, many believe that the dragon referred to in Revelation 13 symbolizes Rome. Throughout the chapter there is a deep understanding that not only is the “beast” a negative

\textsuperscript{103} Ibid., 343.
\textsuperscript{104} Romans 13:1-2, NRSV.
\textsuperscript{105} Meinardus, \textit{Christian Egypt}, 343.
\textsuperscript{106} Ibid., 343.
influence, but that it is necessary to fight against the beast. For example, verse 10 ends with “Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints.”107 The author is urging Christian leaders to fight back against the “beast” of Rome, indicating that the author did not see Rome as a “divine institution” like Paul described.

Finally, in both Matthew 22:16-22 and Luke 7:1-10 we see the “acceptance of the state.”108 The reference in the Gospel of Matthew describes a conversation between Jesus and some Pharisees about the issues of taxes. It includes Jesus’ famous line “give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s [after Jesus notes that the emperor’s picture is on Roman coins], and to God the things that are God’s.”109 In Luke, we see the story of the Centurion who is praised for his faith after he describes his obedience under authority. Here, a Christian is told to keep separate the issues of the world and the issues of faith. It is not the perfection seen in the state from the first doctrine, but there is a sense of acceptance of the person or systems in power.

Meinardus describes the existence of these three drastically different doctrines as “Apostolic ambiguity,” because the early church held no central and consistent political philosophy. This problem is an undercurrent among Christians and churches around the world. To what extent should Christians get

107 Revelation 13:10, NRSV.
108 Meinardus, Christian Egypt, 343.
109 Matthew 22:21, NRSV.
involved with politics? Should the Catholic Pope have secular political power in addition to his control of the Church? In what ways do Christians have a responsibility to seek change in their government, and in what ways should the Christian mission occur outside the political sphere?

All of these important questions and more have manifested differently for Christian denominations around the world. For the Coptic Church, one of the most important issues is the extent to which Church and state should or should not remain separate. Milad Hanna highlights this difference between the Roman Catholic and the Coptic Orthodox churches based on the political power each church gathered. Hanna describes the Catholic church as seeking political might, specifically in Europe. The Coptic church, on the other hand, “did not enter the political arena and hence its heritage of ‘peacefulness’… in its relationship with the ruler.”

Although the Coptic Church did not seek (or if it did was unsuccessful in seeking) control over Egypt broadly, there are ways in which the Copts tried to gain power vis-a-vis the Muslim majority that came with the Arab invasion.

Nonetheless, the Copts’ status has essentially been under the control of the Muslim-dominated government. In chapter II, I discussed the ways in which the Copts have been oppressed within in Egypt. The remainder of this chapter will present the way liberation theology, a growing trend in global Christianity in the last 50 years, has sought to support the liberation of oppressed groups.

110 Hanna, Seven Pillars, 107.
This movement began in Latin America, made famous by Gustavo Gutiérrez of Peru. However, the ideas have spread and there are now liberation theologies for African Americans, the LGBTQ community, women, and even Palestinian liberation theology.

Interestingly, Hanna argues that Christianity in Egypt was actually born as a “liberation movement.” Egypt was under Roman rule in the 1st century C.E. and Hanna describes Christianity as a “clandestine organization…” that “spread easily and quickly in protest against Roman persecution and as part of the slave liberation movement.”111 Just as Christianity in Egypt began under Roman persecution, there are ways in which a similar liberation movement may be needed for the well-being and safety of Copts today, particularly from the perspective of the persecution dialogue.

Reflecting on Gutierrez’s *A Theology of Liberation*, Robert McAfee Brown explicates three levels of liberation that are interconnected and are all necessary for true liberation. These are first, “liberation from unjust social structures;” second, “liberation from the power of fate;” and finally “liberation from personal sin and guilt.”112 These fairly general concepts are paired with a deep contextualization that marks all liberation theologies. According to liberation

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111 Ibid., 118.

theology then, Christians must act, and act appropriately for their context, in order to achieve these aspects of liberations, especially the first two.

Liberation theology is, inherently, a rejection of the doctrine of separation of faith and politics. Gutierrez writes that, “To assert that there is a direct, immediate relationship between faith and political action encourages one to seek from faith norms and criteria for particular political options.” The Coptic Church, as an institution that has related to and interacted with the Egyptian government, must then weigh its theology against its political options.

A liberation theology for Egypt would need to incorporate three elements as well, though slightly different from Gutierrez’s levels of liberation. The elements are: liberation from unjust political structures, liberation from biased education and legal standards, and liberation from fear caused by violence against Christians. These elements are based on four key goals developed in the 20th century by Copts seeking to improve the situation of Christians in Egypt. The four goals were to allow Christians to have Sunday as a Sabbath, to include Christian education alongside Muslim teaching in public schools, to see more Copts appointed to government positions within legislative bodies, and to achieve equality in the appointments of other government positions. Elite Copts, after gaining some improved rights in the early 20th century, held a conference of influential Copts where they discussed and put forward these

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ideas. Additionally, it is important for us to include liberation from fear, as that is a major factor for the large numbers of Copts emigrating out of Egypt as well a central concern for those deciding to remain in Egypt.

An opportunity for the Coptic Church exists if its patriarch chooses to “lead the Church to become an ‘institution of social criticism...’ where “its critical mission will be defined as a service to the history of freedom, or more precisely, as a service to human liberation. The Church and not the individual Christian would then be the subject of the praxis of liberation.” A Church that takes this call seriously would become inseparably bound to a goal of liberation from unjust social systems. This Church would seek to radically challenge what persecution theorists would argue are the oppressive systems in place in Egypt. This Church would seek for its members the rights to practice important aspects of their faith like Sunday Sabbath, to share their faith with their neighbors in compliance with the biblical call for evangelism, and secure jobs regardless of their faith.

Pope Theodoros II should take some lessons from the work of Pope Shenouda if he were to attempt to make the changes I have proposed.

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114 Hasan, *Christians Versus Muslims*, 34.

115 I do not include in my development of Egyptian liberation theology Gutierrez’s third level “freedom from personal sin.” This level is crucial to any holistic Christian theology; however, in this thesis it is important to focus in on political theology. Therefore, just as both Brown and Gutierrez recognize that one cannot have a full theology without the personal grace Jesus promises his followers, this paper recognizes that level as important. Nonetheless, I will not dedicate much time in the thesis to its study.

Specifically, Pope Shenouda was able to “incorporate the lay community into the church, by making religious values relevant not simply to a good afterlife but to the here and now.” However, others criticized Shenouda of later becoming too easily swayed and manipulated by President Mubarak. After Shenouda was released from the monastery he was sent to during the end of President Sadat’s reign and the beginning of Mubarak’s time as President, the Pope’s political role was subdued. Hasan writes that “they [Copts] hardly recognized in the man so cautious in his dealing with the state... The pope now seemed to ooze charm in the presence of high officials.” The drastic shift in policy undermined the work Shenouda had begun and Theodoros would do well to bring the Coptic church back to the reforms Shenouda had begun before his incarceration.

Peter E. Makari, in *Conflict & Cooperation: Christian-Muslim Relations in Contemporary Egypt*, defines two different types of citizenship: “social citizenship” and “legal citizenship.” The former is our central concern in discussing liberation from unjust political structures. Makari defines social citizenship as “how members of society include or exclude others and allow others to enjoy the rights to which they are entitled... The social definition has merit in the activities of daily life and in interaction among people.”

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118 Ibid., 114.
120 Ibid., 7.
case of Coptic Christians, social citizenship gives us a framework to understand the ways in which Muslim individuals may prevent Copts from enjoying their full rights.

Keith Roderick, another speaker at the *Copts in Egypt* conference, made bold claims about the processes that would be required to resist the Islamists, or one might say liberate the Copts. He argues that Islamism is fundamentally dangerous and that the Muslim majority is too quiet about the Islamists. Roderick believes that Copts need to start an organized resistance, including what he describes as a world congress of minority Christians around the world to overthrow injustice. While such a congress is highly unlikely, Egyptian Christians could learn from social justice movements around the world. Dialogue between the Christians and Muslims would create a milieu of cooperation rather than enmity. The liberation of Christians must not be through a reversal of power structures, but create a liberation for all.

In the same conference proceedings, *Copts in Egypt: A Christian Minority under Siege*, Milad Iskander connects social and legal citizenship when he writes that “Christians in Egypt have to deal with two enemies: The Egyptian government, which engages in criminal activities against them and cares nothing about their plight, and Islamic fundamentalists who are waging war against the

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121 Thomas and Youssef, *Copts in Egypt*, 95-100.

122 See Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* which requires a liberation for both the oppressed and oppressors in the creation of a free and equal society.
Copts."\(^{123}\) While some of the systems of oppression in Egypt are based on social pressures from the populace, there are others which are codified in the legal system of Egypt. Thus an Egyptian liberation theology must incorporate the need for liberation from biased education and legal standards.

President Nassar, who was in power from 1952 to 1970, made changes to the Egyptian educational system based on influence from his more extreme Muslim constituents. While Nassar made great strides to open the university system to lower and middle class Egyptians by eliminating tuition, he also limited the freedom of Copts in universities. Specifically, lecturing positions were no longer given to Copts and Christians were either prevented entirely or limited in their entrance to certain fields like Arabic or gynecology.\(^{124}\) This process of Islamization of education in Egypt continued under President Sadat who required Islamic education to be the core of the Egyptian curriculum and created a university entrance exam which included a religious exam only covering Islam.\(^{125}\) In order for Copts to earn more prestigious positions in Egypt, they must be both socially permitted to hold those positions and have the ability to be educated well enough to be qualified for them.

The Coptic Church must decide where it stands in relation to the government. Hanna applauds the Coptic Church in his *Seven Pillars of Egyptian*...

\(^{123}\) Thomas and Youssef, *Copts in Egypt*, 41.

\(^{124}\) Hasan, *Christians versus Muslims*, 170.

\(^{125}\) Ibid., 179.
Identity. He contrasts the Coptic Church with the Roman Catholic, showing how the latter sought political power in Italy and to some extent Western Europe. Specifically, Hanna writes that by its very nature of avoiding politics, the Coptic Church created a “heritage of ‘peacfulness’, as much as events allowed, in its relationship with the ruler.”

Interestingly, Hanna does not clarify his caveat to the above statement (“as much as events allowed”). An Egyptian liberation theology would necessitate some sort of Church action in order to lead toward liberation from the oppressive legal systems in place in Egypt.

Sana Hasan discusses a potential example of shifting a personal religious practice into a politically liberating practice:

The method of passive resistance so long practiced by the monks in their battle against sin could also be used to resist the persecuting state. Shenouda… first called for a collective fast in January 1977 to protest the imminent passage of the law of apostasy…

In so doing, Shenouda deliberately re-interpreted the use of fasting for personal liberation from sin toward a non-violent attempt to be liberated from the Islamic state’s persecution of Copts. Shenouda shows how a more confrontational approach by the Church could be a force for political action.

Both Meinardus and Hanna recognize that, especially given the lack of clear political direction from the Bible, the Coptic Church used the Islamic government’s approach to it as the basis for how it would interact with the state.

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126 Hanna, Seven Pillars, 107.
127 Hasan, Christians Versus Muslims, 212.
Meinardus writes that “the attitude of the Copts toward the state depended heavily upon the attitude of the state, more often of the respective governor, to the Church.” One of the most important concepts for understanding this dynamic, then, is the term “dhimmis.” As defined by Meinardus, “The dhimmis are the non-Muslim residents in Muslim territory who had to pay a personal tax in recognition for their protection by the state.”

According to Islamic Law, the “people of the book,” including Jews, Christians and Sabians (often equated with Mandaeans), are eligible to be considered dhimmis and are not required to convert to Islam in order to exist under a strictly Islamic state.

The conditions for Copts as a “protected minority” are believed by some to be quite positive. Sohirin Mohammad Solihin, a Muslim scholar, writes in *Copts and Muslims in Egypt*, that Islam “guarantees free choice of religion,” a claim that many others would contest. Solihin, though, recognizes himself that many of the Copts do not consider dhimmi status to constitute Copts as “full partners in the nation.” The belief put forward by Solihin, that Copts are given freedom and are a part of the fabric of Egypt, aligns with the National

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129 Ibid., 343.
131 At least in terms of how it is enacted, see Hanna Interview and many of the essays presented in *Copts in Egypt: A Christian Minority Under Siege*.
132 Ibid., 71.
Unity discourse discussed in Chapter II. However, those with a more Persecution slant would offer a very different approach.

In a section of *Christian Egypt: Faith and Life* called “The Attitude of the State towards the Copts,” Meinardus describes the Islamic government as very conditionally tolerant towards the Copts. He argues that the government pursues a policy of “sufferance” as a compromise wherein Copts are allowed to practice, may keep the churches they have, and will not be forced to convert to Islam. However, they are not permitted to build any new churches and must not proselytize to Muslims.133

The larger issue, though, is that the Islamic government has created a milieu of Copts being subservient to Muslims. Meinardus writes that “the attitude of sufferance by the state was conditional upon the acceptance of an inferior social and political status.”134 He recognizes that many Copts have been employed by the civil service in Egypt, especially in the early years after the Arab invasion. However, Meinardus points out that these positions did not come with “power or prestige, for Christians were not placed in those positions where they could execute any authority over Muslims.”135

One example is the issue of military service. As a dhimmi population, Christians were protected under the government, but they were not permitted to

134 Ibid., 347.
135 Ibid., 347.
participate in military service. Solihin, a Muslim writer, describes Copts as being “freed from conscription.”136 This positive tone is not shared by Coptic writers such as Meinardus who explains that in Egyptian and Arab culture, military service is actually seen as a privilege137. While there are no legal or concrete benefits afforded to soldiers or veterans, these individuals do receive social capital and status. Therefore, one might understand government prevention of Copts serving in the military as, at best, preventing Copts from holding positions with “power or prestige” or at worst, an offensive maneuver implying that Copts cannot support their own country. In Chapter II, I noted Kawas’ assertion that there are Muslims who seek to intentionally prevent Christians from holding any power over Muslims. By preventing Christians from serving in the military, Muslims are able to prevent Christians from earning authoritative military and even political positions. This is an example of both structural violence, because it prevents Christians from gaining authority, as well as cultural violence, because of the cultural status that comes from fighting in the army. An Egyptian liberation theology must analyze and reject this violence in its call for liberation from legal injustice.

The final level of an Egyptian liberation theology must be a liberation from fear. This is related to the aforementioned levels because changes to social and legal pressures would improve the situation for Copts. However, fear is

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137 Meinardus, *Christians in Egypt*, 17.
connected most closely to direct violence against the Copts. In order for Copts to actually be liberated from this fear, the threat of direct violence must be removed. As we saw in our discussion of types of violence, structural and cultural violence bolster and justify direct violence. Therefore, a liberation theology for Copts must be holistic in its approach.

This final level is very closely related to one of Gutierrez’s principles, “liberation from the power of fate.” For Copts, the first step to actual action is to believe that change is possible. If the Copts are stuck believing that their situation will only worsen and if they have no hope for a better future, there is no motivation for the Church to fight against the government. Currently, the fear of violence has led to many Copts choosing to emigrate from Egypt.\(^\text{138}\) This is a reflection of the lack of hope they feel for their country. The Church needs to provide this hope, and develop a theology which encourages action to liberate Copts from the oppression they face on all three levels: from unjust political structures, from biased education and legal standards, and from fear caused by violence.

\(^{138}\) It has not been possible to determine an exact amount. Even the numbers of Christians in Egypt is a highly contested figure. However, several news sources as well as anecdotal evidence from informal interviews points strongly to this conclusion.
VI. Conclusions

In 2011, the world witnessed Egyptians standing against a tyrannical leader, President Mubarak. The protestors stood for democracy, for freedom, and yet in the years after the Revolution, Egypt has become an increasingly dangerous place for Christians. These same Christians have been systematically persecuted for centuries. Just this month, April of 2013, there was an attack on the central Coptic Cathedral: the seat of the Coptic papacy. Despite President Morsi assuring the Copts that they would be protected, rocks and fire bombs rained down on the Christians as they sought to mourn the death of one of their own earlier that week. Coptic families are faced with a choice to either remain in constant fear, or to leave their homes and emigrate. This thesis has tried to offer a third alternative, a framework for developing a Coptic liberation theology for the Coptic clerics to stand up to the government in the best interests of Christians in Egypt.

This study began by investigating the types of violence experienced by Copts in Egypt. Galtung’s theory of direct, structural and cultural violence allowed us to classify and analyze the violence against Christians. By describing these forms of violence as a triangle in which each affects, justifies and contributes to the other two, we can see that a holistic response is

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necessary. I also criticized some of Galtung’s conclusions about the conditions needed for a complete peace, and argued that the liberation theology I present by the end of this paper is an alternative solution for the Copts.

The next chapter used two central theories, persecution and national unity, presented by Sedra to understand the Coptic response to this persecution. Sedra showed that Copts typically viewed their identity as an integrated and necessary part of Egypt as a whole, represented by the national unity discourse, or Copts believed that they were more authentically Egyptian and were oppressed by the Muslims who invaded their country, represented by the persecution discourse. The perspective an individual had was often dictated by economic class, with more elites supporting national unity theory. Nonetheless, neither the national unity nor the persecution argument offers a solution to the persecution problem for Christians.

One reason for this is the structural violence embodied in the constitutions Egypt has had since its independence. The next chapter explored the development of these constitutions and looked specifically at articles pertaining to freedom of religion. I found that Article II, whose current wording began with the 1971 constitution, was the first step toward the Islamization of Egypt. In declaring Islam as the central source for law in Egypt in 1980, the writers of the constitution contradicted other clauses claiming to protect freedom of religion. In that chapter, I compared Egypt’s constitution with that of Bhutan. Although it comes from a very different culture and history with
diversity of religions, Bhutan’s constitution uses surprisingly similar language to essentially establish a state religion while also attempting to have freedom of belief. I argue that such a constitution, in both Bhutan and Egypt, is contradictory and does not provide freedom for minority groups.

Finally, I argue that within the context of Egypt, the Coptic Church, as an institution, needs to take a more active approach in their relationship with the government. I propose three important elements necessary to the development of a Coptic Liberation Theology, in addition to being contextually developed for Egypt and being engaged in praxis between thought and action. These three levels of liberation are: from unjust political structures, from biased education and legal standards, and from fear of violence.

While I do believe these aspects are all necessary in some form, the actual implementation of a Coptic liberation theology must come from within the Coptic community, and most likely the Coptic clergy. There are a lot of barriers to such a large change. First, there must be a willingness of clergy to change their perspective and approach to the government. The Coptic Church, however, is known for resisting change and innovation. It is important for the clergy to decide if they can hold onto their central beliefs for hundreds of years while still changing the application of those beliefs for the current situation.

Second, there is always a danger associated with political challenge. Given the already unstable relationship between Muslims and Christians, the result of a Coptic political revival seeking equal rights in Egypt has the potential
to turn more violent. For this reason, I believe that the Church must spend time seriously considering at what point they can no longer hope the state will improve the way it handles Muslim-Christian issues. It is important that any action be at the right time for Egypt in order to prevent an escalation of violence.

In response to the recent attack on the Coptic cathedral, a 24 year old Christian told Reuters that “Egypt is no longer my country… The situation of Christians is worsening from day to day. I’ve given up hope that things will improve.”140 Another man looking for an opportunity to emigrate said that “the attack on the cathedral was the crossing of a red line.”141 The Church must do something to protect its people because the state is not. The current Coptic Pope said, in response to the lack of state action, “we have seen enough committees being formed. We want action, not words.”142 I would say the same to the Pope Theodoros II: the Coptic clergy need to lead the way toward peace and liberation through action, not words.


141 Ibid.

142 Ibid.


Kamil, Murad. Coptic Egypt.


