

**The Role of Religion in Fostering Peaceful Relationships between
Christians and Muslims in Egypt**

by

Ibrahim Hariz

B.Sc., University of Al Asmarya, 2007

M.Sc., University of Al Asmarya, 2010

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Supervisor(s): John Valk, Ph.D., Renaissance College

Examining Board: Jason Bell, Ph.D., Dept. of Philosophy

Marica Cassis, Ph.D., Dept. of Classics and Religion,
University of Calgary

Anna Hamling, Ph.D., Dept. of Culture and Media
Studies

External Examiner: Linda Darwish, Ph.D., Dept. of Religious Studies,
St. Francis Xavier University

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Abstract

While religion is often seen as a source of conflict and tension between Egyptian Muslims and Christians, the teachings of Islam and Christianity have historically and in the present been sources of mutual tolerance and coexistence. Political speeches, religious teachings, practices, rituals and ceremonies, social gatherings, and institutions all play a role in demonstrating religious influence on peaceful relations.

My research shows that the teachings of Islam and Christianity can promote peace. It also focuses on how the teachings on peace, which are foundational to both Muslims and Christians worldwide, have also influenced the relationship between Christians (Catholics, Orthodox, Evangelical, and Protestant) and Muslims (Sunnis) in Egypt in the period c. 1950–2019. Further, it investigates the influence of those teachings on politics, socio-cultural behaviour, and religious education in Egypt by examining political speeches, religious practices, and institutions that encouraged tolerance and cooperation during the study period c. 1950-2019. It will be concluded that, conflicts notwithstanding, the teachings of Islam and Christianity have played an overall positive role in promoting peace between Christians and Muslims in Egypt.

Dedication

To my Mother and Father

Salma Salem AlMabsout

1951 – 2011

&

Beleid Suliman Hariz

1938 – 2012

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Introduction

The role that religion plays in conflicts between groups is well known and therefore needs to be openly acknowledged (Huntington, 2010; Dawkins, 2006). In his book, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, Christopher Hitchens (2007) states that religion inflames tribal and ethnic hostilities. For example, America's religious congregations continue to be significantly divided along ethnic and racial lines, and Asian Americans are less likely than whites, blacks, or Latinos to affiliate as Christian (Hitchens, 2007). Richard Dawkins (2013) makes the absurd statement that teaching religion to the young is child abuse, as some spiritual practices can result in the amputation of a limb for exorcism purposes. Sam Harris (2004) states that religion is "a net evil for civilisation, that Islam is especially hostile to the principles of a civil society, and that Muslim women are denied almost every human liberty, except to breed" (p. 9).

Given the role played by religion in promoting peace between groups, it is important here to define "religion." As a concept, it can have many different meanings. For example, the Oxford English Dictionary defines religion as the "belief and worship of a superhuman controlling power generally involving belief in a personal God or gods" (Patte, 2019, p. 119). This definition tells us that belief involves a god or gods, along with activities that are connected with this belief, such as prayer or worship in a building such as a church or temple (Jensen, 2019). Paul Tillich (2017) defined religion as concerned with ultimate questions, stressing faith's

existential dimension (Şener, 2018). Religion, for Tillich, deals with the fundamental questions of human life and provides a structure whereby people can seek to make sense of their existence. Rudolf Otto (1937) defined religion as an encounter with the numinous, mysterious, and awe-inspiring reality that elicits a sense of reverence and fascination. Otto's emphasis on the experience of the sacred contributed to the phenomenological understanding of religion. Clifford Geertz (2006) argued that religion is a cultural system of symbols that carry meanings in common. In his earlier book of essays, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Geertz (1973) explained that religion's system of symbols serves to organise and guide thinking about the world. The symbolic approach pioneered by Geertz showed how culture is involved in determining religious practices and meanings.

Émile Durkheim (2006) considered religion to be a system of beliefs and practices that unite a community of believers. He emphasised the social functions of religion, arguing that it provides a moral framework and a sense of collective identity (Malik, 2022). In his book *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim (2006) laid the foundation for the sociological study of religion. To him, religion is not merely a set of individual beliefs but a system of practices that fosters a sense of community and social cohesion. This view considers that religious teachings, rituals, and traditions bind people together, producing an identity for everyone that then strengthens social relations. In this regard, religion understood as incorporating beliefs, practices, religious teachings, and religious texts, can promote peaceful relationships by exhorting peace and encouraging different religious groups to treat each other with justice, love, and compassion.

Based on the above, religion is the observance of duties in both supernatural and natural (human) relationships and includes organised beliefs, practices, and systems that relate to the belief and worship of a higher force, such as a personal god. Beliefs, practices, religious teachings, rituals, and traditions can play an important role in promoting tolerance and peace between Christians and Muslims because they provide a moral framework and a sense of collective identity. Religion, then, can promote peaceful relationships that foster a sense of community and social cohesion.

Religious conflicts in Europe, India, Myanmar, Israel, and other Middle Eastern countries have been well documented and addressed (Hallward, 2018; Ullmann & Aung, 2017). Due to the banning of Muslim headscarves in schools and workplaces in several European countries, including Germany, France, the United Kingdom, Spain, Ireland, and Scotland, Europe saw a rise in religious tensions between 2014 and 2016. During this period, there were several terror attacks inspired by the Islamic State (Abdelkader, 2019; Sharma, 2020; Harris, 2005).

Terror attacks are not restricted to Europe, however. Communal violence between Hindus and Muslims in India and Pakistan has been occurring since the partition of India in 1947. The division of the country into essentially two religious zones (Hindus in India and Muslims in Pakistan) sparked deadly riots, gruesome violence, and mass migrations of Muslims to Pakistan and Hindus to India. In 2012,

the death toll from religious riots in India was nearly 93 people (Pew Research Center, 2018).

In general, religious conflict is caused by intolerance of religious beliefs or practices. Religious intolerance has recently led to the collective religious persecution of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar. More than 500,000 Rohingya had fled to Bangladesh by August 2017 due to the escalating brutality and repression by the Myanmar army (Abdelkader, 2017; Lloyd, 2017). Religious conflicts have also escalated dramatically between Sunni and Shia Muslims in the subcontinent and the Middle East, especially in Syria and Iraq, which has caused massive displacements of Sunnis and Shia in both countries (Pillai, 2021; Pruitt, 2019). Since the US invasion of Iraq toppled Saddam Hussein, Shias have claimed power. It is a factor behind the rise of radical Sunni groups, such as Monotheism and Jihad (Jama'at al-Tawhid wa'l-Jihad) and the Army al-Ta'ifa al-Mansoura group (Jaysh al-Ta'ifa al-Mansoura, the Army of the Victorious Sect), to target mosques, shrines, weddings, and funeral processions. In 2008 alone, 1,121 suicide bombers blew themselves up in Iraq (Black, 2015).

Other conflicts premised on religious intolerance include the historical conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, which has caused millions of Sunni Arab Palestinians to suffer, along with the loss of tens of thousands of Palestinian lives (Abdulmajid, 2018; Tamir, 2010). The main contentions between the two groups concern the sanctity of holy sites and the historical narratives of both religions, with both groups claiming the right to create a nation-state of their own. The religious Zionists in Israel see themselves as guardians of how the Jewish state should be,

while Islamist groups such as Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and Hamas in Palestine advocate for the liberation of the holy territories (Sotirovic, 2020; Shimron, 2021).

Meanwhile, in Kosovo, the Meja Massacre was committed by Serbs against Muslim Albanians in 1999, increasing the complexity of the problem between them (Smock, 2008; Carmines, 2015). The conflict was sparked when Serb security forces killed 45 Kosovo Albanians in retaliation for Kosovo's ethnic-Albanian attack on four Serb police officers (Chang, 2019). The KLA majority is now demanding recognition as a sovereign state after unilaterally declaring independence in 2008. In contrast, Serbia vows never to agree to the secession of what it considers its historic heartland, which is home to ancient holy sites belonging to the Serbian Orthodox Church (Savic, 2020). These examples confirm that religious differences underlie some of the world's conflicts.

Another ethno-religious war is currently taking place in the Philippines, where conflicts in Mindanao City have been portrayed as Christians versus Muslims. What has exacerbated the violence in Mindanao is socioeconomic and political discrimination against the Muslim minority by the Christian majority (Kamlan, 2011; Buendia, 2006; Abanes & Kanas & Scheepers, 2015), leaving many conservative Muslims feeling underrepresented in the Philippine political system. This has led to violence between the state and Muslim separatist movements in Mindanao (Abinales, 2017).

Similarly, Indonesia has experienced numerous incidents of communal violence between the Muslim majority and the Christian minority (Arifianto, 2010; Crisis, 2001). For example, violent acts erupted after a meeting of Christian youth groups in the city of Kupang to protest the burning of churches in Jakarta in 1998 in what has become known as the "Ketapang tragedy" (Human Rights Watch, 1998). In 1999, it was estimated that around 5000 people were killed in Maluku, North Maluku, and Poso in Central Sulawesi. In 2017, the city of Cabo Delgado in Mozambique witnessed violence between Christians and ISIS-affiliated extremists. The violent acts included the kidnapping and killing of civilians, as well as the destruction of entire villages (Chandler, 2022; Lima, 2022). Due to the growth of extremist groups such as Boko Haram and radical Fulani herdsmen, Nigeria experienced the Kaduna Sharia riots of 2000 and the Bauchi riots in 2001, which resulted in the deaths of hundreds of Muslims and Christians and the displacement of thousands more, along with the destruction of private and public property (Fox, 2021; Abubakar, 2019).

These conflicts and tensions often surface through the actions of small radical groups and frequently result in bloodshed and the loss of life. Atrocities committed by the Islamic State (ISIS), the events of September 11th in the United States, and the murder of Charlie Hebdo journalists in Paris are but a few examples of violent acts committed by extremists (Brahm, 2005; Silvestri, Sara, & Mayall, James, 2015). Religion-instigated violence against women is also well known and documented. The case of Malala Yousafi, the Pakistani student who survived a

brutal attack on her school by the Taliban, is perhaps one of the more egregious examples of this form of violence (Kastner, 2018; Harris, 2006).

Although tensions and conflicts such as those delineated above can challenge everyday life for the groups and individuals involved, could it be possible that such tensions and conflicts caused by religion are the exception and peaceful relations are the norm? Could it be possible that religious differences are often part of larger issues and that so-called religious wars are more political, cultural, and economic in nature, with religion frequently used as a convenient cover that then minimises certain real conflicts and tensions? Can we thus challenge the popular notions that “religion causes most wars” and “religion promotes violence”? There are various explanations for the apparent causal relationship between religion and violence, but scholars and writers have yet to reach a consensus regarding whether religion is actually at the heart of most societal conflicts (Barton, 2012; Barnett, 2013; Cavanaugh, 2009; Armstrong, 2014; Haynes, 2020; Deutsche, 2011).

According to Barnett (2013), religion per se has not contributed to conflicts between Muslims and Christians. Barton (2012) explains that “when we examine phenomena as complex as the current social and political upheavals at the heart of the Muslim world, religion is but one part of the story” (p. 415). Cavanaugh (2009), Armstrong (2014), and others suggest that only about 17% of conflicts around the world have been fueled by religion. Deutsche (2011) argues that religious tensions are the product of political and historical upheaval, not the catalyst. Haynes (2020) also sees that conflict and violence may be intimately linked to non-religious issues, including ethnicity, gender, culture, class, power, land, and wealth. Such strains and

stresses may be played out within countries, such as, for example, Northern Ireland, Nigeria, Fiji, Cyprus, Palestine, and Sri Lanka.

In Northern Ireland, the religious conflict between Protestants and Catholics yielded to political demands when it was finally acknowledged that the Protestants were overrepresented in the political realm and therefore had a greater impact than the Catholics on how the nation was governed. For example, Protestants wanted Northern Ireland to remain part of the United Kingdom, whereas Catholics wanted the country to leave the United Kingdom and become part of the Republic of Ireland (UKEssays, 2018; Aufrechter, 2013).

Halfway around the world from Northern Ireland, a host of other issues, such as ethnicity and competition for power and resources, led to long-simmering conflicts in Nigeria. For example, in 2001, riots were triggered between Islamist Fulani herders and the Christian Anaguta people. The Fulani are based in northern Nigeria, but due to desertification, they are being forced southwards in search of water and grazing pastures. The Christians felt the Fulani were starting to encroach on their land, and a conflict erupted (Fox, 2021; Abubakar, 2019).

In Sri Lanka, the ethnic conflict of the two predominant religions – the Buddhist majority and the Tamil Hindu minority – had its political roots in the 1983–2009 period, leading to an outbreak of civil war in the city of Mannar (Bhat, n.d.; Karunaratne, 2018). The problems manifested when the state introduced legislation to promote Buddhist nationalism in the country. As a result, the Hindu

identity in the district was erased and Sri Lankan Hindus felt excluded from the political system.

The origins of the current Israeli-Palestinian conflict can be traced back to land and border disputes that erupted when the country of Israel was formally created in 1948 (Hil, 2022; Tamir, 2010). Israel has asserted that Jews have a right to Palestine since it is their ancestral homeland (Bradley, 2018; Centre for Preventive Action, 2022).

In Cyprus, ethnic issues are the main cause of the conflict between the majority of Greek Cypriot people (Christian Orthodox) and the Turkish Cypriot minority (Muslims) (Navarro, 2017; Michelopoulos, 2007). For example, in 1974, a Greek military coup following outbreaks of violence between ethnic Greeks and Turks led to a Turkish invasion of the northern part of the island (Lucente, 2021; Dağlı, 2017).

Ethnicity also plays a major role in the ethno-political divisions and resulting conflicts between the Indo-Fijian and indigenous Fijian communities. Widespread chaos created by Indigenous nationalists in 2000 led to the establishment of an Indigenous nationalist government, which re-instituted ethnic discrimination against Indo-Fijians. Therefore, one of the primary reasons provided by the military leader, Frank Bainimarama, for the 2006 coup was to change these ethnically focused political structures. It was not a religious war (Ramesh, 2010; Cretton, 2005).

According to Gardner (2021) and Wadekar, Neha, and Ram (2021), the recent conflicts in Mozambique were motivated by various factors but were blamed

on religious differences. For instance, wealthy Christians were viewed as unfairly enjoying the fruits of the socioeconomic development of Cabo Delgado, which contains the largest and richest liquid natural gas (LNG) project in Africa (Bussotti, 2021; Lima, 2022). The economic disparity between these Christians and other religious groups prompted the beginnings of an insurgency in 2017, which later became "internationalised" as the insurgents gained support from ISIS. The trigger for the dispute, however, was who should profit from LNG.

The above review of different conflicts over the past 70 years shows that, in most cases, these conflicts cannot be categorised as solely religious. In fact, Harpviken and Røislien (2008) pointedly state: "[n]o conflict is solely about religion" (p. 7). Rather, a multitude of other conflicts are also clearly involved, such as ethnic (Sri Lanka, Fiji, Nigeria, and Cyprus) or political (Northern Ireland and the Israeli-Palestinian) conflicts. Therefore, it is imperative that we dig deeper into the role religion may play in promoting peace and averting conflict rather than fomenting it. A report released by the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP) outlines that religious leaders such as Desmond Tutu, Mahatma Gandhi, and Martin Luther King played pivotal roles in building peace in the 20th century (IEP, 2015).

Religion has often contributed to shaping peaceful relationships between various religious groups (Lama, 2012; Schmidt & Usarski, 2007). According to Lama (2012), religion teaches moral precepts such as love and peace through spiritual practice. For example, Buddhism teaches us to view all people as brothers and sisters and to show our gratitude by loving them all (Lama, 2012). Schmidt and Usarski (2007) argue that religion can make people more tolerant and open-minded.

For example, 77% of Hindus believe in karma, which is the "law of justice" in Buddhism. Also, 81% of Buddhists believed in the purifying power of the Ganges for Hindus, which is the river that allegedly cures illnesses and washes away sins (Pew survey, 2021). Buddhists regard the Hindu ritual as an attempt to enact justice and thus have respect for the Hindu religion, and this contributes to harmony between the two religious groups (Pew survey, 2021).

According to Smock (2016), the contribution that religion can make to peacemaking—as the flip side of religious conflict—is only beginning to be explored and explained. Research by the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP) (2014) has shown that religion can be an effective driver of peace within countries. According to its report:

Religion can be the motivator or catalyst for bringing about peace through ending conflict as well as helping to build strong social cohesion. Furthermore, religion can act as a form of social cohesion, and, like membership in other groups, greater involvement in society can strengthen the bonds between citizens and strengthen the bonds of peace.

In India, Hindus and Buddhists share a common heritage and common practices that promote good will and comradeship (Luce, 2012; Subedi, 2003). For example, Hindus and Buddhists meet on a regular basis at the “World Conference of Religions for Peace” (Schmidt & Usarski, 2007). Throughout the historical Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Jews and Palestinians have engaged in cultural and religious practices (Abu-Nimer, 2003; Ben-Lulu & Feldman, 2021). For example, in 2015,

Rabbi Mira Raz and Sheikh Ihab Balha sought to develop initiatives of coexistence and peacemaking by heading the Daniel Reform congregation in Jaffa (Ben-Lulu & Feldman, 2021). The Daniel Reform congregation, which is a Hebrew-speaking Christian community comprised of "Messianic Jews" (i.e., Jews who follow Jesus), invites Muslim residents of Jaffa to participate in rituals incorporating Christian and Muslim and Jews clergy and prayers, which promote neighbourly relationships (Ben-Lulu & Feldman, 2021).

Meanwhile, indigenous African religions such as Yoruba, Zulu, and Igbo hold family relations and kinship in such high regard that even tribal differences do not destroy strong family units (Karade, 1994; Chiorazzi, 2019). In Igbo and Zulu families, children are brought up to value family, attend large family gatherings, and learn to interact with their extended family members and elders from other religions (Dunmade, 2022). Kenyan indigenous traditional practice shares places of worship both to practice their religion and to socialise with friends, family, and acquaintances (Scroope, 2018; Eldon, 2015). Many Kenyans incorporate traditional beliefs into their practice of Christianity, such as the belief in a spirit world inhabited by the souls of ancestors.

Family and neighbourhood gatherings are also highlighted in Indonesia, where Christians and Muslims participate in each other's religious festivals and gather together at weddings and funerals, fostering a sense of community with each other (Waardenburg, 2004; Hutagalung, 2016; Lattu, 2019). One example is the Christian village of Passo and the Muslim village of Batumerah. A marriage took place between people from the two villages, who differ culturally and religiously

(Marshall, 2019), and both villages celebrated in union. In Albania, interreligious harmony is also promoted through intermarriage (O’Connell, 2014; Rowland, 2017; East European Quarterly, 2012). According to Thomas (2013), inter-religious marriages are now so common as to be completely unremarkable in Albania, including marriages between Muslims and Christians, and Albanians take pride in the spirit of tolerance and understanding that prevails among them.

Beyond the family and community level, local religious leaders from religious organisations in Mozambique, such as Ahl al-Sunna and Sufi revival groups, organise religious meetings to forge new paths towards peace between Muslims and Christians (Sicard, 2008; Bonate, 2010). According to the Report on International Religious Freedom (2018), Sunni leaders at the national level called for religious tolerance and condemned the use of religion to condone violence. In 2021, Muslim and Christian leaders gathered in Pemba to discuss how religion could bring peace back to Cabo Delgado (Lima, 2022).

All the examples mentioned above highlight the notion that interreligious engagement practices appear to create an understanding between Christians and Muslims, which strengthens their communal ties (Küng, 2009; Abu Nimer, 2003; Haynes, 2009; Bekele, 2015). As Küng (2009) sums it up, “There is no peace among the nations without peace among the religions” (p. 4). Abu Nimer (2003) argues that one should not view religious identity as a destructive force but as a source of cooperation. According to Haynes (2009), the three Abrahamic religions share a broadly similar set of theological and spiritual values and views, such as belief in one God, and this potentially underpins their ability to provide positive contributions

to conflict resolution and peacebuilding. Bekele (2015) suggests that focusing on peacebuilding in collaboration with other worship and faith traditions can create unity.

Peace as a core element of religion, contributing to peaceful relations in society, politics, and culture throughout history, has received heightened attention recently in religious studies (Odak, 2020; Pohl, 2009). Based on interviews with Christian and Muslim leaders in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Odak (2020) offers an analysis of the main post-conflict challenges, such as forgiveness and reconciliation. He also provides a number of new concepts for peacebuilding, such as the responsibility of forgiveness, degree zero of reconciliation, ecumene of compassion, and phantom memories. Pohl (2009) suggests that Islamic values such as human dignity and social justice, when promoted through Islamic education vehicles in Indonesia such as Muslim schools and colleges, can achieve lasting harmony and peace among religious groups in that nation.

Religion is also increasing as a focus of discussion beyond local community organisations (Rowe, 2016; Armstrong, 2014; Valk & Selçuk, 2018). Rowe (2016) explores the activities of global religious movements, finding a wide array of actors involved in development and peace advocacy and contributing to the cultural vitality of global society. For example, some of the world's largest relief and development organisations are rooted in religion, including World Vision, Caritas, the Aga Khan Foundation, and Compassion International. Through the increasing participation of religious actors, Rowe believes that the growth of religion can wield a positive influence on political behaviour.

In looking at historical events that were considered templates of conflicts between Christians and Muslims, Armstrong (2014) argues that religion was not the cause of most violence in history, especially recent violence. For example, the First and Second World Wars were not caused by religion; Stalin's gulags were also not inspired by religion; and the Young Turks who massacred Armenians were avowed atheists.

Valk and Selçuk (2017) focus on education as a way to learn about religion. Because religion is often misunderstood due to imbalances in the manner in which it is portrayed, the authors see schools as ideal places for students to interact with religion and religious issues. For example, religious education in schools can show that the conflicts between Catholics and Protestants in Ireland in the latter part of the 20th century were not due to belief differences but rather to political and socio-economic differences.

Harpviken and Røislien (2008) argue that religious actors can make peace by focusing on what they consider to be the three facets of religion: norms, identity, and organisation. Further, the authors contend that religious peacemakers can offer perspectives on the roots of a conflict, offer alternative meeting spaces, and bring moral credibility to the search for solutions. For example, the Good Friday Accords involved religious leaders from both Protestant and Catholic Christians who used religion to help bring the long, bloody years of the Troubles in Northern Ireland to a close. However, even if religious actors play an important role in some peace processes, they may also play a role in initiating conflict with others. ISIS in Iraq is

one such religious group. In addition, not all religious actors get involved in conflict resolution.

Van Gorder (2014) reports that Islam today is not inherently violent, arguing that the primacy of social justice and the quest for peace are central parts of Islam. He contends that Christianity, Islam, and Judaism share a common justice-oriented foundational value based on peace. In contrast, he overlooked the existence of extremist religious groups that have created conflicts, such as Christianity's Lord's Resistance Army or the Taiping Rebellion, Islam's ISIS, and Judaism's Lehava.

In related research, Alhashmi, Bakali and Baroud (2020) examine the role that religion plays in the education system in the United Arab Emirates. They conclude that utilising religious-based instructions promotes peace in the entire nation, as it teaches tolerance among students while in school, which then extends to tolerance in their interactions outside school (Alhashmi, Bakali & Baroud, 2020).

From the same perspective, Haynes (2020) concludes that religious leaders and faith-based organisations (FBOs) can play constructive roles in helping end violence. In some cases, FBOs can even help establish proactive peace via early warnings of conflict. They can also help negotiate and facilitate peace once conflict has erupted, such as through reconciliation and trust-building between the parties to the dispute, along with advocacy and mediation (Haynes, 2020). Haynes points to the following examples:

Peace was restored through intermediation undertaken by the Quakers and financed by the Ford Foundation in the Nigerian Civil War in 1967–1970, the work of the World Council of Churches and the All Africa Conference of Churches in mediating a cessation to the Sudan conflict in 1972, efforts made by John Paul Lederach, Professor of International Peacebuilding at the University of Notre Dame, in Nicaragua in the 1980s, and the more recent work of the Imam of Timbuktu in seeking to end various conflicts in West Africa. (Conflict and Resolution Forum 2001, p. 658)

These and other efforts like them attest to the success of the timely building of peace initiatives between groups experiencing conflict with each other.

Similarly, Chowdury (2018) looks at Islam's role in promoting global peace by exploring several Middle East crises. He reports that more people are converting to Islam than to any other religion, because they believe it advocates for peace and other rights that foster peaceful coexistence. He also challenges the conventional perception of Islam created by the Western media, which typically portrays it as a violent religion favoured by terrorists. His research confirms that Islam is integral to enhancing peace through activism that stresses non-violent approaches.

Zaduqisti et al.'s (2020) research aligns with Chowdury's (2018) research, showing that Islamic teachings promote moderation and peace. Zaduqisti and colleagues (2020) affirm that "Islamic moderateness is said to be one of the key factors that contribute to the promotion of peace in Muslim societies" (p. 3). Their research includes an investigation of tolerance between non-Muslims and Muslims

to gauge whether tolerance is universal to all groups or discriminatory based on religion. Although political speeches are dominated by peace-seeking messages and the condemnation of war and potential outgroup differences, mixing religion with political discourse often gives rise to instances of inequality and intolerance. For example, after the September 11, 2001, attacks in the United States, then-president George W. Bush talked about the need for a "crusade" in the Middle East (Krieger, 2007).

Although the above scholars diverge somewhat in their research approaches, they all appear to arrive at the same conclusion: that religion promotes universal love and peace. Specifically, Armstrong and Van Gorder (2014) use historical sources and events; Haynes (2020); Rowe and Chowdury (2018); De Juan and Vüllers (2010); Harpviken and Røislien (2008); and Zaduqisti et al. (2020) use literature reviews, journals, books, and relevant research studies; and Valk and Selçuk apply a worldview. Yet all of the authors find a common pivot point in the capacity of religion to foster peace between the groups. They thus elevate the importance of religion to achieve peace and position religion as a connector between the groups.

Given the centrality of the notion of peace to religion, it is important here to define "peace." As a concept, it can have many different meanings. It could mean, for instance, that there is no longer any conflict, that a war has ended (Anderson, 2004; Webel, 2019), or that violence in all its manifestations is nonexistent (Galtung, 1996: 9). In this sense, the definition of peace can be used as the semantic basis or point of departure to define the concept of war (Darash, 2017; Andrews,

2004). The absence of war or conflict, however, does not automatically mean peace for society, as there are other social factors that come into play (Andrews, 2004; Al-Shatibi, 2004), such as injustice, discrimination, poverty, terror, repression, and intimidation. If a country has a high level of these factors, it cannot be considered a peaceful nation, regardless of the absence of war (Sayeed, 2018; Eroglu, 2013).

Sayeed (2018) distinguished between negative peace, which is simply the absence of war, and positive peace, which is the presence of justice. “Positive peace” is much broader and encompasses aspects that go beyond war and violence. According to Eroglu (2013), peace is rooted in the human condition, which in turn is rooted in justice and harmonious existence with the environment. Webel (2019) argued that peace can be defined as harmony in human or personal relations that involves mutual concord and esteem (Kutlutürk, n.d.). For Martín (2005), “positive peace” refers to attitudes, institutions, and structures that create and sustain peaceful societies. In fact, the concept of peace as concord, harmony, or tranquilly rests heavily on the right relationship or harmony between two parties or people. From this broad perspective, it can be argued that peace cannot be viewed as merely the absence of war but as a positive concept that describes a harmonious relationship.

In view of the foregoing, peace, according to the above definitions, has always been a major focal point for Christians and Muslims. Many spiritual practices and beliefs revolve around peace, which is particularly important in Christianity and Islam. Furthermore, peace is closely related to the notion of a harmonious relationship that can be achieved by following the teachings in sacred texts and by fostering and building a positive connection with others. In addition to

the absence of violence, the concept of positive peace is also associated with many other social characteristics that are considered desirable, including mutual concord, mutual esteem, and harmony between groups. Peace as a broad concept is therefore not confined to the absence of conflict but establishes itself as an independent and positive position that denotes harmonious relationships based on the presence of justice.

The term “peaceful relationships” refers to interpersonal interactions that do not use violence, duress, constraint, or exploitation to achieve peaceful goals (Shyjan, 2017; Job, 2017). According to Shyjan (2017), peaceful relationships start with accepting the notion of coexistence with others, which implies the need for mutual trust and respect and the desire to cooperate in areas of common interest. A peaceful relationship is one that is at peace, claims Job (2017). However, the phrase “at peace” does not guarantee the total absence of conflict. Rather, it implies the presence of justice and the creation of conditions in which humans can realise their full potential.

There are many principles in Islamic and Christian teachings that provide a foundation for the culture of peaceful relationships (Ramadan, 2003; Thowhidul, 2018; Khan, 2019). For example, Tariq Ramadan (2003) stressed that the Qur'an includes numerous passages encouraging peaceful coexistence with people of other faiths, such as “O mankind, we created you all from a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another” (Al-Hujurâ, 49). This verse clearly indicates that there should not be any discrimination based on clan, colour, gender, or race (Thowhidul, 2018). Moreover, Abdul Aziz Said and John L.

Esposito (Zagoon-Sayeed, 2018) explain that peace has everything to do with justice and mercy, which means that the basic principle of Islam, whether in relations with Muslims or non-Muslims, is interaction, peace, tolerance, and friendship (Khan, 2019). Islam encourages dialogue, understanding, and cooperation between different peoples to achieve peaceful relations (Khan, 2019).

There are still a lot of unanswered questions about religion's beneficial effects, even though they have been widely acknowledged in recent studies. Rather than going into greater detail or explaining how and why religion is important for peacebuilding, several of the scholarly books that are now available have a tendency to paint a broad picture of religion. In casting a wide net, these scholars often ignore the teachings of Islam and Christianity and focus instead on social and political movements. Furthermore, religious scholars' engagement remains relatively limited regarding the influence of religion on political, social, cultural, and educational fields. For example, De Juan and Vüllers (2010), Harpviken and Røislien (2008), and Haynes (2020) focus on the religious leaders and elites who play constructive roles in helping peacemaking. However, although they describe peace initiatives in their research, they do not show the effects of those initiatives. Moreover, despite Van Gorder (2014), Chowdury (2018), and Zaduqisti et al. (2020) agreeing that religious teachings have a major influence in promoting peace between groups, their engagement remains relatively limited regarding the influence of religion on political, social, cultural, and educational fields.

By exploring the teachings of Islam and Christianity, the present thesis focuses on how religion has contributed more to peaceful interactions and

understandings in social, cultural, and political affairs. Islam and Christianity are currently the world's two largest religions. In exploring these belief systems, the research seeks to answer the following question: How have Islam and Christian teachings on peace contributed to peaceful interactions between Muslims and Christians in political, cultural, social, and educational areas, and what have been the results? The research will look specifically at religious communities in Egypt to examine how religion promoted peaceful relationships between Sunni Muslims and Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant Christians.

Peaceful Relations in Egyptian History

A positive relationship between Muslims and Christians in Egypt, while not always evidenced, has nonetheless been characteristic of a large part of its history, perhaps to find alternative ways to engage rather than to conquer and suppress minority groups (Michel, 1995; Andrawes, 2019). The long-term peaceful coexistence between the two communities in Egypt, based partially on defending their country and protecting their mutual beliefs, can be a model for peaceful relations for countries that have a similar majority/minority religious and/or ethnic divide (Ivanova, 2020). In the seventh century, during the time of Prophet Muhammad, the active development of Muslims and Christians's relations began through the historic covenant (a Charter of Privileges). In the mediaeval period, Christians experienced a variety of social constraints and religious discrimination, including increasingly rigorous tax policies. In the Modern Period, the integration of Christians in the social and political structure of Egypt occurred to implement equal citizenship for Copts and Muslims (Andrawes, 2019; Ivanova, 2020). I argue that

Egypt dealt with its majority Muslim and minority Christian interactions uniquely throughout its history, which was largely a peaceful one. This has continued in the present. In other words, Egypt was unique in dealing with its majority/minority religious population divide. The main goal of this section is to trace historical events that can be considered either negative or positive discrimination and their influence on the positive relationship between Muslims and Christians in Egypt. Ivanova (2020) defines negative discrimination as the special treatment of an individual or group based on their actual or perceived membership in a certain group or social category” (p. 27). He also defined “positive discrimination” as a complex of measures that give special advantages to a discriminated minority (Ivanova, 2020). The question of the balance between positive and negative discrimination as an instrument of positive relationships between Muslims and Christians can be unique in dealing with the majority/minority religious population divide. The chronological frameworks of the section are the time of Prophet Muhammad, the Crusades, and the Modern Period.

Time of Muhammad

Guenther (1999) wrote that in Egypt, the peaceful relations between Christianity and Islam are deeper than the centuries of conflict would lead one to think. According to Rauch (1995), positive relations between Coptic Christians and Muslims have mainly been affected by historical factors. Already early, the Prophet Muhammad advised his companions: “If God bestows His grace on you to conquer [Egypt], take mutual advice from its inhabitants [and] have marital kinship with them” (Solihin, 1991). With the

inception of Islam in the seventh century, according to Dickens (2000), Prophet Muhammad sent official letters to different regions, their cities, and their rulers, inviting them to join Islam. For example, one invitation was sent to Najran. Interestingly, in the seventh century, when the Najran delegation reached Madina, Prophet Muhammad allowed them to pray in the mosque (Masjid al-Nabawi), where the Muslims prayed. This was the first meeting between Christians and Muslims. It was also the first time that Christians prayed in a mosque (Solihin, 1991). According to Berkley (2003), "certain ritual and conceptual parallels are especially strong between Islam and Christianity as understood and experienced by the Christians of Syria, Iraq, and Egypt" (p. 37). For example, the Qur'an holds Mary in high regard and refers to Jesus as Ibn Maryam, the "Son of Mary."

According to Khalid (2013), in 628 C.E., the Prophet Mohammed gave the monks of Saint Catherines a Charter of Privileges that contained a pledge to maintain their churches and priests, assistance and protection from Muslims, and a guaranteed right to property (Dawa, 2017). The following is the pledge made to St. Catherine:

This is a message from Muhammad ibn Abdullah: As a covenant to those who adopt Christianity, we are with them near and far. Verily, I, the servants, the helpers, and my followers defend them because Christians are my citizens, and by God! I hold out against anything that displeases them. Being with them is not required. It is not appropriate to remove the monks from their monasteries or the judges from their positions. Muslims who practice their religion are

prohibited from having anything brought into, destroyed, or broken into their homes. Someone who took one of these would be a disobedient prophet, breaking God's covenant. They have my secure charter against everything they detest, and they are, in fact, my allies. No one is to force them to travel or to oblige them to fight. The Muslims are to fight for them. It is not appropriate for a Christian woman to marry a Muslim man without her consent. It is not appropriate to stop her from going to her church to pray. We should show respect for their churches. Neither the sanctity of their covenants nor their ability to mend them should be hindered. Until the end of time, no Muslim country is allowed to break the pact (Morrow, 2013).

Seventh Century

Under the leadership of the second Caliph, Umar ibn al-Khattab, during the Islamic Caliphate that Amr Bin Al-As established in 639 CE (Al Tabar, 2008; Morton, 2012; Armstrong, 2002), Amr ibn al-As consented to permit the Egyptian Christians to continue practicing their religion. This is the Amr bin al-As Pact:

This is the text of the covenant for protection of one's self, religion, property, churches, crucifixes, land, and waterways that 'Amr ibn al 'As gave to the people of Misr. It is incumbent upon the people of Misr, if they agree on the terms of this covenant, and when the rise of the Nile water comes to a halt, to afford the jizya, to give fifty million dirhams. They will have to account for the crimes committed by robbers among them. The covenant of Allah and His

protection, along with that of His Messenger, the Khalifah, the Commander of the Faithful, and the protection bestowed by all Muslims, are assurances for the contents of this document. (Al Tabar, 2008).

Egypt's stability and the peaceful coexistence of Muslims and Christians are directly attributable to the historic agreement. The agreement makes clear how crucial tolerance between Christians and Muslims was to both parties. Christians were free to practice their religion throughout this period of peace and safety, despite the fact that they were considered dhimmis, or subjects, but protected individuals.

There were some restrictions on Coptic Christians during the Umayyad (661–750 CE) and Abbasid (750–1258 CE) caliphates (Kan, 2023; Raseef, 2016). According to Kan (2023), these were imposed from time to time and typically involved special rules, such as an increase in the jizya, a tax imposed on non-Muslims. Raseef (2016) notes that the Righteous Caliphs, who are the first four caliphs of the Islamic community, known in Muslim history as Abū Bakr (reigned 632–634), ‘Umar (reigned 634–644), ‘Uthmān (reigned 644–656), and ‘Alī (reigned 656–661), prompted the rulers of Egypt to collect as much jizya money as they could, while Colello (1987) explains that “Umayyad and Abbasid rulers were asked to pay special taxes against Christians” (p. 13). The most violent challenge that Caliph Al-Ma’mun faced in the Abbasid state, according to Abd Rabbo (2019), was the successive uprisings led by the Copts (767 and 831), especially in the Delta region (known as the Pashmurian Revolution). The unrest was triggered by protests against the policies of Al-Ma’mun, which discriminated against Copts and intended to impose additional taxes. To stop the revolution, Al-Ma'mun sent an army from

Baghdad to Egypt, which committed many massacres against the Copts (Abd Rabbo, 2019). Overall, the increase in taxes during the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates led to sporadic conflicts between Muslims and Christians.

Saleh (2012) points out that taxation in Islamic Egypt had, for the first time in Egyptian history, a moral connection to the flow of the Nile. In other words, no one was charged if the Nile did not flow, but people were taxed if the Nile rose to the point where it allowed for planting and harvesting (Saleh, 2012; Mansour, 2005). Moreover, taxes were collected not only from the cadastral side but also from Muslims, who had to pay zakat, and alms were collected along with the tax (Khalil, 2023). According to Ivanova (2020), the taxation imposed on Copts was a form of "positive discrimination," defined as a complex of measures that gives special advantages to a discriminated minority (Ivanova, 2020).

Shakroun (2002) suggests that there might have been political reasons for the jizya tax on Christians in the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates. According to Tajer (2020), the aim of the taxes was to create remedies that would lessen the state of decline that was experienced by them throughout that time. A state requires money to keep it going (Sicker, 2000), but during Muhammad's time, there was no Arab empire to administer; indeed, there was neither a government nor a full-time army to support. Now, some eighty-six years later, the situation is radically different. The Muslim domain no longer consisted of the relatively small communities of Mecca and Medina and the tribes of the desert. The empire that was administered from Egypt was vast and demanded ever larger amounts of money to keep it going. (Sicker, 2000, p. 76)

Moreover, the wars against Constantinople would have paralysed the Islamic army, as it had to be compensated. As Armstrong (2002) notes, Jizya was like the present-day national defence tax. At the same time, there were exemptions for the poor, females, children, slaves, monks, and hermits, as the tax was on able-bodied males of military age only. The jizya levied on Christians was to enable the state to protect their lives and property during times of war, as unlike Muslims, Christians were not required to join the army (Sahas, 1996; Sicker, 2000).

In the Umayyad state, variations in the status and prevalence of jizya—a kind of persecution against religious minorities—are not a prominent characteristic. On the other hand, the jizya was often quite moderate. According to Al-Duri (1995):

It appears that the Umayyads did not increase the rate of jizya in Egypt, except in rare cases... [and] the sum of jizya was never so large to the extent that the men were unable to pay, as jizya never exceeded four dinars under the Umayyad rule. (p. 31)

It would be incorrect to attribute the imposition of jizya simply to Muslims being intolerant of Christians, but many writers have done so, assuming that the increase in jizya was punishment for Christians because they did not convert to Islam. However, Morton (2012) explains that this tax was not imposed on the Christians, as some would have us think, as a penalty for their refusal to accept the Muslim faith. Rather, it was paid by them in common with the other dhimmis or non-Muslim subjects of the state whose religion precluded them from serving in the army, in return for the protection secured for them by the arms of the Muslims. When the people of Hirah contributed the sum agreed upon, they expressly mentioned that they paid this jizya

on condition that the Muslims and their leader protect us from those who would oppress us, whether they be Muslims or others. (p. 18)

Also, if it were meant to be a punishment for Christians, monks and the clergy would not have been exempted from paying jizya, which they were.

It is evident that there is no reason to assume a state of persecution for Christians based on the increase in jizya, where "there was protection of the taxpayer against any excess or unjust oppression" (Al Qrdawi, 1980; Arnold, 1990). By contrast, jizya should be perceived, rather in the political sense, as a tax arising from financial need (Ahmad, 1997; Arnold, 1990). So, a proper understanding of the jizya system in the Umayyad and Abbasid states reveals there was no persecution against Christians (Al Qrdawi, 1980).

Tolerance and coexistence between Christians and Muslims during the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates were an everyday reality (Coope, 1993; Al-Razi, 1970; Winter, 2003; Kan, 2023). Will Durant explains that "during the Umayyad Caliphate, Christians enjoyed a degree of tolerance that we do not find these days. They were free to practice the rituals of their religion, and they kept their churches" (Saleh, 2012, p. 67). The English historian Sir Thomas Arnold stated in his book *Preaching of Islam*: "Muslims have treated Arab Christians with great tolerance since the first century AD, and this tolerance continued in successive centuries... [We can truly judge that the Christian tribes that embraced Islam embraced it willingly." (p. 44). Saleh (2012) echoed this sentiment: "Christian Arabs who live today among Muslim groups are a witness to this tolerance" (p. 54). There is no

doubt that the countries under Muslim rule, including Egypt, have tolerance and coexistence between Christians and Muslims.

In dealing with the subject of Christian persecution, Saleh quotes the orientalist Douzi in his book *Considerations in the History of Islam*, saying: “The tolerance and kind treatment of Muslims towards the people of the Dhimmah led to their acceptance of Islam, and that they saw in its ease and simplicity that they were not accustomed to in their previous religions” (Saleh, 2012, p. 88). According to Ibn Kathir (2002), the early years of the rule of the Umayyad caliph Umar II (717–720) were especially characterised by tolerance. For example, Christians were allowed to retain their churches. In one case, where the Basilica of John the Baptist in Egypt had been turned into a mosque, Omar ordered it returned to a Christian church (Ibn Kathir, 2002). Furthermore, according to Winter (2003), the caliph Abdul Aziz bin Marwan (705) demonstrated remarkable tolerance towards the Coptic Christian community in Egypt, showing them “humane” treatment (Armstrong, 2002). Marwan’s policies allowed for the rebuilding and construction of Coptic churches, which enabled Christians to practice their religious affiliation openly, serving as a tolerance icon in Egypt.

The early years of the rule of the Umayyad caliph Umar II (720) were also marked by justice (Ibn Kathir, 2002). Christians felt secure under Umar, who eliminated oppression and tyranny against them and demonstrated equal treatment of Muslims and Christians. For example,

a Christian filed a suit against Hishaam Bin Abdul Malik, who later succeeded as Caliph. The just Caliph ordered both the plaintiff and the defendant to appear personally before the court. This annoyed Hishaam, who abused the Christian. Thereupon, the Caliph rebuked him and threatened him with dire consequences." (Ibn Kathir, 2002, p. 19)

Another example of tolerance and cooperation between Muslims and Copts was demonstrated by Coptic builders participating in the construction and expansion of mosques. For example, in 722 AD, Coptic builders were sought as help in the expansion work that took place in the Amr bin Al-Aas Mosque in Fustat during the reign of the governor Qara bin Sharik Al-Absi (723) (Yosry, 2023; Ibn Kathir, 2002). The peaceful relations developed between Muslims and Christians strengthened the harmony of their communities and moved the social order towards the process of growth through the interaction of its components with each other.

In view of the foregoing, it is clear that restrictions such as the jizya tax, introduced during the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates, were common practice. Whenever there was significant political turmoil, the need for extra funding to control the situation was satisfied by moderate, targeted taxation. Through the cooperation of Muslims and Copts in the financial field, political life flourished under the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates, as the rulers were able to maintain political and religious unity between Christians and Muslims, thus consolidating the state. Christians have fully shared in society and participate in political activities among Muslims, regardless of their beliefs or backgrounds. This was done in accordance with Islam's instruction to foster peace, harmony, coexistence, and

cooperation. The political role in the relationship between Muslims and Christians was an important element in this era because it reveals the shared historical connections between the two religious groups and illustrates how they have a common origin and should thus co-exist in one state.

The Crusades

The good relations between Muslims and Christians generally continued during the Fatimid era (969–1172), though there were some brief periods of religious discrimination against Christians in Egypt (Skreslet, 2022; Raseef, 2016). Skreslet writes that the Caliph Al-Hakim Bi Amr Allah forced Christians to wear specific colours as well as scarfs and hats that are different from those worn by Egyptian Muslims (Thomas, 2015; Markus, 2008). Taqi al-Din al-Maqrizi (2002) describes how Copts were to wear heavy wooden crosses around their necks in public, which, according to Ivanova (2020), made them into a group suffering “negative discrimination.” Despite these discriminatory restrictions against Copts, they were not always enforced, as each individual ruler had the liberty to impose them or not. According to Raseef (2016), during the last years of Caliph Al-Hakim Bi Amr Allah’s rule, Al Hakem changed his policy once again, allowing Christians to wear the same robes as Muslims.

The state-decreed discrimination against Christians did not prevent the Copts from integrating into Egyptian society or hinder Muslims from participating in Christian religious celebrations (Abdul Hamid, n.p.; Abdel Aziz, 2022). Abdul Hamid (n.p.) explains that Muslims joined in Coptic religious celebrations that were attended by Fatimid caliphs and senior state officials and that the Muslim celebrants

spent a lot of money to secure supplies of food, drink, and other items (Lev, 2022). For example, Al-Hakim Bamri attended Christian celebrations such as the Feast of the Epiphany (January 2) and did not prevent any of his employees from celebrating the holiday (Winter, 2003).

According to Thomas (2015), Egyptian Copts likewise participated in Muslim holidays and religious celebrations, such as Ramadan, Eid al-Fitr, al-Adha, the Prophet's birth, and the tenth of Muharram. Copts and Muslims also shared in joint activities, such as praying against low levels of the Nile or for the recovery of an ill prince. These shared religious celebrations (1145–1166) created a peaceful atmosphere among Christians and Muslims and were a key factor in the enjoyment of freedom by the Copts and other sects and in Muslims and Christians living together in harmony (Abdul Hamid, n.p.).

Additionally, the participation of both religious groups in the political and economic life of the nation further demonstrated the cohesion and harmony between them (Thomas, 2015; Markus, 2008; Abdel Aziz, 2022). At the political level, according to Thomas (2015), many Copts held important positions in the administration, working as clerks, tax collectors, and supervisors of the treasury of the caliphate itself. These Christian employees were appreciated and trusted by the rulers (Atiya, 1968; Thomas, 2015). For example, Yuhanna ibn Masawaih (850) was appointed Head Chancery by Caliph al-Mu'izz (Kan 2023). Ivanova (2020) notes that their appointments in important positions gave Copts a higher social profile.

At the economic level, Christians played an important role (Thomas, 2015; Khusraw, 2013; Abdel Aziz, 2022). According to Thomas (2015), they made major

contributions to grain stocks to meet the needs of all Egyptians. For example, Nasiri Khusraw (2013) tells a story about Caliph Al-Mustansir Billah (1036) asking one of the Coptic merchants during a famine to supply the government stores with grains, either in cash or on credit as a loan. The merchant replied to him: “I have enough crops that I can feed the people of Egypt with bread for six years.” Thus, the famine was relieved by the stock of this Coptic merchant (Thomas, 2015). Political, economic, and social life flourished in Egypt when the Copts and Muslims lived in harmony and helped each other (Raseef, 2016).

In view of the above, relations between Muslims and Copts still fare relatively well in everyday life. Under the earlier Fatimid caliphate (909–1171), the religious holidays in Egypt took on a distinctive and unique character, with Muslims participating with the Copts in celebrations that were held on their various religious holidays and sharing their holiday food as well. The appointment of Copts to the highest administrative positions of the caliphate and their participation in economic life also showed the religious harmony that was the common theme in this era.

However, Copts faced intense persecution and challenges during the Mamluk rule (1250–1517) (Lev, 2022; Little, 2009; Rowe, 2021; Werthmuller, 2010). According to Lev (2022), Christians were particularly affected by political conditions at the beginning of this era. Werthmuller (2010) describes the Copts’ situation as being especially bad during Baybar Mamluk’s sultanhip (1260–1277), due to the Crusades (the Frankish Wars), which did not harm the Muslims as much as they affected the Copts directly and indirectly. Little (2009) states that Mamluk’s involvement in the Crusades affected their policy towards the indigenous Christians

of Egypt to an appreciable extent. Where Muslims in the East saw the European armies carrying the cross, they did not differentiate between one cross or another and waged religious jihad against all Christians, whether in Egypt or outside (Werthmuller, 2010).

Rowe (2021) reports that the Crusades contributed to the often-difficult situation of Copts in Egypt, which included widespread suspicion of Copts, as they were often accused of supporting Western Crusaders against Muslims. The outcome of this suspicion was more stringent enforcement of Islamic restrictions on Copts, including major tax increases and the demolishing of churches. Mohamed (2018) asserts that the Crusades were a direct cause of the persecution of Copts in Egypt, which saw churches and monasteries demolished all across Egypt during the years 1339, 1357, and 1384. Some of these structures escaped demolition and were instead converted into mosques. Moreover, according to Little (2009), the restrictions on Copts during this era, such as heavy taxation, were so extreme that they prompted some of them to convert to Islam. Yet, there is no doubt that the Crusades caused more stringent enforcement of Islamic restrictions on Copts and a corresponding drive to promote the conversion of Christians to Islam. Saleh (2012) agrees that the main reason for the high number of Christian-to-Muslim conversions during the Mamluk era was Christians wanting to "avoid paying the onerous tax," as conversion to Islam "meant that they were exempt from the jizya" (p. 36). This explains the influx into the garrison towns of large numbers of Christian farmers who have now abandoned their lands and attempted to enter Islam by becoming the clients of Muslims (Raseef, 2016). What is clear is that the Crusades played a major

role in initiating conversions to Islam, with the conversions in many cases being made to avoid persecution. It is important to note that these events took place while the Crusades were happening, which amplified Muslims' feelings of mistrust and suspicion towards Eastern Christians in general (Raseef, 2016).

The tightening of the above restrictions on Christians did not override the spirit of harmony and cooperation between Muslims and Copts, such as their participation in each other's religious gatherings (Al-Nahar, 2019; Ahmed, 1987). According to Ahmed (1987), the interdependence of Copts and Muslims was demonstrated in many joint religious and social gatherings. For example, when the rituals and ceremonies of the Abbasid Caliphate were restored at the hands of their Sultan al-Zahir Baybars in the year 1360 AD, Christians participated in the activities of Egyptian society and contributed to the events. According to Al-Nahar (2019), Muslims and Copts worked side-by-side to decorate shops, markets, and other points of interest along the route of the royal procession, carrying their holy books and burning candles (Al-Nahar, 2019; Ahmed, 1987). This joint contribution indicates a state of familiarity and social solidarity between different religions.

From the above, it is clear that religious gatherings played an important role in promoting peaceful coexistence between Muslims and Copts in the Mamluk era. The religious gatherings engendered a peaceful relationship between the two religious groups (Al-Nahar, 2019; Ahmed, 1987), despite the shadow cast on them by the Frankish-Crusader wars. This confirms that the restrictions imposed by the state on Copts were due to circumstances and policies that had a specific meaning, namely reaction to the Crusades. In fact, there is no historical period in which wars

and conflicts dominated the relationship between Muslims and Copts, except during phases of political, social, or economic decline. However, even then, the majority of Copts and Muslims continued to participate in each other's religious events. The two groups lived intertwined in the fabric of Egyptian society, influenced by it and influencing it.

Ottoman Period

In the Ottoman era (1517–1805), peace was the basis for good relations between Muslims and Christians. Nonetheless, there were occasional instances of tension between the two religious groups (Winter, 2003; Mikhail, 2021). Winter (2003) describes an incident in 1521, shortly after the Ottoman entry into Egypt, in which three Copts walked in the streets of Cairo while drunk. The Muslim judge decided to bring them before the Justice, but some Muslims were dissatisfied. The ruling prompted them to track down the three Christians and tear apart two of them with swords, but the third feared the fate of his companions and quickly declared his conversion to Islam to avoid being killed.

There were also other times of tension regarding the relationship between Muslims and Copts (Mikhail, 2021; Winter, 2003). Mikhail (2021) states that in 1577, several Christians in Alexandria erected a church on the site of a ruined mosque and a Muslim cemetery. When Muslims came to see what was going on, the monks chased them away with weapons. These were sporadic individual cases, not the general case.

However, the idea of tolerance and coexistence became one of the most important foundations of the Ottoman political system (Ali, 2020). Indeed, the

Ottoman period was known for its promotion of the “millet” system, in which the affairs of each religious sect were transferred to its own church (Ali, 2020). According to Mestyán (2020), the millet system was able to recognise the religious rights and freedoms of Copts and was considered a religious right for them. Moreover, Mikhail (2019) explains that the millet system was based on regulating the affairs of non-Muslims in the state, granting non-Muslims the right of independence to elect their religious leaders as well as manage their private affairs in education, justice, and taxes under their appointed leaders. Another recognised right in the millet system was political representation for Copts. Mestyán (2020) asserts that Copts actively participated in different bureaucratic posts, utilising their administrative skills and linguistic abilities to promote the governing structures of commerce within the Ottoman Empire (Mikhail 2019). For example, Youssef Bey Matar (1787) served as the treasurer and supervisor of the Ottoman mint, showcasing the Coptic community's active participation in key administrative positions and contributing to cordial inter-relations within the broader society (Mestyán, 2020).

In view of the foregoing, it is clear that the policy of tolerance practiced towards the Copts by the Ottomans through the millet system and the freedoms they granted them played a major role in creating a climate of political and societal calm, dominated by a culture of coexistence and tolerance. Several Ottoman laws contributed to achieving the religious freedoms granted to people of other religions.

In so doing, the Ottomans sought to achieve social justice and equality among all segments of Ottoman society.

Regarding relations between Muslims and Copts under Muhammad Ali's rule (1805–1848), Copts enjoyed a policy of tolerance and a spirit of equality among all Egyptians (Rowe, 2021; Lev, 2022; Ibrahim, 2016). Rowe (2021) mentions that during the rule of Muhammad Ali, Copts were officially allowed to build churches and were asked to join the army. Moreover, according to Lev (2022), there were major societal improvements in terms of social integration and recognition, especially through education reforms and political participation. Ibrahim (2016) notes that due to the large proportion of Copts who were scribes and educated people, Muhammad Ali allocated Copts to councils and administrative and editorial tasks, as well as to the treasuries of offices, departments, and directorates. The creation of Coptic schools was another milestone. This decision not only gave the Copts educational opportunities but also contributed to their social and cultural development, substantially increasing their contribution to Egyptian society (Ibrahim 2016). At the same time, the monetary council for the management of Coptic affairs was established. As a result, Coptic public and political figures started to appear, and eventually Boutros Ghali became prime minister (1908–1910) (Raseef, 2016). According to Raseef, the nomination of Boutros Ghali as Prime Minister under Khedive Abbas Hilmi (1892–1914) represented a significant step in integrating Copts into the top echelons of public affairs (Lev, 2022).

Another major improvement was allowing cops to carry weapons for the first time. This change in law occurred after an incident in the year 1814 AD (Raseef,

2016; Lev, 2022). According to Raseef (2016), during the rebellion of the Cairo garrison, the Copts feared for their lives, and terror gripped their neighbourhoods. They set up barricades, barred their doors, and armed themselves with rifles to protect themselves from the mob. In response to the situation, Muhammad Ali supplied the Copts with gunpowder and armaments and secured their lives and homes.

In view of the foregoing, among the most important decisions issued by Muhammad Ali (1835) was the one to implement equal citizenship for Copts and Muslims. This meant the abolition of the obligation to wear certain clothing that was imposed on Copts by the Ottoman Sultanate. Copts were also allowed to freely build churches and practice their religious rituals, and no request submitted by Copts to build or repair any church was rejected. Muhammad Ali was the first Muslim ruler to grant Coptic state employees the rank of Bakawi in recognition of their services to Egypt. He also appointed Coptic advisors.

Muslims and Christians have also shared in safeguarding national unity and defending the land (Iskander, 2012; Faught, 2009). For example, Muslims and Copts were both driven by their patriotic sentiment and shared the concourse of Egyptians during their 1919 rebellion against the British colonisers (Iskander, 2012; Faught, 2009). The year 1919 is widely regarded and acknowledged by many Egyptians as the golden era of Egyptian unity, nationalism, and the brotherhood between Copts and Muslims. The more recent struggles of both communities against Western

imperialism saw Coptic and Muslim leaders using shared religious slogans to defend Egyptian unity and protect their beliefs (Iskander, 2012).

Historical events have also been a constant point of reference in recent peaceful coexistence efforts in Egypt that enhanced relations between Muslims and Christians (MaiMujeeb, 2013; Delhay, 2007; Carter, 2017). For example, the overarching aim of both religious groups during the 1919, 1952, and 2011 uprisings was to safeguard national unity, defend the land, and protect their respective beliefs (Abaza & Nakhla, 2005). Moreover, the British colonial reign ended in 1952 with a coup led by Gamal Abdel Nasser that overthrew and ousted British rule. According to MaiMujeeb (2013), both Copts and Muslims participated in this coup. Coptic support was incredibly enthusiastic during this period, with religious leaders taking an active part in demonstrations and giving patriotic speeches (Carter, 2017). Indeed, Muslims and Copts jointly struggled to liberate Egypt from foreign domination. In their battle, priests and Muslim leaders used both religious platforms—church and mosque—to bring an end to the British occupation. Al-Azhar sent a number of religious scholars to deliver sermons in Egyptian churches with the slogan “Religion belongs to God and the homeland is for all.” (Ghoneim, 2013).

Because of the preceding, it could be argued that the historical relationship between Muslims and Christians reveals a repeating pattern of long periods of peaceful relations. Whether unity is an offshoot of Prophet Muhammad’s directive to extend tolerance to Christians or a grassroots expression of support for the Egyptian homeland is open for debate. Christians worked side by side with Muslims in the

creation of Egypt. Moreover, they have contributed to safeguarding national unity, defending the land, and protecting their respective beliefs.

Based on how the Prophet Muhammad called for Christians to be granted the right of toleration, the same principles espoused by the Caliphs can be used to dissipate the current tensions between Muslims and Christians (Abulmajd 2021). They can and should be used at this time to further the tolerance of relations between Muslims and Christians, not just in Egypt but also around the entire world, because Islam and Christianity are both monotheistic religions and both believe in one God (Kan 2023). That discrimination against Christians and willful mistreatment in this era runs counter to these covenants, which were written down between 622 and 632 CE. The Prophet Muhammad was particularly clear on tolerance, as the historic covenant includes an overarching covenant with all Christians worldwide, so this analysis will be very important because it could lead to greater tolerance and understanding today.

Ultimately, the relations between Muslims and Christians resulted from the belief that Christians and Muslims should be able to freely practice their faith by their own will, especially if they live in the same area. In addition, their common message of tolerance should help to minimise the scale of disorders current between Muslims and Christians in the Middle East.

Copts and Muslims in Egypt tell the story of Muslim-Christian relations in Egypt from the coming of Islam to the aftermath of the January 2011 revolution. The Copts were also subjected to periods of persecution—by rulers from the Umayyad, Abbasid, and Fatimid dynasties and under the Mamluks—but by and large, a

relatively satisfactory form of cohabitation was established. Kan (2023) and Raseef (2016) argue that, even if they were occasionally attacked and persecuted, the Copts generally shared the fortunes of their Muslim neighbours and that religious difference in Egypt was frequently exploited by internal and external rulers for political gain (Radaideh & Al Shdouh 2021). Copts and Muslims in Egypt provide an engaging and highly readable account of communal relations through key points in Egyptian history (Andrawes, 2022). Even more importantly, the historically delicate harmony and peaceful coexistence of 1400-year-old Islamic-Coptic relations have played an integral part in shaping the stability of Egypt.

Evidence of the development and enduring positive relationship between Christians and Muslims has existed from the time of the Prophet Muhammad to modern days. In the era of the Prophet, Christians were called "People of the Book," which is an Islamic term referring to followers of religions that Muslims regard as having been guided by previous revelations, generally in the form of scripture. In the era of the Rightly Guided Caliphs and the Umayyad and Abbasid states, Christians were called "dhimmis," which means "protected persons." This label refers to the state's obligation under sharia to protect the individual's life, property, and freedom of religion in exchange for loyalty to the state and payment of the jizya tax. In the era of the Ottoman Empire, Christians were called "the millet," which is a group consisting of citizens subject to the Ottoman Empire but who are not Muslims. Millets are independent political and social units, and the millet system is a historical and legal continuation of the term "dhimmis" in the Ottoman Empire. In the era of Muhammad Ali's rule, Christians were called "Citizens." There is no doubt that this

development in the relationship between Muslims and Copts is the result of the enduring peaceful relationship between them.

Based on the development of the positive relationship between Christians and Muslims, Egypt can play an important role in the peaceful coexistence between them. Recognising that the preceding revealed that peaceful relations between Muslims and Christians were part of the history of Egypt, the present period from 1952 to the present day will be examined in order to explore to what extent those peaceful relations continue today in Egypt.

Why Egypt?

There are many reasons for choosing Egypt to highlight the role played by religion in promoting peace between Muslims and Christians. Culturally, Egypt is an important religious centre for Islam and Christianity (Barnard, 1968; Perez, 2019). Al Azhar University is also one of the oldest and most respected institutions of Islamic education, and the city of Alexandria was a centre of early Christianity in the ancient Middle East (Yarbrough, 2016; Tawfeek, 2018). Additionally, Egypt has one of the oldest churches in the Middle East: the Coptic Orthodox Church (Stanley, 2015). According to Stanley (2015), “Egypt was the intellectual and publishing hub of the Muslim world and was thus regarded by Christians as the key to its regeneration by the gospel and modern ideas of reform” (p. 423). Moreover, Muslims and Christians speak of compatible relations in their shared language and culture (White, 2011). Hatina (2006) argues that Copts cannot be distinguished from Muslims by language or geographical or professional distribution” (p. 50).

Socially, Christians and Muslims also share common religious, social, and traditional values, such as marriage, family life, and chastity (Afayori, 2016; Rauch, 1995). According to Afayori (2016), “these are issues that specifically relate to social and moral values that Christianity and Islam uphold and which could help to clarify and provide common contexts between the two groups” (as cited in Chapman, 2012, p. 252). Hatina (2006) argues that in modern Egyptian society, there are numerous similarities shared by Islam and Christianity, such as religious, social, and moral values. For example, every year during the holy month of Ramadan, and as a demonstration of solidarity, Coptic Christians and Muslims share meals together (Meceed, 2017; Wahba, n, b). Moreover, they support each other’s social and religious practices. Farah (1986) explains that “many Copts have expressed support for sharia because it provides for the implementation of Coptic personal status laws" (p. 28).

Relations between Muslims and Christians in Egypt have not always been peaceful in the present era. Tensions have sporadically erupted between the two groups in the past, and some of these tensions persist today. The building of Christian churches, interfaith marriage, religious conversions, and differentiations between Egyptian Muslim identity and Egyptian Copt identity and conversion have been and continue to be problematic in Egypt (McCallum, 2007; Guiney, 2008). Undoubtedly, these issues are primarily of a religious nature. For example, a controversy arose over the construction of churches, which then led to sectarian strife in the areas of Al-Khankah in 1972, Al-Zawya Al-Hamra in Cairo in 1981, and Al-Kosheh in 1998 and 1999 (Gabbay, 2018; Qandil, 2018). Interestingly, the

construction of Egyptian law did not make the construction of new churches any easier regarding the procedure of obtaining a construction permit, which involves security approval for Egyptian Christians. According to Farid (2026), the law did not define the shape and structure of a church in detail, which led to objections to building a dome or placing crosses on the roof.

Although socio-religious issues such as the ones mentioned above can be challenging for Cops and Muslims in Egypt, it could be argued that issues of the above kind are not as divisive as sectarian conflicts in India, China, or Iraq. Moreover, sectarian strife in Egypt began with individual incidents, which then turned into sectarian events. However, as mentioned above regarding religion in general, are these events possibly an exception to the rule? Could it be the case that even in Egypt, in spite of numerous conflicts resulting from religious tensions, in both the past and the present, religion does nonetheless have an overall positive influence on society, promoting peace and engaging in actions that lead to overall harmonious relations between these two large groups?

Religious contributions towards peace by Egyptian religious leaders and institutions have been evident recently (Wahba, n.d.; Jayson, 2015). For example, Egypt's religious institutions, represented by al-Azhar and the Orthodox, Protestant, Catholic, and Anglican denominations, have worked to strengthen Egyptian religious harmony by creating the Egyptian Family House (Casper, 2015; Aboshady, 2019).

Egyptian religious leaders and scholars have also perpetually sought to renew religious discourse. In 2017, a "Sharing the Homeland" informational campaign was launched for the upcoming Christian New Year and Eastern Orthodox Christmas (Noor, 2017; Fides, 2019). This campaign was aimed at correcting misperceptions about the impermissibility of congratulating Christians on their holidays and responding to “deviant and extremist fatwas” that circulate every year in advance of Christian holidays (Memri Inquiry & Analysis, 2017).

The efforts of religious leaders and institutions were also evident in the discussions contained in the document “Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together” (Boje, 2020; Volokh, 2015). This document upholds the following:

The firm conviction that authentic teachings of religions invite us to remain rooted in the values of peace; to defend the values of mutual understanding, human fraternity, and harmonious coexistence; to re-establish wisdom, justice; and love; and to reawaken religious awareness among young people so that future generations may be protected from the realm of materialistic thinking and from dangerous policies of unbridled greed and indifference that are based on the law of force and not on the force of law;.....Dialogue, understanding, and the widespread promotion of a culture of tolerance, acceptance of others, and living together peacefully would significantly contribute to reducing many economic,

social, political, and environmental problems that weigh so heavily on a large part of humanity.

The document calls for cooperation in spreading a culture of tolerance and living in peace, and an end to hate and intolerance, violence, and conflict. As well, religious leaders have worked on organising conferences and dialogues that focus on the concept of global peacemaking (Garfinkel, 2008; Küster, 2014), such as the conference organised by the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, an affiliate of the Egyptian Ministry of Religious Endowments (Staff, 2021; Makari, 2007; Damanhuri, 2018). According to Wahba (n.d.), the dialogues that have taken place between Al-Azhar and the Anglican Church for many years have contributed to a greater understanding between Christians and Muslims.

The thesis will focus on and expand on the positive role religion plays in contributing to peace, tolerance, equality, cooperation, justice, and freedom between Christians and Muslims since Egypt became a republic in 1952. The religious contributions of religious leaders and institutions towards peace will be highlighted as well.

Teachings of the Qur'an and the Bible that promote peace

The teachings of peace in the Bible and the Qur'an are fundamental to the ethics of Christians and Muslims. Peace might predominantly originate from Jesus Christ's teachings and life examples. Moreover, the Qur'an also advises peace, with the call for tolerance and fairness being the principal aspects of ethics in Islam. This section will cite some Biblical verses that speak about peace. This will be very brief

and will mention only clear verses, as the focus of the dissertation is on how Islamic authorities in Egypt deploy religion, including the Qur'an and other religious texts, to promote peace between Muslims and Christians in Egypt.

The Bible and Peace.

Many verses in the Bible promote universal love, peace, and tolerance for others. We can see peace used as part of formalised greetings in Paul's letters (e.g., Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:3; Gal. 1:3), where Paul writes: "Grace to you and peace from God our father, and the Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 1:7).

The texts in Matthew, Romans, and John refer to how followers of Jesus should seek peace in this world and should seek to make peace where there is hostility (Matthew 5:9; Romans 12:18; John 14:27). If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone (Romans 12:18). Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled; do not be afraid (John 14:27). The text in John speaks of how followers of Jesus should take comfort in the inner peace that Jesus offers them in difficult times (Bock, 1994; Fitzmyer, 1982).

Matthew 5:9 presents Jesus' profound teaching on peacemaking within the Sermon on the Mount context. Jesus declares, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God" (Matthew 5:9). Wright's (2004) commentary on this verse highlights the significance of peacemaking as a central aspect of Christian principles. He sees that Jesus advocates for the pursuit of peace and identifies peacemakers as embodying the character of God himself. This call to peacemaking extends beyond passivity or neutrality; it requires intentional efforts to foster

harmony, justice, and forgiveness in relationships and communities (Wright, 2004). Jesus says that all commanded must be perfect, like their Father in Heaven. "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy" (Matthew 5:7). (Barth, 1993).

In Romans 5:11, the apostle Paul asserts that believers are justified by faith, a Christian theological principle, which results in peace with God through Jesus Christ (Romans 5:1). According to Paul, it is through faith in Christ that believers find themselves with profound peace and assurance of salvation. According to Barth (1993), this peace is the cornerstone of Christian morality, moulding believers' self-awareness and perception of their existence in ratio to God and others (Yoder, 1994; Barth, 1993). Yoder (1994) interprets Romans 5 within the broader framework of Jesus' ethic of nonviolence and love for enemies (Yoder, 1994). Yoder (1994) underscores the radical implications of Paul's theology of peace through justification by faith, challenging traditional narratives of power and violence. He advocates for a transformative approach to violence resolution rooted in Jesus' example, emphasising the ethical imperative of embodying peace and reconciliation as followers of Christ. Barth's (1993) interpretation of Romans 5 emphasises the divine initiative in establishing peace with God and humanity, rooted in God's redemptive love as revealed through Jesus Christ.

The above Bible's teachings focus on peace as "peace with God." This is a major theme of the New Testament, as it is at the centre of Jesus' mission: to help people return to God and cultivate a close relationship with God, which the New Testament often refers to as "peace with God." It is important to remember that these are four ways that the New Testament speaks about peace: First, having peace

with God, i.e., being in a good relationship with God, Second, experiencing inner peace when life is hard. Third, making and maintaining peace between ourselves and other people. Fourth, making peace between other people who are not getting along well or are at war with each other.

The Qur'an and Peace.

The Qur'an deals with issues of peace and tolerance in relationships between individuals. Allah says, "Be fearful of God and make peace among yourselves" (Al-Anfal 8/1) and that "if two groups of believers fight against one another, [you should] make peace among them" (Al-Hujurat 49/9). According to Bhattacharya (2019), these Qur'anic verses instruct Muslims to solve their disputes and disagreements through peaceful means, indicating that peace is not only the foundational tenet of Islam but also its core essence (Bhattacharya, 2019; Kalin, 2005). Observing the primacy of peace in religious practice has encouraged many religious leaders to play significant roles in shaping peace in Egypt, including Ahmed Al-Tayeb and Pope Tawadros.

The Qur'an also highlights issues of peace in relationships between Muslims and other believers through social peace (Rashed, n.d.). Kalin (2013) explains that "the discourse of peace in the Qur'an is the sine qua non of collective and communal peace" (p. 223). The Qur'an states: "And if they are inclined toward peace, then accept and fear God. He is the Hearer, the Knower" (Al-Anfal, 8:61). According to Nuhung (n. p.), this verse above urges peace between Muslims and non-Muslims to promote social peace.

Based on the above, it can be argued that peace is central to the Qur'an and the Bible and plays a fundamental role in providing a vision of social harmony and unison. Furthermore, both Islam and Christianity emphasise the virtue of peace and discourage people from responding to an evil deed with another evil deed, just as they frown upon unjust aggression. The emphasis of both on peaceful relations encourages in its adherents a spirit of tolerance and respect for other religions.

Therefore, Islam and Christianity, in spite of some actions to the contrary, promote peace and harmony based on specific texts in the Bible and Qur'an that encourage justice, love, and compassion. These religious texts also call their adherents to freedom, tolerance, and respect for other religions and exhort them to allow others to live and worship peacefully. On this, both the Bible and the Qur'an concur.

Promotion of Peace by Religious Scholars, and Theologians

The relationship between Muslims and Christians in Egypt has often been put in jeopardy by discrimination against the latter group (Azuri, 2010; Pennington, 1982; El-Rashidi, 2014; Gabbay, 2018). According to El-Rashidi (2014), Christians were subjected to violent attacks, including the torching of several Christian churches and the slaughter of parishioners attending mass, such as in the case of the Omraniya Church in 2010, the Saints Church in 2011, the Petrine Church in 2016, the Church of Saint George in the city of Tanta in 2017, and a church in the Mostorod area, north of the Egyptian capital, in 2018. Gabbay (2018) reports that members of one of the most influential groups in Egypt—the Islamic Brotherhood—initiated an attack on a Catholic church in the Egyptian capital, Cairo. Gabbay

further explains that a crowd forcefully entered the church and set it on fire. The arsonists also murdered a Muslim man who had converted to Christianity and refused to reinstate his Islamic status. His body was left in the burning building (Gabbay, 2018; Chandler, 2011). Moreover, discrimination against Christians led to the events of Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt in 2010. Sectarian strife also erupted in the city of Al-Khosos in Qalyubia Governorate on April 5, 2013, resulting in the displacement of nine Christian families from Rafah to Al-Arish for fear of terrorist threats (Farid, 2016; Michel, 1997; Brownlee, 2013). Although these events marked a clear setback in Muslim-Christian relations in Egypt, the resulting tensions were, however, individual.

Despite these and other occasional clashes between the Muslim majority and the Christian minority, especially regarding discrimination against Christians, many of Egypt's religious scholars and theologians have sought to create common ground between the two religious groups (Sedra, 2007; Isgandarova, 2012; Ali, 2011; Kamal, 2020). For example, in 2011, Ahmad Al-Tayeb established the "House of the Egyptian Family" to spread tolerance, encourage cooperation between groups, and promote peaceful practices (Middle East, 2011; Khalil, 2019). In these and other gestures of solidarity, there were efforts to find common ground and promote a spirit of tolerance and cooperation with each other. All of this will be further elaborated in Chapter One.

The Impact of Religion on Egyptian Politics Through Presidential Speeches

In the relationship between religion and politics, religion often conflicts with the demands of politics. In other words, politics can affect religion, and religion can impact politics (Mubarak, 2009). In this regard, some Egyptian presidents have taken advantage of religion for political gain. Rugh (2021) suggests that “most presidents in Egypt began their tenures with reasonably good relations with Christians, emphasising reassurances for their protection. However, the support from Christians dwindled when politicians found it expedient to take actions that harmed the Christian community” (p. 3). For example, according to Ceren Belge, former president Anwar Sadat did not recognise Christians as being his responsibility and openly branded himself as a Muslim president for the Islamic community. Sadat’s remarks were not welcomed by Christians. Moreover, Sadat’s preference for one group over the other might have influenced some Muslims to develop negative feelings towards Christians (Belge & Karakoc, 2015). It could be argued, however, that Sadat’s comments were simply directed at Nasserist and leftist movements that have opposed the peace agreement between Egypt and Israel. In contrast, his successor, former president Mubarak, not only tolerated the minority group (Christians) but openly and continually expressed his love for them (Belge and Karakoc, 2015).

On the other hand, religion has had a bearing on politics in Egypt through political speeches that promote concepts of tolerance and cooperation (Monier, 2014; Melcangi, 2012; Zeghal, 1999; Smith, 2015). For example, after the deterioration of political and socioeconomic conditions as a result of the 1952

Egyptian revolution, President Nassar, “in his speech at the inauguration of St. Mark's Cathedral, stated that, as Egypt’s president, he was equally responsible for all Egyptians regardless of their religion” (Samir, 2012, p. 2). As a conciliatory gesture towards Christians, Nasser showed them their value to Egypt by dispensing “half a million pounds from the government’s budget for the construction of the new Coptic cathedral and participating in its inaugural festivities” (Tadros, 2009, p. 272). Commenting on the deterioration of political and socioeconomic conditions in Egypt, Mohamed Naguib, the primary leader of the Egyptian Revolution of 1952, announced that “the post-revolutionary Egypt would depend on the cooperation and tolerance between Copts and Muslims” (Saied, 2015, p. 112).

In their study, Hassan and Shalaby (2018) examine some political speeches, finding that Egyptian presidents have been keen on participating—and being seen participating—in religious ceremonies and festivals. For example, the formal discourses of President Sisi included frequent mentions of Qur'anic verses that call for tolerance and cooperation between the two groups, indicating how powerful religious signalling is in Egyptian society and politics in promoting peace between groups (Campbell, Green, and Layman, 2011, p. 205; Safi, 2019). Based on the above, it could be argued that the influence of religion on politics in Egypt is significant, especially in cases of political, social, and economic unrest. All of this will be further elaborated in Chapter Two.

The relationship between religion and education in promoting peace

As mentioned earlier, religion plays a large role in Egypt's education system (Isaac, 2012; Hilgendor, 2003), and Islam is already incorporated in existing curricula of K–12 public schools, e.g., Arabic language courses and social studies (Krapp, 1999; Faour, 2012). Faour (2012) points out that the religious and public education curriculum in Egypt sometimes includes materials that are antithetical to values promoting tolerance and cooperation between Christians and Muslims. For example, “there are Qur'anic verses that challenge the beliefs of non-Muslims, such as those that preach God's absolute unity and that contradict the Christian belief in the Holy Trinity” (p. 17).

However, it could still be argued that the teaching of some passages from the Qur'an, such as the one about absolute divine unity mentioned above, did not encourage discriminatory behaviour. Teaching about absolute divine unity in public or religious schools does not mean spreading a spirit of hostility between people of other religions. There are many verses in the Qur'an that call for good treatment of people from other religions. God said: “You will certainly find the nearest in friendship to those who believe (to be) those who say: We are Christians; this is because there are priests and monks among them and because they do not behave proudly” (al-Ma'idah 5:82). Moreover, curriculum materials, such as the Arabic language, civics, history, and religion, promote tolerance and cooperation between Christians and Muslims and teach students about the need for peace and integration (Colla, 2007; EIPR, 2010). History textbooks present the Coptic and Islamic eras as an integral part of Egypt's history, highlighting Coptic and Muslim participation in

Egypt's national struggle and emphasising their cultural achievements throughout history (Abdou, 2017). Moreover, Niell (2016) argues that religious education is the very nature of the Egyptian character, which is Islamic and Christian. According to Abdou (2017), these curricula provide important insights to construct a cooperative Egyptian identity.

However, when curricula veer from established precepts, issues can arise. According to a report published in Memri: Inquiry and Analysis (2017), some leaders at Al-Azhar have promoted school curricula that contradict discourses by its Al-Azhar institutions promoting tolerance of Egypt's Christians. For example, when the Al-Azhar committee sought to create twelve books intended "to strengthen national unity among pupils at Al-Azhar," some individuals inside the Al-Azhar committee charged with creating educational materials removed anything related to extending holiday greetings to Christians, including photographs. Granted, they are individual actions, but they can still affect Al-Azhar's efforts to build peace between the two groups. For their part, Al-Tayeb fired some committee members at Al-Azhar who had removed content encouraging national unity and acceptance of other beliefs (Memri: Inquiry & Analysis, 2017). All of this will be further elaborated in Chapter Three.

Promotion of Peaceful Social and Cultural Behaviour by Religious Institutions and Leaders

Among some Muslims and Christians, there persists a sense of religious pride that prevents them from accepting each other's social and cultural way of life

(McLean, 2001; Kaaki, 2017; Pew Research Centre, 2010). According to George McLean (2001), Muslims are highly conservative in their teachings, whereas Christians are more flexible. Accordingly, a Muslim man in Egypt is allowed to marry a Christian woman, but Christian and Muslim women are only allowed to marry within their respective religions. This restriction has caused tension between the two groups, with some Christians and Muslims supporting the restrictions and others not supporting them (Mclean, 2001). The challenges to intermarriage laws have become too complicated and have made the quest to find common grounds almost impossible, despite the fact that constant petitions have been delivered to the Egyptian courts (Michel, 1997). This appears to be a setback in enhancing the Muslim-Christian relationship in Egypt since the two religious groups do not follow the same standards for marriage (Alexander, 2015). Muslims aim to promote the patriarchal foundations of this aspect of Islamic law.

Despite challenges such as this between Copts and Muslims in Egypt, it is clear that enormous efforts have been made by leaders and institutions to ensure a solid and supportive relationship. The need to be united is strong among most leaders and institutions. For example, leaders and institutions attempt to promote peaceful social and cultural relations by encouraging attendance at many marriage celebrations (Shenoda, 2011; Smith, 2015). Furthermore, the Dar al-Ifta Al-Misriyyah, an Egyptian Islamic institution, offers Muslims religious guidance and advice through the issuing of fatwas on every-day and contemporary issues, confirming that attending Christian marriage celebrations does not conflict with Islamic teachings (Dar al-Ifta Al-Misriyyah, 1998). Based on this example, we can

see that Dar al-Ifta Al-Misriyyah has actively sought to create a kind of tolerance and understanding between Muslims and Christians. All of this will be further elaborated in Chapter Four.

Methodology

In this thesis, I will highlight some of the conflicts that led to attacks on churches and have occurred from time to time in Egypt during the period 1952–2022, as fueled by religious rivalry. However, during 1952–2022, the period covered by this study, I will also show that religion has been instrumental in promoting peaceful relationships and cohesion. As well, I will investigate how religious scholars, theologians, and Egyptian presidents have referred to some prominent Qur'anic and Biblical texts and teachings mentioned above that refer to peace, peacemaking, and peacebuilding in promoting peace in politics, education, and society in general. I will also show how these texts and teachings have been emphasised in various places, contexts, speeches, and institutions and the impact they have had. I also highlight Christian and Muslim points of view as revealed through newspapers, academic journals, magazines, and documents.

My study fits in well with previous research conducted by other scholars and authors, such as Armstrong (2014), Van Gorder (n.d.), Valk and Selçuk (2018), Haynes (2020), Chowdury (2018), and Rowe (2016). These scholars present research demonstrating that religion has played an important role in promoting peace. In my study, I will follow several of their methods and use historical sources as well as books, chapters of books, journal articles, blogs, and reports. I believe that

these authors' approaches to research will provide a suitable example for me to follow in my work, especially when I look further into the writings of Egyptian Muslim and Christian leaders, theologians, and philosophers who promote values of tolerance and cooperation. Along with conducting interviews on the subject of religion's role in fostering peaceful relationships between Christians and Muslims, I will explore how Islamic and Christian teachings calling for peace have affected the discourses of religious leaders and institutions in Egypt.

In general, I have found that religion provides a peaceful environment in Egypt. In addition, I have discovered that religious teachings heavily influence scholarly work about Egypt. The impact of religion appears to have allowed some leaders and scholars to begin to perceive the potential contribution of religion to peacebuilding. This thesis thus contributes to a growing body of research that is developing arguments about the role that religion can play in peacebuilding. Therefore, the present research aims to demonstrate how religious teachings can be applied to a diverse range of situations, institutions, cultural behaviour, political speeches, and educational opportunities that promote peace. By considering the importance of religious teachings that specifically promote peace, the research provides a methodological contribution to the field of scholarship on religion and peaceful relationships and brings to the fore the question of whether religion contributes to making peace and promoting respect between groups or leads to controversy and conflict. This is done by examining sources and conducting interviews.

Thesis Outline

This thesis is structured into four chapters. Chapter One highlights the role played by Islamic and Christian leaders in promoting tolerance, cooperation, equality, justice, citizenship, pluralism, coexistence values, and religious freedom. It will also identify the contributions and efforts that have been made by Egyptian Muslims and Christian scholars and leaders in this field to enhance peaceful coexistence between them and to suggest the best practices that could help in promoting peace, such as religious dialogues, conferences, and the Egyptian Family House. In addition, some of the positive impacts that promote and enhance peaceful coexistence between Muslims and Christians in Egypt, including religious discourses on peace, addressing sectarian disputes, and spreading the spirit of love and brotherhood, will be examined. This is a very important chapter, as it shows the influence of the teachings of Islam and Christianity stemming from the texts of the Qur'an and the Bible, respectively, on religious leaders through the major efforts of different groups to inspire and maintain peace.

Primary Sources

The current primary sources for this study include material from writings, speeches, and interviews with Muslim and Christian leaders who are in positions to offer valuable context and information for my research. My methodology is qualitative research carried out through in-depth interviews with eight participants, including Ali Gomaa, a renowned Islamic scholar who served as the Grand Mufti of Egypt in the period 2003–2013, and Pope Tawadros II, leader of the Coptic

Orthodox Church of Alexandria in the period 2012–present. Both Gomaa and Pope Tawadros are authorities on religion and peace. In addition, I interviewed Ibrahim Abdel-Karim Allam, current Mufti of Egypt; Ahmed Al Tayeb, current leader of Al-Azhar Institutions; Andrea Zaki, leader of the Coptic Evangelical Institutions for Social Services (2007–present); and Refaat Fekry, head of the dialogue board in the Evangelical Institutions in the period (2019–present). In this field of study, interviews conducted with major religious leaders are a critical component of the research. My primary resources also include some writings of the interviewees as well as the interviewees’ testimony during the interviews. As well, I conducted interviews with representatives of the Ministry of Education, such as Tariq Shawki, Egyptian Minister of Education, and Dawood Nasr, Director General of Schools for the Evangelical Church.

Unfortunately, restrictions caused by COVID-19 mandates and time have impeded my efforts to gain access to more participants. Nonetheless, these eight participants collectively represent Muslim and Christian theologians, leaders of Islamic and Coptic religious institutions, and Egyptian educational system leaders. The research illuminates the opinions of the interviewees and their conceptions regarding how religion affects everything from daily life to vast social movements and peace. Conducting interviews on the subject of religion’s role in fostering peaceful relationships between Christians and Muslims fits into the methodology of what other scholars have employed in their research, such as Mohammed Abu-Nimer (2001), Allen Baatsen (2017), Oluwafemi Ayodele Bandele (2014), Shyjan C Job (n, b), Raja Juli Antoni (2014), and Panos Kourgiotis (2018).

Secondary Sources

Secondary sources in this study include newspaper and media reports on the role of religion in promoting peaceful relations between Muslims and Christians. These reports will reveal important insights that contribute to the present study's findings.

Translations

The present work involves the use of some Arabic sources, such as articles, books, newspapers, and interviews written or presented by Arab Christians and Muslims. Because I am fully aware of the rules and methods of the Arabic language, I was the source of the Arabic translations in all cases.

Chapter One

Promotion of Peace by Religious Scholars, and Theologians

Introduction

Religion is often accused of being a key cause of conflict, whether between individuals, cultures, or nations (Galtung, 2014; Thomas, 2008). Historical issues such as interreligious marriage, conversion, identity, and restrictive government laws on the construction of churches have been the main reasons for sectarian conflicts between Christians and Muslims in Egypt (Guiney, 2008; Rieffer-Flanagan, 2016; Zeidan, 1999; Abdou, 2017). Guiney (2008) sees that one of the main challenges that have made the quest to find common ground difficult is conversion (Thomas, 2008; Nimer, 2003). Incidences such as these threaten efforts towards ensuring a good relationship between the two religious groups (Human Rights Watch, 2003). According to Guiney (2008), Egyptians view the process of conversion to Islam as being substantially easier than conversion to Christianity. For example, new identification cards with Muslim names are issued quickly. Conversion to Islam is recognised by the government, but conversion to Christianity and any other religion is not recognised, especially for people born in the Islamic religion. An individual converting to Christianity will have to present documents from the receiving church and their details, including their fingerprints and the intention for the conversion. The ease of conversion to Islam compared to Christianity has caused some Christians to argue that the state does not do enough to protect vulnerable Christians from campaigns to leave their faith (Hanna, 2018; Nimer, 2003). According to

Hanna (2018), government policies that limit the conversion to Christianity often lead to discrimination against Christians. According to Nimer (2003), if an Egyptian Muslim converts to Christianity and tries to register the conversion, he will simply be denied that by any government official. The consequences of violating freedom of religion related to conversion often lead to violence in society.

As well, the actions of extremist groups that have at times been the offshoot of radical government policies and official statements have been one of the core reasons for sectarian violence (Rieffer-Flanagan, 2016; Abdou, 2017). To clarify the concept of sectarian violence, Gandhi (2005) spoke of non-violence rather than peace and emphasised the necessity of overcoming injustice. Gandhi's meaning was summarised by Jonathan Schell (2007) as follows: "Violence is a method by which the ruthless few can subdue the passive many, whereas non-violence is a means by which the active many can overcome the ruthless few" (Yazdani, 2020; Haar, G., & Busuttil, 2005). Charles Tilly (2017) argued that sectarian violence refers to those situations where conflicts are rooted in some identity-based factor (e.g., religious beliefs, cultural practices, or ethnic affiliations). This type of violence erupts when tensions multiply along the lines of sectarian distinction, promoting hostility between disparate communities (Tambiah, 2023; Badaan et al., 2020). According to Juan Cole (2018), sectarian violence refers to the hostility between people due to their religious or ethnic minority status. Such animosity is therefore often the result of historical, cultural, religious, or political differences that exacerbate existing tensions and encourage confrontation (Svensson & Nilsson, 2018). For instance, "Sadat in 1980–1981 openly accused the Copts of a conspiracy against the state in

order to bolster his alliance with the Islamic groups against the political left” (Zeidan, 1999, p. 57). The result of Sadat’s accusations was that the self-styled Islamic State (ISIS) terrorist group specifically targeted Copts, subsequently creating a wider conflict between Egyptian Muslims and Christians (Abdou, 2017; Zeidan, 1999). These and similar challenges represent real threats to their peaceful relationship.

In a recent study, Fawaz Gerges (2019) defined sectarian violence as hostility between communities that belong to different religious sects or denominations and sometimes differing peoples. This form of hostility is caused by a sense of mutual difference, which in turn gives rise to fighting or targeted attacks (Brown, 2020; Badaan et al., 2020). Liyakat Takim (2018) suggested that sectarian violence refers to incidents involving acts of discrimination or physical attacks carried out because the victims are members of a particular religious group. In its more common forms, such violence invariably worsens societal tensions and conflicts arising from sectarian differences (Juergensmeyer, 2023; Ishfaq et al., 2021).

According to Vali Nasr (2018), sectarian violence describes violent conflicts occurring between followers of different religious traditions. Its various forms may include attacks on religious institutions and communities (Carter & Caton, 2022). Bassel Salloukh (2020) defined sectarian violence as strife and conflict arising out of ethnic or religious differences, accompanied by tensions, hostilities, and confrontations. Such violence is rooted in the distinctive identities characteristic of these communities (Vostermans & Petronella, 2020; Shah, 2020). From the above, it can be argued that sectarian violence refers to any action that causes harm or damage

and that encompasses everything from minor offences to disputes between religious groups to mass societal disturbances.

Unfortunately, Egypt continues to experience bouts of interreligious sectarian conflict between Muslims and Copts. The three main reasons causing these occasional eruptions are interreligious marriage, church construction, and conversion, all of which are issues affecting both communities in Egypt (Bontrager, 2021). According to Fahmy (2016), Christians have complained about restrictions on building churches by the state, which often prompted them to build places of prayer without obtaining a legal permit. Which usually led to a state of tension with their Muslim neighbours, who considered it to be a violation of the law and an attempt to impose a *fait accompli* on them. However, the Coptic Christian community has mostly been on the receiving end of serious violent attacks, and most of these have been conducted by radical Islamist groups (Bizzotto, 2016). In a video released in 2017, a group calling itself “ISIS Egypt” claimed responsibility for an attack on a church in Cairo and threatened to kill more Christians throughout Egypt (Kårtveit, 2017; Abdelaty, 2017). In response, the Egyptian government condemned the attacks and offered to renovate and rebuild the damaged churches. A recent report on religious freedom in Egypt (2017) noted that the Egyptian government has completed the reconstruction of 78 churches and other church-owned properties that were destroyed or damaged in mob violence since 2013. Additionally, Egyptian authorities have hunted down and arrested the alleged perpetrators of the attacks.

Conversion continues to be a challenging issue confronting Muslims and Christians that has brought social tensions and violence (Lindbekk, 2021; Ezzat,

2020). For example, in 2017, Maher El-Gohary, a convert from Christianity to Islam, was killed in Sinai (Tapia, 2023). In response, the Egyptian government has taken action to offer protection to human beings dealing with difficulties associated with conversions (Ezzat, 2020). According to Human Rights Watch and the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR) (2018), the ruling by Egypt's Supreme Administrative Court in 2018 that allowed 12 Christian converts to Islam to "re-convert" back to Christianity was a welcome step by the government to protect converts from discrimination and harassment. Doubtlessly converts face hate due to their conversion to a specific religion. Egypt's Supreme Administrative Court discourages acts of violence and discrimination against individuals who have selected to exchange their spiritual affiliation. Protecting converts from violence and threats is essential to addressing conversion troubles.

Inter-religious marriage has been a contentious issue in Egypt (El-Maghlawy, 2019). In 2016, an Egyptian Christian man, Nabil Habashy Salama, faced many obstacles, including prison terms, when he sought to marry a Muslim woman. The incident highlighted the continued challenges and societal resistance towards inter-religious marriage (Aadalen, 2021). The Egyptian government has taken measures to cope with inter-religious marriage issues (Pinfari, 2022). For example, in 2020, President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi called for legal changes to the Family Rights Law to simplify divorce for Christians and to relieve worries surrounding interfaith marriages. (Alshoubaki, 2021; Human Rights Watch, 2017). Despite these efforts, challenges persist. In 2020, a court annulled the wedding of a Christian female, Hagar Nagy, to a Muslim male, illustrating the ongoing complexities of imposing

reforms (Alshoubaki, 2021). Continued government commitment, legislative upgrades, and community education remain essential in addressing inter-religious marriage problems and fostering an inclusive and tolerant society in Egypt.

Based on the above, violent acts can have many different motives. For instance, the sectarian violence between Christians and Muslims in Egypt has roots in the political, social, and cultural turmoil arising out of differences over issues as diverse as inter-religious marriage and the construction of churches. However, the perpetrators of the violence are being held to account, specifically through Articles 160 and 161 of the Egyptian Penal Code. With Egyptian government efforts, sectarianism today is arguably significantly less prevalent than it was previously. Data collected by Barrie, Clarke, and Ketchley (2020) from 2013–2016 shows that the occurrence of attacks decreased (Barrie, Clarke, & Ketchley, 2020). Moreover, since President Abdel-Fattah El Sisi announced the war on terror in 2016, official reporting of operations related to acts of violence has decreased significantly compared to 2015. According to Human Rights Watch (2017), security forces arrested 173 “terrorists” and killed 533 throughout 2016, compared to 11,771 arrested and 1,595 killed in 2015. (Human Rights Watch, 2017; TIMEP, 2015). However, the sectarian incidents that occur sporadically in Egypt only temporarily affect the generally amicable coexistence of Christians and Muslims. This is because the majority of Egyptians do not hold the views expressed by the individuals or groups inciting the incidents (Brownlee, 2013; Beattie, 2000).

Responding to the seriousness of these threats and issues, Egypt’s religious scholars and theologians have been working hard to create common ground between

the two religious groups (Sedra, 2007; Isgandarova, 2012; Ali, 2011; Kamal, 2020). Sedra (2007) and Hanna (2018) explain that religious teachings, in particular, have been used for many years to address problems that might lead to conflict between the two groups. For example, Ibrahim Abdel-Karim Allam, the Grand Mufti of Egypt, has condemned anti-Christian slogans and intimidations as being contrary to Islamic teachings. He has also called on Christians and Muslims to join forces in protecting churches so that Christians can celebrate their liturgical solemnities in peace (Fides, 2019; Multimedia Centre, 2016). According to Isgandarova (2012), Muslim spiritual leaders have much in common with their Christian counterparts in their non-violent approach to problems and in “connecting spirituality and praxis, which is a continuous commitment to creating knowledge out of experience” (p. 98; Kadayifci-Orellana, 2013; Ali, 2011).

This chapter explores the writings, speeches, and interviews generated by Muslim and Christian leaders such as Ali Gomaa, a renowned Islamic scholar who served as the Grand Mufti of Egypt (2003–2013), and Pope Tawadros II, the leader of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria. The chapter also considers the thoughts of Ibrahim Abdel-Karim Allam, the current Mufti of Egypt; the Grand Imam Ahmed Al Tayeb, the current leader of Al-Azhar Institutions; Andrea Zaki, leader of the Coptic Evangelical Institutions for Social Services; Ahmed Karima, a professor of comparative jurisprudence at Al-Azhar University, Pope Shenouda III; and the former Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar, Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi. Despite the occasional eruption of sectarian violence between Christians and Muslims, Egypt’s

religious scholars, philosophers, and theologians, such as those mentioned above, continued to strive for peace in their work.

The chapter is divided into two sections. Section one sheds light on the contributions of Egyptian intellectuals in addressing sectarian conflicts such as interreligious marriage, conversion, identity, and restrictive government laws on church construction via the application of religious teachings. Section two identifies initiatives of Egyptian religious leaders and intellectuals to reduce tensions between Christians and Muslims, including religious dialogues and conferences and the activities of the Egyptian Family House. The focus of this chapter is on how Egypt's religious elite have dealt with issues that led to conflicts and how they continuously strive to overcome these issues.

Section One: The Contributions of Egyptian Religious Scholars, and Theologians in Addressing Sectarian Conflicts

In light of the occasional conflicts and tensions that erupt between Christians and Muslims in Egypt, numerous religious scholars and theologians have started the process of creating an environment of tolerance between the two groups (Ali, 2021; Hanna, 2018). For example, Ahmed Al-Tayeb decided to cancel religious profession as a requirement on all certificates, documents, and papers issued or dealt with by the university, including students' graduation certificates and their papers and documents at the university (Qadri, 2021; Ezzat, 2017). Therefore, according to Karima, it could be argued that the presence of religious professions on government ID is not sectarian segregation but rather a public affirmation of religious beliefs.

This is a welcome policy as it eliminates the suspicion that the presence of religious profession on government ID involves sectarian segregation rather than a public affirmation of religious beliefs.

This section investigated how prominent religious intellectuals and leaders in Egypt address sectarian points of conflict, including interreligious marriage, conversion, identity, and restrictive government laws around church construction and renovations.

1- Dealing with religious intolerance

In the ongoing religious coexistence of the two dominant religious groups in Egypt, a perception of growing intolerance is leading some Christians to shun their Muslim compatriots (Brok, 2013; Rugh, 2021; Bashir, 2019). For example, an incident recently occurred at St. George's Church in Alexandria, where aspects of it created controversy for Muslims (Elizabeth, 2012; Alnamer, 2005). The play's content describes a Christian character who leaves Christianity to join Islam (Al-Rai, 2005, Mikhail, 2010). According to Monier (2012), the play, which was performed in 2005 and streamed in the media, attracted Muslim protesters all over the country. The play and subsequent protests also drew the attention of the international media. Monier (2012) argues that the media stoked increasing violence among Christians and Muslims, using its powerful influence to shape and incite people to engage in inter-communal conflicts. Such incidents could hinder the process of understanding and peace between the two groups.

In response to the protests, Pope Shenouda III issued a joint statement with the Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar, Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi. The statement was addressed to Muslims and Coptic Christians and affirmed that what "happened in Alexandria sorrowed us all, especially as we are in the blessed month of Ramadan." The religious leaders called on "everyone to calm down in order to spread the blessing of peace, security, and love." The joint statement added, "[if] something was misunderstood, then we must deal with it in a spirit of dialogue and understanding, in particular, as our religions teach us." In support of this statement, Ali Gomaa (2013), the former Grand Mufti of Egypt, added that "any attempt to sow discord among the people of this land must be opposed in the strongest terms possible." These statements critiqued the protests and the media's incitement to violence, not the content of the play. Gomaa also stated that:

Egypt's religious tradition is anchored in a moderate, tolerant view of Islam. We believe that Islamic law guarantees freedom of conscience and expression within the bounds of common decency and equal rights for Christians.

Responding to the fears felt by both Muslims and Christians, President Sisi announced in July 2017 the establishment of the "National Council to Confront Terrorism and Extremism," headed by Sheikh Al-Azhar and the Pope of Alexandria (Al-Dakhakhny, 2019). According to Allam and Zaki (as cited in Zaki, 2018), the decision was an important step in promoting peaceful coexistence. There is no doubt that Egyptian religious leaders such as the Sheikh of Al-Azhar and the Pope of

Alexandria have sought to promote peaceful relations through joint statements that urge tolerance and respect for all religious faiths.

2- Dealing with restrictive legal practices in church construction

Despite citizenship rights denoting that the Egyptian people must have equal access to rights and shoulder an equal number of duties (Pizzo, 2015; Makari, 2007), inequality can be demonstrated in some instances (Mikhail, 2010; Bashir, 2019). According to Mikhail (2010), spats turn into battles when the state ignores laws, making it easier to build mosques than churches. Bashir (2006) argues that when the Egyptian state imposed special rules on some but not all religious communities, it reinforced the Christians' perception that they were treated as second-class citizens. For example, in 2006, over 100 applications were submitted to build new churches, but many of these applicants had to wait more than a decade for a final decision (Riefer-Flanagan, 2016, p. 7; US Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2013). Moreover, some Egyptian laws limit the building of churches, thereby placing an obstacle in the way of giving religious rights to Christians (Tadros, 2010; Human Rights Watch, 2003). In this regard, it could be argued that one of the reasons for conflicts between Copts and Muslims is the inequality between them due to legal practices, with Christians having to fight for the same rights as Muslims.

While overly legalistic approval processes have hampered the building of churches, some Muslim leaders have shown their willingness to participate in the construction and restoration of Christian houses of worship (Zaki, 2018; Fides, 2019; Maureen, 2011). For example, in 2019, Shawky Ibrahim Abdel-Karim Allam announced that according to Islamic law, there is no objection from the Muslim

community for the government to use Muslim money to build churches. He made the pronouncement on a national television programme, thereby promoting equity and justice in the allocation of resources to religious discourse in Egypt (Fides, 2019; Maureen, 2011). In his March 2020 interview and discussion with me, Ahmed Al Tayeb confirmed that. According to Al Khateeb (2022), in Egyptian law, there are legal obligations that must be fulfilled when building any building, including a mosque or church. This means no new construction is approved except after obtaining a license from the competent administrative authorities. However, these laws are stricter on building churches, as building a church also requires approval from the government authorities and the relevant provincial governor. According to Maureen (2011), a legal representative of the church must submit a request, along with the appropriate permits and documentation, to the relevant provincial governor. The governor must approve or deny the request within four months. There is no doubt that Egypt's Church Construction Law is subject to discrimination and lack of standardization. Therefore, these restrictions need to be handled by the authorities to stop discrimination against Christian minorities. In March 2020, Ibrahim Abdel-Karim Allam confirmed during our interview that a large church had already been built in Alamein City with the assistance of "donors," including the government. According to Pope Tawadros, the new Alamein City has the Church of Saint Marina on the northern coast, and a new church is being built. He also pointed out that this achievement in the new Alamein City was with government assistance (Al Khateeb, 2022).

Moreover, the Egyptian government appears to have been trending in a positive direction in recent years about equal rights for all citizens (Gerges, 2020; Report on International Religious Freedom in Egypt, 2018). Gerges (2020) reports that after June 2013, President Sisi decided to improve the dilapidated condition of some church buildings by permitting them to be renovated without a permit. Egypt's court gave the president the sole power to permit the construction of churches through the 1856 Ottoman decree. With this power, President Sisi permitted the building of new churches in every new municipality. Based on this and other initiatives, Christians' rights are more and more being acknowledged and addressed by the Egyptian government, leading to the hope that truly harmonious relations are a near prospect. Moreover, the 2018 Report on International Religious Freedom in Egypt states that progress has been made in implementing the registration process for unlicensed churches and related buildings, with the government authorising the building of 14 new churches since September 2017 (Report on International Religious Freedom in Egypt, 2018; Megahid, 2019). Despite the diversity of beliefs and religions among Muslims and Christians, there is still a high level of cooperation, unity, understanding, and acceptance between the religions regarding the allocation of resources for religious purposes such as the construction of churches.

3- Dealing with restrictions of religious freedom

In Egypt, belief freedom is supported by the exercise of laws based on the culture, values, and principles of the pertinent religions (Rieffer-Flanagan, 2008; Human Rights Watch, 2003). The constitution declares Islam as the state religion,

but it also declares that freedom of belief is absolute in Egypt and that the canonical laws of Christians and Jews are acknowledged in the nation's constitution (Hasan, 2003; Tadros, 2010). Freedom of belief is absolute or unconditional in the sense that no one, under any circumstances, should be coerced into abandoning their faith or embracing a particular religion. This is consistent with the Islamic law that forbids forced conversion (Hamzawy, 2014). This means that the denial of freedom of belief comes from local tyrannical laws, which should not be supported.

However, the declaration of Islam as Egypt's official religion sparked rumblings and then outright protests by Christian groups in Egypt, especially by religious leaders (Gomaa, 2013; Morocco World News, 2013). In support of the protests, Ali Gomaa requested some amendments to the 2013 constitution, stating: "Go endorse the constitution; God supports it, the revised charter, because it favours productivity and stands against corruption, infidelity, hypocrisy, schism, and misbehaviour" (Gomaa, 2013; Morocco World News, 2013, p. 1). Ali Gomaa pointed out that schism means discord (which is what the protests cause). The context suggests that "misbehaviour" here means acting against the constitution or the religious canon. In response, the Egyptian government adopted some policies that enhanced the Copts' religious freedom to align with the demands of some Muslim and Christian leaders (Hamzawy, 2014). The revised 2014 constitution requires legislation to be developed pertaining to the building and renovation of houses of worship (Article 235). Moreover, Article 2 protects all faiths' rights to practice their religion (Rieffer-Flanagan, 2016). The relationship between Muslims

and Christians in Egypt tends to improve when there are collaborative efforts by scholars and religious leaders to support democratic freedoms.

4- Dealing with interreligious marriage and conversions

Conversion is associated with interreligious marriage in Egypt (Joshua, 2017; Krogt, 2016). According to Hassanein (2011), intermarriage is not permitted, so Muslims must convert to Christianity or Christians to Islam in order for the union to be approved by the respective authorities (Krogt, 2016). Meanwhile, according to Egyptian law, it is legal for a Muslim man to marry a Christian woman. Quarrels between Muslims and Copts have erupted in the past due to Christian women converting to Islam in order to marry Muslim men, or vice versa. Hassanein (2011) reports that about 75% of the quarrels that took place between Muslims and Christians over a six-year period concerned the religious conversion of women.

However, despite conversions, interreligious marriage has occasionally become problematic among Muslims and Christians in Egypt (Hager, 2018). An example of a well-known conversion in Egypt occurred in the Buhaira Governorate, when a woman converted to Islam. Wafaa Constantine declared her conversion to Islam in 2004, after which Copts organised huge demonstrations alleging that Constantine had been kidnapped. Their protests were followed by Muslim demonstrations, with protestors alleging that Constantine was in fact tortured and killed after she was handed over to Christians (Hassanein, 2011). Milad Abdel Malak (2011) is sceptical that the woman was actually kidnapped and forced to convert to Islam. Instead, he suggests that the allegations of kidnapping in this and other cases are usually made by the families of the girls in an attempt to ward off

scandal, as Egyptian tradition considers that, for a girl, such an “escape” from her family’s home is a disgrace and a scandal. Despite the constant barrage of petitions delivered to the Egyptian courts by lawyers to recognise the marriage of a Christian man to a Muslim woman, it remains illegal (Hanna, 2018; Nimer, 2003). Shaaban (2006) argues that such issues between the two communities perpetuate conflict.

On the other hand, conversion to Islam is not strictly necessary for a Christian woman to marry a Muslim man, as interfaith marriages are permissible in Islam when the non-Muslim person is female, but Muslim females are forbidden to marry non-Muslim men. To clarify this issue, Ahmed Al-Tayeb, Sheikh of Al-Azhar, delivered a speech addressed to the world in March 2016. Standing in the headquarters of the German Parliament, Al-Tayeb spoke about the marriage of a Muslim woman to a non-Muslim man. He stated:

Marriage in Islam is not a civil contract; rather, it is a religious charter between the two parties. So, if a Muslim marries a non-Muslim woman, such as a Christian, because he believes in Jesus, it is a condition for the completion of his faith, as Islam commands a Muslim to enable his non-Muslim wife to perform the rituals of her religion, and he does not have the right to prevent her from going to her church to worship. Therefore, affection is not lost in the marriage of a Muslim man to a non-Muslim woman. Unlike the marriage of a Muslim woman to a non-Muslim man who does not believe in Messenger Muhammad, he may not enable his Muslim wife to perform the rituals of Islam or respect its sanctities. Therefore, he harms her by disrespecting her religion and insulting her

Messenger and her sanctities. Therefore, affection is lost in the marriage of a Muslim woman to a non-Muslim man. Therefore, Islam forbade it (Mustafa, 2020).

In my interview with Al-Tayeb, he confirmed that Islamic teachings seek to preserve religion for both the Islamic and Christian sides. Therefore, a Christian woman can marry a Muslim man without having to convert.

It is worth mentioning that interreligious marriage and conversions are also complex issues in the Christian Church in Egypt, as Christian priests and ministers cannot marry a couple unless the couple is of the same religion, sect, and denomination (Ali, 2003; Vivian, 2015). Although the Church has consistently refused to approve marriages between different Christian sects, let alone different religions, religious leaders have sought a peaceful solution to the conversion issue (Joshua, 2017; Zaki, 2018). Joshua (2017) reports that Pope Tawadros met with Pope Francis in Cairo in 2017, at which time they made a declaration not to re-baptise new converts in a bid to reduce sectarian violence. This initiative may be controversial, but its practice has led to genuine progress between different Christian sects.

In view of the foregoing, the following could be argued: First, Egyptian religious scholars and theologians have sought over the years to fight against all types of strife, intolerance, and discrimination and to consolidate the unity of Egyptian society. Second, an examination of Christian-Muslim relations in Egypt currently is the best way forward by focusing on the responses of religious leaders and intellectuals to both tension and dialogue. Third, Christians are as much a part of

the Egyptian nation as Muslims or any other people. However, there are still obstacles to be overcome to ensure genuine communal harmony. These obstacles constitute the same underlying issues that have plagued Egyptians for some time, including church-building legislation, conversions, and religious intolerance leading to violence.

Section Two: Initiatives taken by Egyptian Religious Leaders and Intellectuals to Reduce Tensions.

Focusing on religious tensions in Egypt serves to highlight the growing importance of solutions to sectarian conflicts between Muslims and Christians (Papademetriou, 2004; KAICIID, 2018; Hassan, 2020). Papademetriou (2004) argues that religious leaders and scholars have generally sought to establish centres of dialogue and conferences aimed at promoting the peaceful coexistence of Muslims and Christians in Egypt (USIP, 2011).

This section identifies initiatives that have been taken by Egyptian religious scholars and intellectuals to enhance peaceful coexistence between Muslims and Christians. The section also explores practices that have helped to achieve enduring peace between the two groups. Some of the initiatives proposed as solutions include dialogue, conferences, and the work of the Egyptian Family House.

1- Religious dialogue

All too often, interreligious conflicts are founded on misconceptions about other religions (Aslan, 2013; Tvecom, 2017; Gomaa, 2012). Aslan (2013) argues that radical groups tend to develop a biased view of other religions, such as

Christianity, dismissively applying labels like “minorities” and the phrase “Aqbat al-Mahgar” (“the Coptic diaspora”) that tends to carry with it negative connotations between Copts and Muslims, inciting violence (Messieh, 2012). For example, the purposeful misuse of various terms led to political turmoil in Egypt during the reign of President Morsi, at a time when Christians did not enjoy the same legal rights as Muslims (Messieh, 2012; Hulsman, 2015). Rieffer-Flanagan (2016) explains that the Muslim Brotherhood’s rise to power between 2011 and 2013 and their policies that Islamized Egypt’s political system were mainly “to blame for the lack of freedom of religion and belief in Egypt” (p. 8). The organisation was largely classified as a terrorist group (Rieffer-Flanagan, 2016; Zollner, 2019; Reuters, 2013), yet such labels can instill general feelings of mistrust and hatred between Muslims and Christians.

In response to widespread misconceptions and mislabelling, the Grand Imam Ahmed Al-Tayeb and some fellow Al-Azhar clerics held dialogues in which they shared with the Copts the primacy of their inclusion in Egyptian national identity (Fuad, 2015). In the opening statement of a dialogue with intellectuals in May 2011 to discuss the “Egypt Future Document,” the Grand Imam expressed his concerns about the use of the term “minorities,” which he argues connotes distinction and separation and encourages division between Muslims and Christians (Fuad, 2015). The Grand Imam also stated that religious leaders and the media should not use divisive terms. It is worth noting that “Coptic” is the correct usage since the word “Coptic” means Egyptian;

therefore, it is correct to call all Egyptians Copts (Said, 2000; Abdou, 2017).

The fourth article emphasises:

Full respect for diversity and the value of dialogue, the necessity of avoiding the declaration of others to be infidels (“takfir”), and abuse of religion and using it to divide citizens from one another.

Egypt’s Future Document reflects a concerted effort by Muslim and Christian leaders and intellectuals to establish an understanding of their basic human rights as they pertain to Egyptian nationality and democracy. They also aim to achieve a sense of mutual understanding to resolve the problem of division and inequality.

In 2007 and 2008, the United States Institute of Peace hosted the Annual Wasat Generation Dialogue in Cairo, in collaboration with the Al-Ahram Centre for Political and Strategic Studies and Georgetown University’s Centre for Democracy. Based on the decisions reached in the diverse interfaith dialogue sessions led by USIP, more informative publications have been made with regard to Egypt’s interfaith peacekeeping. USIP’s “Crescent and Dove” publication has tackled various concepts on interfaith peacekeeping in Egypt (USIP, 2011), and USIP has also printed a book on Interfaith Dialogue and Peacebuilding and Islam and Democracy to bolster interfaith harmony (USIP, 2011). Further, the USIP grant programme has funded interfaith cooperation conferences and co-opted members from both faiths for improved Muslim-Christian relations in Egypt.

In a recent study, Abdo (2016) describes how theologians have successfully used religious dialogues to connect human rights with nationality and democracy

(Allam, 2021; Elsässer, 2010; Berenson, 2017). Zaki (2014) reports an initiative involving 20 Egyptians and Arabs, including representatives of the Ministry of Endowments, the Orthodox Church, ministers, and media figures. This group travelled to Brussels to open a dialogue with Europeans on the transition to democracy after the Arab Spring revolutions. In conducting the meetings, their purpose was to discuss the evolving relationship between Europe and Arabs (Rahouma, 2014; Hassan, 2016). These and other recent religious dialogues have given birth to an evolving peaceful rapprochement between Muslims and Christians.

2- Religious conferences

Religious conferences are catalysts for discussing the main issues underlying various conflicts between the groups, such as religious freedom, the building of churches, and outbreaks of violence (Rutland, 2020; Reuters, 2013). According to Rutland (2020), conferences have provided crucial opportunities to create connections between Muslims and Christians. For example, the World Council of Churches (WCC) held an important conference in 2014, with Pope Tawadros making critical remarks on peaceful interfaith coexistence in Egypt (World Council of Churches, 2014; Merkley, 2001). One of the most important critical remarks that Pope Tawadros made concerned religious hate speech by extremist groups and extremist ideology. Pope Tawadros further claimed that it is the responsibility of the state to protect churches as religious attacks break national unity. The WCC is a forum that spearheads timely advances and dialogue on peace promotion (Merkley, 2001). It brings together churches in the East and West to discuss peacekeeping,

justice, and unity among Christians and Muslims in hotspots like Egypt (WCC, 2014).

In 2016, Ibrahim Abdel-Karim Allam, the Grand Mufti of Egypt, convened a foreign affairs conference in Brussels to address interfaith violence in Egypt (Multimedia Centre, 2016). Abdel-Karim Allam also made a significant contribution at the Egyptian House of Ifta, a religious institution that works side-by-side with the Al-Azhar institution. Dar al-Ifta al-Misriyyah is one of the most influential organisations in Egypt on matters of Islamic law and research (Fides, 2019), with much of the interfaith cooperation in Egypt being informed by this institution. Through the Dar al-Ifta al-Misriyyah office, Ibrahim Abdel-Karim Allam clarified several Islamic teachings that promote cooperation and peaceful coexistence between Muslims and Christians (Multimedia Centre, 2016). Ibrahim Abdel-Karim Allam confirmed that places of worship such as churches and mosques should not be destroyed but rather protected and maintained (Fides, 2019).

In addition, Ahmad al-Tayyib addressed a conference in Egypt under the theme “Al-Azhar International Conference on the Rejuvenation of Islamic Thought,” held in late 2019. In his speech, al-Tayyib underscored the need for the cooperation of interfaith leaders to sustain peace in the region (Hellyer, 2020). The Anglican Diocese of Egypt has similarly held numerous conferences under the “Better Together” project, which establishes a peaceful coexistence journey (Faith to Action Network, 2018). The core objectives of these conferences are to minimise violent extremism in Egypt, confront the challenge of religious radicalization, and promote better interreligious relationships (Anis, 2013). Conferences have been held in Old

Cairo, the El-Salam city community, and Ezbet El-Nakhl. Other conferences on interfaith dialogue and peaceful coexistence were held in 2018 (Faith to Action Network, 2018). Additionally, under the umbrella “Together for Egypt, and Together We Develop Egypt,” 30 imams and 30 priests worked together on community development projects in a bid to promote improved Muslim-Christian relations.

Religious scholars and theologians have played a key role in addressing and reducing tensions between Muslims and Christians. The purpose of the conferences is to focus on applying religious teachings that call for cooperation and peaceful coexistence among all Egyptians.

3- Egyptian Family House

The Egyptian Family House espouses well-defined roles with regard to peacekeeping. The project's mission is to promote common values among cultures, religions, and civilisations (The Orthodox Cultural Centre, 2016; Sonia, 2020). It also seeks to establish a new discourse on ethical and ideological advocacy in youth upbringing for the sustaining of peace and to denounce interreligious hatred. Further, the House utilises Egypt's cultural legacy to enhance cooperation among people from different religious backgrounds through regular meetings and the ideological contributions of members (The Orthodox Cultural Centre, 2016).

The administrative organs within the Egyptian Family House comprise the executive board, the religious discourse committee, and the education committee. The youth committee, family culture committee, and executive emergency committee are also active units with clearly delineated mandates. Under the most

recent committee structure, the board is chaired by Tawadros and al-Tayeb. Other board members include Mohamed Hamdy Zaqzouq of the Al-Azhar Dialogue Centre in Egypt, Shawki Allam of the Mufti of Egypt, Anba Ermia of the Coptic Cultural Centre, Ibrahim Isaac of the Coptic Catholic patriarch of Alexandria, and Andrea Zaki of the evangelical denomination. Additional members are Mouneer Hanna of the episcopal Anglican Diocese of Northern Africa in Egypt and Abbas Showman from the Azhar undersecretary. The House's board of trustees includes Ibrahim Mahlab from the presidential aid for strategic and national projects, Mohamed Mokhtar Gomaa from Awqaf, Minister, Mohi el-Din Afifi, the Secretary-General of Islamic Research Complex, along with Inas Abdel Dayem (minister of culture), Khaled Abdel Aziz (youth minister), Nabila Mak (immigration minister), and Alexandrina el Feqi (director of Bibliotheca). Mofeed Shehab, the former minister of legal affairs in Egypt, and Abdel Sallam, the legal adviser at the Al-Azhar dialogue centre, are also board members (State Information Service, Egypt, 2018).

The Egyptian Family House constitutes a robust social, religious, and political network that impacts interreligious matters. Recent reformation has resulted in a renewed institution dedicated to its initial mission and vision, which is to positively affect Egypt's religious harmony (Kamal, 2020). The House is viewed as the model of peaceful religious coexistence in Egypt and beyond, with religious leaders being the pillars of its success. Practical partnerships are embraced in the Egyptian Family House through contemporary religious leaders (Jayson, 2015), who then extend the mission and vision of the House to their areas of jurisdiction (Anglican Communion News Service, 2014). For instance, Fr. Arsanious extended

the regional branch of the institution to his region, while Fr. Mikhail and Sheikh Emad worked in the Kilo Cairo slum, where they disseminated their interreligious cooperation at the grassroots level.

Furthermore, the religious leaders' exchange programme that runs under the auspices of the Egyptian Family House has created a strong network of leaders in Egypt's interfaith cooperation (Anglican Communion News Service, 2014). This has made the House fundamental in promoting interfaith cooperation and tolerance in Egypt and elsewhere around the world, due in large part to its expansive network that connects the government with local communities.

At the same time, the Egyptian Family House has initiated numerous national projects that involve cooperation between Muslims and Christians (Aboshady, 2019). While extremist groups have endeavoured to cause interfaith conflicts in Egypt, interfaith dialogue and cooperation by the Orthodox Church under Pope Tawadros and Al-Azhar have promoted religious tolerance through House programmes. In 2018, the House trained a group of 70 priests, sheikhs, and pastors on how to engage in activities that promote religious unity (Sonia, 2020). The training is essential to enabling interfaith dialogue at every level and for embracing social development approaches that are inclusive of both faiths. The group members meet four times a year for a three-day retreat, where they dialogue on diverse matters related to interfaith cooperation in Egypt. Other activities undertaken at the retreat include a visit to places of worship and museums, after which the members disseminate the group message to their local communities. The participating members are drawn from different regions all across Egypt, thus having a national

impact (Jayson, 2015). The establishment of regional branches has made it easy for the Egyptian Family House to manage Muslim-Christian cooperation to avert violence. The House's ability to foster Muslim-Christian unity in Egypt largely relies on the leaders' willingness to get involved at the grassroots level.

At its core, the Egyptian Family House has a key purpose: to alleviate sectarian disputes and heal the nation from terrorist attacks (Sonia, 2020). The House members go to places where religious animosity is experienced and attempt to calm the situation (Jayson, 2015). A case in point occurred at a dispute in Hurghada, where two families (Christian and Muslim) engaged in violence, resulting in physical injuries. The Al-Azhar representative and the Red Sea Church governorate branch of the Family House successfully resolved the conflict (Sonia, 2020). The details of the disputes between the Coptic and Muslim families go back to 2016, where the Muslim family resided in one of the properties owned by the Coptic family, where they disagreed over the rental value of the residence, and a quarrel broke out between the two families, which led to the injury of some people from both sides, who went to the police department, and a report was written about the incident. This was followed by presenting the injured and the parties to the problem to the Public Prosecution in Hurghada (Arafa, 2016). The Egyptian Family House ended the dispute, resulting in a reconciliation. The reconciliation session was attended by Sheikh Saber Saeed, a representative of Al-Azhar Al-Sharif in the Egyptian Family House, Red Sea branch, and His Eminence Pastor Benjamin, a representative of the Red Sea churches in the Egyptian Family House in the Red Sea Governorate (Sonia, 2020). While the Egyptian Family House has contributed

immensely to better Muslim-Christian cooperation in Egypt, the voices of other religious leaders are also a critical ingredient in promoting religious harmony. The Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Al-Tayeb, and Pope Shenouda are considered among the foremost religious leaders seeking to address and alleviate religious extremism in Egypt (Kamal, 2020). Although many legalists reject these reconciliation meetings, as they merely end up silencing attempts to achieve justice in the interest of "keeping the peace" (Khalil, 2016), others see that these reconciliation meetings are an integral part of society where Muslims and Christians citizens continue to resort to such sessions to settle disputes because they see sessions as a peaceful and amicable solution to crises and also because of their ability to quickly contain and end disputes, especially in light of continuing sectarian and religious tensions across the country (Afifi, 2015). I argue that the presence of effective social mechanisms such as reconciliation meetings that help reduce sectarian conflicts and reduce the intensity of tensions that accompany them is positive, important, and required.

The Egyptian Family House has established several branches in the governorates of Egypt in order to crystallise a new religious discourse aimed at eliminating religious rivalries (Hamdy, 2012; Starr, 2009). Casper (2015) relays an incident that took place in Port Said, where Father Kyrillos and Sheikh Hassan helped to resolve a clash between a Muslim family and a Christian family before it escalated into a full-fledged sectarian incident. In my interview with Rifaat Saeed, head of the council of dialogue and relations in the Evangelical Church in Egypt, Saeed confirmed that Muslim and Christian leaders make pastoral visits to villages like Minya Governorate in Upper Egypt, aiming to deal on a personal, one-on-one

basis with different levels of social problems and strife. For instance, in 2016, Minya Governorate in Upper Egypt witnessed a clash between a Muslim family and a Christian family, which led to a conflict between the two parties (Issa, 2016). Issa (2016) confirmed that the cause of the conflict was boys throwing stones at a truck carrying a number of Christian female students, according to what was stated in a report received by the Minya Security Director, Major General Muhammad Sadiq Al-Halabawi. According to Ahmed (2018), the clashes resulted in the injuries of nine people before the security forces could take control of the situation. In response, Saeed and Sheikh from Al-Azhar held a traditional reconciliation session and called for a culture of tolerance to maintain peaceful coexistence and eliminate strife (Ahmed, 2018). The efforts of different religious leaders to work together have gone a long way towards addressing social problems and strife. Saeed and Sheikh from Al-Azhar have selected a neutral location, and they are assessing the damages and compensating the Christian girls with financial sums and announcing a ruling along with a verbatim report of the reconciliation, which includes the articles of the agreement and the decisions of the committee. This document is then signed by both parties.

In view of the foregoing, the following can be argued: First, Egyptian Muslims and Christian scholars and leaders have engaged in past and present peace initiatives between their respective Muslims and Christian brethren. One of the outstanding contributions of Muslim and Christian leaders is their proactive launch of the Egyptian Family House. Such an initiative has assisted both religions in overcoming barriers and hatred between them. The Egyptian Family House is an

ongoing experiment of an organisational, practical, and representational nature for containing religious tension and reforming religious discourse. A second aspect that emerges from this chapter is the many initiatives undertaken by religious leaders and intellectuals to promote the spirit of love and brotherhood between Christians and Muslims. In an unprecedented initiative, Ahmed al-Tayeb and Pope Francis signed a declaration entitled “Human fraternity for world peace and living together” (Kårtveit, 2017; Agence France-Presse, 2019). Kårtveit (2017) suggests that “Egyptian Copts very much crave the kind of unity that these gatherings are meant to invoke, and to some extent, their future in Egypt depends on” (p. 6). Additionally, this chapter shows that initiatives such as those mentioned above reinforce the idea that Egypt is deeply grounded in a spirit of love and brotherhood between the two dominant religious groups, despite occasional eruptions of sectarian violence. Although it is unclear what effect these initiatives have had on Egyptian Christian and Muslim society, they can at least be taken as an indication of harmonious relations at the leaders’ level.

Chapter Two

The Impact of Religion on Egyptian Politics Through Presidential Speeches

Introduction

In the context of the relationship between religion and politics, religion has often been used by politicians for political gain (Anjarwati & Trimble, 2015; Ibrahim, 2017; Hebbard, 2010). Hamdan (2019) explains that some Egyptian presidents habitually exploit the relationship between religion and politics to achieve specific aims, such as using religious texts to legitimise their actions or to order their clerics to issue fatwas (Belge & Karakoc, 2015; Henderson, 2011). According to Gerges (2018), Sadat, in 1971, took advantage of a political situation to change secular Arab nationalism into Islamism by declaring, “I am a Muslim president of a Muslim country” (Mohammed, 2013; Ali, 2002; Brownlee, 2013). Atta-Alla (2012) reports that in making this declaration, “Sadat renewed the commitment to Islamic symbols and made them part of Egyptian government policy” (p. 479). Tadros (2009), however, sees that Sadat's self-appointment as “the believer president” set him up for sectarian clashes (Farah, 2013; Zeidan, 1999). Although Sadat's speeches were not overtly anti-Christian, one important reason for the intensification of conflicts between Muslims and Christians was Sadat’s increasingly tolerant stance towards the Muslim Brotherhood. Mohamed (2021) reports that President Morsi also exploited the relationship between religion and politics for specific ends (George, 2014; Ahmed, 2018). According to Ahmed (2018), Morsi, in 2012, took advantage

of a deteriorating political situation by declaring, "Islam is the solution to all of society's issues." George (2014) stated that Morsi allied with Muslim Brothers to seize power; he also angered the Copts, who felt themselves being edged out of power.

Islam has been the official state religion in Egypt for centuries, so Sadat's speech highlighting Islam should be expected in a Muslim-majority country (Almunyi, 2020). Moreover, Sadat was not alone in portraying himself as the leader of the Islamic faith. According to Sabih (2017), Nasser was the Arab and Muslim ruler most keen on Islam and spreading the spirit of the true religion in social justice and equality between people. According to Obada (2020), Nasser wrote a short article in the Al-Ahram newspaper, which was published in 1955, in which he said, "As Muslims, we have to obey God and obey the Messenger by being a hand against those who are hostile to us, at peace with those who make peace with us" (p. 7). According to Littlefield (2016), Sadat introduced himself publicly as the "faithful president" who sought to establish a country of "science and faith," thereby "establishing himself as leader of the Islamic faith" (p. 5). According to Ghatrifi (2011), Mubarak's statement in his famous speech in 2010 was: "As I am Muslim, I am addressing the speech today directly to Muslims and Copts, their elders, and their youth." According to Kirkpatrick (2012), Morsi stated that Islam is the solution. According to Abdel Adim (2016), in his meeting with deputies and representatives of society, Sisi said, "I am only a Muslim. I am neither a Muslim Brotherhood nor a Salafi" (p. 2). In highlighting Islam, the comments by Egyptian presidents did not cause clashes between Muslims and Christians, except in the era of Sadat and Morsi,

who both embraced the Muslim Brotherhood, which led to creating policies that were discriminatory, and these created clashes between the two groups. Therefore, Hamden, Gerges, Tados, and Littlefield's claim that Egyptian presidents were the religious leaders, meaning that most were careful to initiate policies that favoured Muslims or caused clashes between Muslims and Copts, is incorrect. Islam is a comprehensive religion that is inherently non-discriminatory, and legislation in Egypt has long been founded mainly on Islamic sources. Which means that Islam was non-discriminatory, but policies initiated by some presidents might have been discriminatory, such as the era of Sadat and Morsi, as previously mentioned.

The speeches given by Egyptian Muslim presidents provide ample evidence of their efforts to refrain from initiating policies that discriminate against Copts and to promote peaceful relationships between Copts and Muslims. For example, Egyptian presidents have strived to increase the representation of Copts in government, overcome sectarianism, support the values of citizenship among Muslims and Christians, and enhance economic cooperation between Copts and Muslims. In this context, the present chapter seeks to show first that Islam has had a positive influence on politics in Egypt, second that Islam has promoted cooperation and tolerance between Egypt's Christians and Muslims in times of political, economic, and social unrest, and third that Egyptian Muslim presidents have consistently promoted peaceful relations between the two groups.

The chapter is divided into two sections. Section One will show how Egyptian presidents have used Islamic religion in their speeches to promote peace between Christians and Muslims. It will shed light on how Egyptian presidents

addressed incidents of sectarian strife that resulted from Coptic political representation within state institutions. Next, it will explore what Egyptian presidents said in their speeches to address the situation of economic unrest and the emigration of Copts. By considering the speeches of Egyptian presidents, I will investigate whether these speeches contributed to fostering peace and promoting respect between Christians and Muslims or instead led to controversy and conflict.

Section Two identifies key initiatives taken by Egyptian presidents to encourage tolerance and cooperation between Christians and Muslims in general, including organising the construction of churches and spreading the spirit of patriotism of patriotism, tolerance, and cooperation. Additionally, it investigates initiatives undertaken by Egyptian presidents to foster peace between the two main religious groups.

This chapter will focus on the speeches by Egyptian presidents, in which they make several references to the teachings of Islam and its role in promoting peace between Christians and Muslims. Because the religion of the state is Islam and Egyptian presidents are all Muslims, the chapter will focus only on their references to Islam and its role in promoting peace in the political realm. Due to their political position, Egyptian presidents have carried considerable influence in shaping public awareness, attitude, and behaviour regarding crises and strife between Muslims and Copts.

Section One: Speeches of Egyptian Presidents During Political, Economic, and Social Unrest

Incidents of sectarian tensions arising in Egypt have increased in recent history, negatively influencing relations between Muslims and Christians. These tension-related incidents started in 1973 and came to a head in 2011 with the revolution (Admindar, 2014; Saad, 2015; Manea, 2016). The tensions affected Muslim and Christian relations across all social, economic, and political spheres (Saad, 2015; Ali, 2002), as they involved not only sectarian strife but also Coptic political representation within state institutions and the steadily increasing rate of Copt emigration (Pennington, 2006; Zaki, 2009). These tensions have been addressed by Egyptian presidents, whose stated goal since Egypt's independence has been to promote peace and unity through equality, tolerance, citizenship, and cooperation among all Egyptians (Kılınc, 2020; Guirguis, 2012; Gerges, 2018).

In a recent study, Hassan and Shalaby (2018) examined a selection of political speeches, finding that Egyptian presidents over the past few decades have heavily promoted peace- and justice-related issues. For example, after the Egyptian revolution in 2011, tensions between Christians and Muslims propelled the country into chaos. Egyptian president-elect Mohammed Morsi gave his first televised speech in 2012 on Egyptian state TV. He is calling for unity and saying he carries "a message of peace" to the Egyptian people. Morsi addressed the country's Coptic, saying "Egypt was always composed of both Christians and Muslims, and it will remain this way" (Podolsky, 2012). The current Egyptian president, Abdel Fatah al-Sisi, delivered a speech in 2015 during a ceremony in Cairo for the Coptic Christmas

mass, in which he stated: “Both of Egypt’s Muslims and Christians are celebrating this occasion, asserting that they are “one entity” in the world’s eyes" (Volkh, 2015). Sisi has been supportive of both Copts and Muslims on issues regarding peaceful coexistence between the two groups.

1- Coptic political representation

Coptic representation within Egyptian state institutions is one of the most important challenges facing Copts (Katie, 2014; Kılınç, 2020; Carter, 2017). According to Kılınç (2020), proportional representation for Copts in ministries and parliament can only be achieved through elections. However, as Copts are a minority in Egypt, elections alone are likely not going to resolve the issue of proportional representation for them (Carter, 2017).

Egyptian presidents have sought justice and equality between Copts and Muslims in terms of representation of Copts in government (Al-Qasas, 2023; Guirguis, 2012). Al-Qasas (2023) reports that Nasser increased the representation of Copts in government, appointing eight Copts to the council after the success of only one Coptic candidate through secret balloting. Nasser’s policy continued to grant Copts the vast majority of the available seats. By 1969, the number of Coptic deputies in the People's Assembly had reached nine, which consisted of 348 deputies in total (Bishara, 2011). It is worth noting that the reason for the weak representation of Copts in the People's Assembly was due to the sweeping nationalisations by Nasser, which were against the interests of Copts and will be dealt with in a later section below. This led to the reluctance of Copts to engage in parliamentary life as well as the desire not to engage in the political process. Guirguis (2012) notes that

Nasser was keen to include an article in the 1953 constitution that allowed the president the right to appoint ten representatives in the National Assembly (Alroeya, 2016). Nasser also asserted that justice and equality were religious principle called for by all religions. In 1965, he addressed the various social circles involved in Egyptian politics, such as the Christian, Jewish, and Muslim circles (Abdel Nasser, 1954). In his address, Nasser stated: "This revolution arose, and it calls for... love, equality, and equal opportunities among the first principles advocated by the heavenly religions. Because with love, equality, and equal opportunities, we can build the right society, the right society that we want and that religion has called for." Elghayesh (2016) explains that Nasser used a form of religious language, or "version of Islam, which did not oppose but rather endorsed the kinds of secularising and modernising change" Egyptian people wanted (p. 405).

Additionally, Nasser used the principle of justice and equality in political representation, specifically in relation to Copts, which shows the influence of Islamic religion at the political level in Egypt. Nasser aimed to bring Egyptians together under the umbrella of a national project that made no distinctions between religions (Onion, Sullivan, and Mullen, 2010). In commenting on Nasser's speech, Guiney (2008) asserts: "Christians continue to be represented in the cabinet and parliament" (Guiney, 2008, p. 5). Having been given equality in the constitution and an equal opportunity (at least theoretically) to be elected to Egypt's representative bodies (Carter, 2017), Copts began enjoying equal civil rights under Nasser's post-independence secular socialist state (1956–1970) (Scott, 2010). Nasser also sought the assistance of Coptic technocrats in public positions. Prominent Christian figures

in the government included Dr. Kamal Ramzy Esteno as Minister of Supply and Kamal Henry Abadir as Minister of Transportation (Al-Gharabawi, 2021). Brown (2000) reports that since 1952, Christians have been active in the political affairs of Egypt and that the formation of a Coptic activist group further increased the representation of Christians in government. Considering these changes, therefore, it may be safe to say that while Nasser's own motivation may have been secular, he used the language of the people—i.e., Islam—to gain support for his policies for justice and equality for Copts at the political level.

Sadat continued with Nasser's policies by appointing ten Coptic representatives in the National (People's) Assembly, which consisted of 360 deputies in total (Ahmed, 2018). Despite the Muslim Brotherhood's control of Parliament, Sadat called for greater representation of the Copts. In his speech at the National Assembly in 1971, Sadat stated, "The door must be opened for everyone who wants to join the parliament elections" (Ahmed, 2018). By 1979, the number of Coptic deputies in the People's Assembly had reached fourteen, of which three were in the National Party and one in the Opposition. It is worth noting that the political alliance of Sadat with the Muslim Brotherhood resulted in the weak representation of Copts in the People's Assembly. Although political representation of the Copts is still low compared to the proportion of Copts to Muslims in Egypt, the ongoing inclusion of Copts in the Egyptian government showed that Sadat did not discriminate against Egyptians on the basis of religion (Imam, 2016). Elghayesh (2016) affirms that Sadat "became more tolerant of Coptic (representatives)" and that Sadat's speech on Copts and political freedom led to their positive contribution to the democratic process. By

striving to achieve justice and equality in politics between Christians and Muslims, Sadat was at the same time striving to achieve peace between the two groups and peace in Egypt. Undoubtedly, Sadat had realised that giving Copts their rights would guarantee justice and equality for all Egyptians. Therefore, the political representation of the Copts remained as it was in the era of Nasser.

Sadat's successor, Mubarak, used his constitutional right to appoint representatives in the People's Assembly and the Shura Council. Of the ten people he appointed to the two councils, seven were Copts (Kılınç, 2017; Melcangi, 2012). In his political speech before the seventh annual conference of the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) he led, Mubarak said that Egypt is "a civil state" where all Egyptians, "Muslims like Copts", live with equal citizenship (Ezzat, 2010). Promoting equal political representation for Copts and Muslims became a rallying cry in Mubarak's political speeches, showing the president's support of Coptic political representation. According to Kılınç (2017), Mubarak was well aware of the importance not only of the principle of equality but also of equal opportunity and how these two principles contributed to stabilising a society. Accordingly, he gladly expanded Coptic political freedoms for the overall benefit of Egypt. For example, Mubarak appointed Fikri Makram Ebeid Deputy Prime Minister and a second Copt as Minister of State for Emigration (Melcangi, 2012, p. 8). Additionally, both Christians and Muslims obtained leading posts in Egyptian society and had a large presence in political representation (Melcangi, 2012). Although Muslims always have a larger political representation than Christians, efforts by Mubarak sought to increase their representation. Tadros (2013) notes that "Mubarak's rule witnessed a

significant opening of the political and media spheres in the country” (p. 21). Through state-decreed equality among all Egyptians, Christians gained increasing political representation in government.

When President Morsi took over the reins of power in 2012, Copts were eager to expand their political representation even further (Ahmed, 2018; Abdel Hakam, 2014). However, Morsi only appointed one Christian, Samir Morcos, as his assistant during the democratic transition (Georg, 2014). This led Copts to believe that Morsi was bending to Muslim pressure, which in turn made some Copts fear that Morsi’s promised increase in Coptic political representation would not happen (George, 2014; Mohamed, 2014). Despite resigning from the Muslim Brotherhood, Morsi remained under their control, and they were his major supporters in the political process (El Desouky, 2013). It is worth noting that the Muslim Brotherhood does not hide its strong anti-Christian position or its mandate to consolidate all political power under Islam. Undoubtedly, during Morsi’s rule, the representation and position of Copts took a step backwards, and Morsi himself did not contribute to political opportunities for Copts. Morsi sidelined Copts through his new constitution of 2012, which did not include the participation of Copts in its writing.

When he succeeded Morsi as president, Abdel Fattah Sisi made it his policy to renew the government’s earlier commitment to increase the representation of Copts in parliament and leadership positions. As a result, 31 Copts were elected deputies in 2021, compared to just five in 2012 (Hamdi, 2021). In his speech at the National Assembly in 2016, Sisi stated:

Here we see the largest number of deputies in the history of Egypt, most of them new political faces, which guarantees us an infusion of new blood into the arteries of political life, as well as the unprecedented representation of youth, women, Copts, and people with special needs. This large amount of partisan and independent representation in Parliament demonstrates and proves that we have a benign and healthy political movement within Egyptian society.

Aware of the importance of increasing societal representation, supporting political life, and balancing the sects of society, Sisi explained that all religions call for coexistence on human foundations and the spreading of the values of love and equality (Fattah, 2021). Since becoming president, Sisi has been supportive of Copts and Muslims on issues such as equality and Christian representation in government.

From the above, it is clear that most Egyptian presidents have not only supported but also actively worked towards ensuring the equality and political participation of Copts and Muslims. The outcome of their efforts is that Copts and Muslims today occupy senior positions in the Egyptian government. For example, according to J. D. Pennington, Nasser's government included three Christian cabinet ministers, two of whom were Fikry Makram Ebeid, Deputy Prime Minister for parliamentary affairs, and Butros Ghali, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs (Pennington, 1982, p. 168). Egyptian presidents have, except for Morsi, encouraged the political participation of Copts. Morsi regarded them as a minority and felt that they should not be in high leadership positions. During his presidency, the Muslim Brotherhood controlled the main political positions, namely parliament, the

presidency, and the cabinet. His political alliance with the Muslim Brotherhood resulted in weak political representation of the Copts. Islam, on the other hand, aims to treat all people equally, whether Muslim or not, and this aim is reflected in the policies of those Egyptian presidents whose stated goal since Egypt's independence has been to promote peace and unity through equality and cooperation among all Egyptians. Currently, under the presidency of Sisi, the general outlook for equal treatment of Copts is better than under Morsi. He has sought to reform the structure of the state to provide protection and equality for minorities. Sisi has extended more protections to Christians.

While the Egyptian presidents have sought to promote equality and cooperation between the two groups, the more common challenges that Egyptian presidents face on a daily basis in Egypt are sectarian conflicts between the two groups. It has proven very difficult to prevent armed attacks by extremist groups in Egypt. Egyptian presidents have tried to minimise violence by promoting notions of religiously mediated citizenship. In addition, they have enforced curfews and arrested leaders of the Brotherhood suspected of incitement. Egyptian presidents' efforts sought to address sectarian violence and achieve justice.

2- Dealing with incidents of sectarian strife

Sectarian conflicts have played a compelling role in Egypt's social upheavals since 1973 (Farrell, 1981; Tadros, 2009). These conflicts vary in type and outcome between individual incidents, with some turning into larger sectarian events involving mass violence and the targeting of places of worship, especially churches

(Manea, 2016; Brownlee, 2013). Confessional differences are the primary source of conflict, with extremist groups playing a tangible role in increasing the occurrence of sectarian strife between Muslims and Copts (Bishara, 2010). Egyptian presidents have strived to overcome sectarianism by outlawing extremist groups and supporting the values of citizenship among Muslims and Christians (Abdo, 2000; Al-Bishri, 2016).

According to Bishara (2010), one of the main reasons why Egypt did not witness any sectarian events during Nasser's presidency is that the Muslim Brotherhood at that time had embraced concepts of democracy and citizenship. Nasser mentioned in his famous 1953 speech that the Egyptian regime would cooperate with the Brotherhood on the condition that they follow the citizenship path. Thus, Nasser allowed Copts to have greater rights, and some even envisioned the Copts as active participants in government and society (Scott, 2010). Further, Al-Gharabawi (2021) notes that the Copts in general and the Egyptian Church in particular supported the movement of army officers on July 23, 1952, like the rest of the Egyptians. The overall relationship of the Copts with the state in this era was positive, which is the main reason why Egypt did not witness any sectarian events during Nasser's presidency (Bishara, 2010). Moreover, Nasser's implementation of the concept of citizenship helped to remove many barriers separating social classes. Many of the legal concepts of citizenship that have been applied in Egypt are based on the Islamic religion. Al-Bishri writes in his book *The State and the Church* that the principle of citizenship derives from certain provisions of Islamic law (Al-Bishri, 2016). In view of the general principles the concept of citizenship in Islamic law is

based on, namely equality, justice, and freedom, Islamic law established the concept of citizenship clearly, and this appears through the Medina Document that the Prophet Mohamed concluded when he came to Medina in 622 and began to regulate the relationship of Muslims with others. The document clarified the rights and duties of every individual and regulated the relationship between the city's Muslim residents and Christians and Jews in a way that achieves justice and equality (Al-Mutlaq; Muhammad, 2011). According to Ahmed Al-Tayeb, citizenship was the first Islamic practice of the ruling system in the era of the Prophet Muhammad, and this practice did not involve any kind of discrimination or exclusion of any group of society at that time (Jundia, n. b.). The agreement of Medina states:

This is a prescript of Muhammad between the faithful and the followers of Islam ("Muslims") from among the Quraish and the people of Madina, and those who may be under them may join them and take part in wars in their company... And that those who will obey us among the Jews will have help and equality. Neither shall they be oppressed nor will any help be given against them (Jundia, n, b).

The Sadat era, however, saw an increase in tensions between Christians and Muslims that further intensified with the rise of more extremist Islamic groups (McCallum, 2012; Guiney, 2008). McCallum (2012) explains that two important events occurred during the Sadat presidency that had negative effects on the overall relations between Muslims and Copts: the crisis between Pope Shenouda and President Sadat and the El-Zawya al-Hamra incident. According to Guiney (2008),

sectarian strife was ignited during the volatile relationship between Sadat and Pope Shenouda. McCallum (2012) notes that tensions were raised in 1977 when Sadat attempted to introduce sharia law into the Egyptian legal system (p. 390).

It is worth noting that the 1927 constitution enshrined sharia law, and it has remained in all subsequent Egyptian constitutions without change and was approved unanimously without reservation or discussion. Entelis and Heikal (2012) explain that Pope Shenouda's refusal to promote Coptic pilgrimages to Jerusalem led to tension between Sadat and the Pope. Saad (2015) and Ali (2002) also point out that Pope Shenouda recorded his rejection of the peace agreement with Israel and confirmed this by deciding not to go with President Sadat on his visit to Israel in 1977 after the war. This naturally created a state of hostility between Sadat and the Pope (Manea, 2016). This was the real reason for the beginning of the tension between Sadat and Pope Shenouda.

It was important for Sadat to clarify that peace outside Egypt means peace within Egypt. Recall that Sadat was known as "the believing president," who highlighted the importance of both science and faith and made "peace" a public aim in Egypt both domestically and internationally. In his famous speech in the Knesset in 1977, Sadat said: "I bring to you the message of peace, the message of the people of Egypt, who do not know fanaticism and whose sons, Muslims, Christians, and Jews, live in a spirit of friendship, love, and tolerance" (Pennington, 1982). Sadat emphasised that tolerance is the nature of the Egyptian citizen, whether he is Muslim or Christian. Although the speech of Sadat in the Knesset was political, he

emphasised that tolerance is the nature of the Egyptian citizen, whether he is Muslim or Christian.

Sadat's tolerance also extended to the Muslim Brotherhood, which then increased hostility between Sadat and Pope Shenouda. According to Afifi (2018), Sadat ordered the mass release of Islamist prisoners and tolerated their presence in universities and their activities in the social sphere, leading to an increase in sectarian incidents (Guiney, 2008). Although Sadat aimed to pounce on the remnants of Nasser's socialist entourage by adopting of the Islamists as a counterweight to the left, the release of some members of the extremist Islamic groups from prison was a catastrophe for the relationship between the two parties, as not only Christians but also Muslims were killed (Mohamed, 2021; Brownlee, 2013). In a speech at the beginning of sectarian events that took place in his era, Sadat noted that the militant Islamic organisation, the Muslim Brotherhood, "jeopardises the sovereignty and security of this nation" and was an "illegitimate" entity that he had erroneously allowed to function (Farrell, 1981).

Mohamed (2021) reports that the most prominent incidents that occurred during Sadat's rule were not against any of the Copts or Christian symbols, but were instead against various state organisations and individuals, including the military in 1974, the kidnapping and killing of Dr. Al-Dhahabi in 1976, the first Jihad organisation in 1977, and the second Jihad organisation in 1979. None of these incidents involved copts. Nonetheless, the main perpetrators of the sectarian events that have occurred in Egypt over the past few decades are from the Muslim Brotherhood, such as Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh, Mahmoud Amin Al Alem,

Mustafa Bakri, Dr. Milad Hanna, Shahanda Makled, and Karam Zuhdi. Despite the sectarian events between Christians and Muslims, Egypt has not imposed a state of emergency on its citizens since the July Revolution of 1952 (Munib, 2016; Mohamed, 2021), which indicates that the events, while occasionally violent and bloody, are mostly confined to small sectors of society.

In the El-Zawya al-Hamra 1981 incident, a “quarrel” erupted between members of the Maurice family and Sarofim Ibrahim and Muhammad Suleiman because of dirty water falling from the balcony of the former family onto clothes drying on the balcony of the latter family, which left 80 Copts dead and hundreds injured. According to Gerges (2018), Sadat refused to describe these events as “sectarian strife,” calling them instead “disputes” between Muslim and Christian neighbors. For example, Sadat stressed that the escalation of the events in the El-Zawya al-Hamra did not happen without the intervention of other elements that were keen to increase the tension between the two groups. In referencing “quarrels” such as these, Sadat, in a speech to the People's Assembly in 1981, reiterated his revolutionary measures that included decisive measures aimed at putting an end to disputes in Egypt and protecting national unity and the safety of the nation. Sadat had always been supportive of Copts and Muslims in issues such as national unity, and he extended that support to include what he considered to be a squabble between neighbours. Sadat never encouraged violence against the Copts, but his alliance with the Muslim Brotherhood resulted in conflicts, which one could argue played a role in the anti-Christian violence in Egypt.

The Mubarak era witnessed many incidents of sectarian strife, which began with events in Fayoum in 1984 and were followed by those in Beni Suef in 1987 and Rawd al-Faraj in 1988. Abaza affirms that Mubarak's regime adopted more repressive measures against militant Islamist groups, mostly in the 1980s (Abaza, 2006, p. 15). According to Kılınc (2020), sectarian conflicts between Copts and Muslims continued, despite stringent measures such as emergency laws and curfews across the country. In January 2000, a skirmish led to the deaths of 20 Copts in Kosheh, a small village south of Cairo, to which Mubarak responded by publishing a message in the official newspapers that was meant to reassure the Coptic community:

Egypt and its people are fine, and no one can harm the unity of its Muslims and Copts... Both groups enjoy full citizenship rights in Egypt... We are all one people and we are not intolerant. We are all sons of this land, and there is no difference between a Muslim, a Christian, and an Egyptian Jew. Everyone grew up in this country, was born in it, and worked for it.

Mubarak also affirmed his rejection of what he described as "sectarian strife," claiming that some forces wanted to interpret volatile events according to their slanted perspective and aimed to weaken Egypt. He called for Egyptians to sow seeds of unity, not discord (n.b., 2001; Mohamed, 2021).

Additionally, Mubarak affirmed that he was the president of all Egyptians, regardless of religion, creed, party, or thought, and that Egyptians were citizens with the same rights and duties: "I look at the Copts as Egyptians who are shaded by the

flag of Egypt and who enjoy full citizenship rights without discrimination” (Ahmed, 2005). In a speech launching the ruling National Democratic Party’s (NDP) electoral campaign, Mubarak pledged to act firmly against any attempts to undermine the constitutional principle of equal citizenship for Muslims and Copts alike and to deal harshly with anyone who made "repeated attempts to undermine the unity of Egyptian citizens—Muslims and Copts" (Ezzat, 2010). Mubarak sought to address sectarian strife by promoting the values of citizenship and tolerance between the two religious groups.

When Morsi came to power, decisions such as his constitutional declaration monopolising his power caused social repercussions, the most important of which was the attack on the main cathedral in Cairo in 2012 (Mohamed, 2021; Ali, 2014). Mohamed (2021) reports how a large segment of Egyptian society demonstrated against Morsi in rejection of the constitutional declaration. As well, the Church withdrew from the Constituent Assembly of the Constitution, as did representatives of the liberal parties, artists, and a large number of various civil groups, all of whom demanded the removal of Morsi. In 2013, the Muslim Brotherhood and its supporters collectively attacked churches in various governorates in the context of implementing their threats to punish the Copts as a result of their political participation in the demonstrations that called for the ousting of Morsi. More than 76 churches were burned and destroyed (Mohamed, 2014). Around the same time, there were clashes between hundreds of Muslims and Christians in the village of Ezbet Marco in Beni Suef, along with the displacement of nine Christian families from Rafah to Al-Arish for fear of terrorist threats in September 2012 (Ali, 2014). Added

to all of this, the relationship between Morsi and Pope Tawadros II was also very tense (Abdel Hakam, 2014). Abdel Hakam (2014) reports that this was the first direct criticism of President Mohamed Morsi by Pope Tawadros II. The pope blamed Morsi for failing to protect the building, as two Christians died after being attacked by an angry mob of Muslims. The pope added that action was needed, not words, as the Egyptian Church had never before been subject to such attacks (Wyatt, 2013, p. 2).

From these events, we can see that the main reason for the tense relationship between President Morsi and Pope Tawadros II is that Morsi did not distance himself from the ideas of the Muslim Brotherhood, which are described as aggressive towards the Copts. Morsi and his Muslim Brotherhood were eventually removed from power by the military, and as a result, Islamic extremists targeted Egypt's Christian minority, holding them partly responsible (p. 3). As mentioned previously, the Muslim Brotherhood holds a strong anti-Christian position. As such, it is important to keep in mind that the violent attacks against Copts originate from the Muslim Brotherhood.

Egypt witnessed one of the worst waves of sectarian violence following the dispersal of the Brotherhood's supporters' sit-in in August 2013, when 46 churches were burned in different governorates. Minya alone recorded 65% of those incidents (Al-Aswany, 2016). In response, Sisi warned of "the danger of exploiting religion as a tool to divide people of the same nation or as a weapon to attract elements that can be attracted to extremist and terrorist groups... which is contrary to the sanctity and tolerance of religions." In a Sunday evening speech at the Cathedral of the Nativity

of Christ in the New Administrative Capital, Sisi reiterated his claim that sectarian strife will likely not end soon and that the only one who can save Egypt is God Almighty, who will preserve it for the sake of the Egyptians. Sisi's cathedral speech came just days after controversial statements made by Pope Tawadros during his meeting with the religious committee in the Egyptian parliament (Alcotb, 2018).

According to Abdel Hamid (2018), Sisi's decision to form a supreme committee to confront sectarian events in Egypt was made in order to put an end to the prolonged crisis that has been worsening for decades. Previous efforts to contain the violence had all failed. The Grand Mufti of Egypt, Shawky Allan, calls the committee an important step towards promoting full citizenship for all Egyptians and supports efforts to promote coexistence among Egypt's diverse populace. Allan considers the country's advancement and progress to be reflected in such initiatives. The evangelical community in particular praised Sisi's decision, describing it as a "qualitative leap" on the path to citizenship (Abdel Hamid, 2018). In a statement, the evangelicals noted that this committee can study the causes of sectarian tensions and develop a general strategy to deal with them at all levels, which in turn contributes to supporting community peace (Abdel Hamid, 2018). In initiatives such as these, Sisi continues to encourage citizenship between Muslims and Copts.

Egypt has witnessed the occurrence of violent incidents in various parts of the country. However, religion was not the cause of the majority of these events; rather, they were sparked by social, economic, and political strife. One might argue, therefore, that successive Egyptian presidents, apart from Morsi, played an important role in reducing sectarian conflicts by promoting, through their speeches,

a spirit of patriotism and a sense of civic duty and pride among the Egyptian people, which in turn assisted in the stability of the peaceful relationship between the two major religious groups.

3-Economic unrest and dealing with issues of immigration

Since 1952, Egypt has faced many issues, including economic unrest (Farah, 2014; Pennington, 2006). Pennington (2006) argues that after the 1952 revolution, Copts and Muslims suffered financially. The squeezing of the private sector hit Copts especially hard, forcing them to lower the economic scale by diminishing business activity and restricting their career opportunities. For example, after the United States backed out of financing the High Dam and the banks of France, England, and America froze Egypt's accounts and attacked the Contella, the economy was effectively destroyed (Zaki, 2009). Moreover, the country's economic unrest increased after Israel's military defeat of Egypt in June 1967. Farah (2014) reports that the crisis after Egypt's 1967 capitulation marked the end of the effectiveness of one phase of socio-development and the beginning of a new economic policy of the ruling elites (Abdel Moneim, 2014; Barakat, 1998). According to Al-Gharabawi (2021), due to the ensuing economic difficulties, many wealthy Copts emigrated from Egypt to Western countries, such as Canada and the United States. Undoubtedly, these economic tensions negatively affected Copts. Egyptian presidents have searched for a cooperative economic approach to national liberation and development, one that would also ensure justice and multiply the minority's chances of economic prosperity.

In 1956, Nasser sought to build a cooperative socialist experiment involving the state and the Egyptian people. The nationalisation of the Canal and the High Dam was intended as a move to get out of the constraints imposed by certain countries and become genuinely independent (Zaki, 2009). In his speech in 1961, marking the occasion of the ninth revolution in Republic Square, Nasser stated that:

From day one of his presidential mandate, the revolution aimed to establish a cooperative, socialist, democratic society, free from political, economic, and social exploitation, and that all this would be accomplished by peaceful means. Our socialism is based on brotherhood and national unity. Islam, in its early days, was the first socialist state. The state established by Islam and established by Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, was the first socialist state. Muhammad the Prophet was the first to implement the policy of nationalisation in these days. There is a hadith about the Prophet—may God's prayers and peace be upon him—in which he says that people are partners in three things: water, pasture, and fire. When the Islamic state arose, it was the first socialist state. Islam followed the Prophet—peace and blessings be upon him—on the path of socialism, and in the days of Abu Bakr and in the days of Omar, he walked on the path of socialism. And in the days of the Prophet, and in these days, they were fair to the people of poverty from the people of the rich, and in the days of Omar, they nationalised the land and distributed the land to all the farmers. All religions stipulate social justice. (Al-Mounir, 2020).

According to Al-Qasas (2017), Nasser put forward a progressive concept of the role of religion in national cooperation and development. Nasser also demanded a greater role for religion in public life. His speech represented the state's tendency to support the orientation of religion, even if (at least outwardly) Egypt became a one-party socialist state with Islam as the official religion.

Although Nasser's economic approach was not discriminatory on the basis of religion, sweeping reforms were against the interests of some Copts (Seager, n.d.). For example, Copts were significantly affected by the agrarian reform in 1953 and the nationalisation programme in 1961, even if they were not specifically targeted. Moreover, the nationalisations that followed hit large businesses dominated by Copts, such as the Magar and Morgan bus companies and the Banque du Cairo (Pennington, 2006). Al-Gharabawi explains that despite the Copts' good relationship with the state in this era, the general tendency of the state was to be hostile to foreigners, who had common interests with some Copts, and this contributed to the emigration of a large number of Copts (Rahouma, 2018). Interestingly, the measures of nationalisation and land confiscation, while anathema to the wealthy, received the support of the poor and marginalised Christians and Muslims (Al-Gharabawi, 2021). Most Copts who approved of Nasser's reforms were from the portion of the middle class that did not suffer from the nationalisation policies (Bishara, 2010). Bishara (2010) also mentions that Nasser's decision to nationalise the Suez Canal in 1956 was done to win the hearts of Copts as well as their support for the state in the face of Western influence and the 1956 war. The Copts who chose not to emigrate were offered a form of inherited protection that enhanced Egypt's social stability.

The cooperative socialist approach pioneered by Nasser proved its effectiveness through the positive repercussions it had on millions of Egyptians. Through various political, economic, and social programmes, the values of work and justice were consolidated for the masses, along with the spirit of self-reliance. This was accompanied by a massive societal change that involved the expansion of the middle class and the exit of hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, from the circle of poverty, indignity, and ignorance. Moreover, under the Agrarian Reform Law, the lands of large owners were distributed among the farmers, which had a great impact on improving the conditions of hundreds of thousands of farmers in Egypt.

In the era of Sadat, Egypt underwent further economic transformations, especially after the 1973 war, which was one of the country's most influential economic events (Kamel, 2022; Omar, 2018). According to Kamel (2022), these transformations contributed to the waves of outmigration of Egyptians to Arab Gulf countries in search of work. The post-war internal economic crisis had deprived many Egyptians of their livelihoods and forced them to migrate to the new labour markets. In response to these radical changes, the policy of economic openness was implemented in the immediate aftermath of the 1973 war (Kamel, 2023). According to Omar (2018), Sadat's economic policy at that time was characterised as "openness," which was particularly beneficial to the Coptic upper class (Pennington, 1982, p. 168). Aulas (1918) notes that "the 'open door' policy (*infitah*) followed trends already underway to restructure the system and escape from the serious crisis that had arisen" (p. 4). Sadat's determination to achieve Egypt's economic goals required him to arrange the nation's internal conditions economically such that there

would be cooperation between all Egyptians, including Muslims and Christians. In his speech to the ASU Central Committee in 1976, Sadat stressed the need for cooperative socialist solutions to the problems of farmers and workers. He also stressed an open-door policy for free trade with the world's richest nations and left room for some liberalisation of internal regulation. As well, he invited both foreign capital and know-how to partner with Egypt in the immediate future.

In a later speech at a meeting with 500 American businessmen at the American Chamber of Commerce, Sadat voiced his hope that they would all work together towards the success of Egypt. The text of the speech was published in the Al-Ahram newspaper on March 29, 1979: Sadat reminded the attendees: "You are responsible to me and to President Carter to work together to achieve prosperity for Egypt" (Al-Bayoumi, 2017). Sadat stressed the notion of cooperation, as he believed that the solution to the economic crisis was for countries to work together, not just groups.

During his tenure as president, Mubarak sought to enhance cooperation between the public and private sectors, which accelerated the economic rise of the Copts (Bashir, 2019; Knell, 2013). An official statistic issued by the Egyptian government in 2007 indicates that Copts owned more than one-third of the total wealth of the country. The statistic was compiled and released in response to statements by the Director of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) about discrimination against Copts, whose percentage of the population at that time was around 10%. In 2007, Forbes magazine ranked three Copts among the ten richest

billionaires in the Arab world, including Naguib Sawiris, head of the Orascom Telecom Group and Orascom Technology Group (Bashir, 2019).

Moreover, Roll (2013) argues that the Muslim-Christian relationship made room for greater economic flourishing during Mubarak's reign. The economy grew substantially because of the economic cooperation between the government and the private sector. This steered economic growth in the country, with Mubarak creating close ties with the private sector, primarily controlled by Sawiris and his family (Roll, 2013). Roll (2013) also added that in 2004, Sawiris teamed up with Salah Diab, a Muslim, to start a daily newspaper called al-Masry al-Youm. The collaboration of these two investment moguls shows that the country has had a favourable environment for integration and economic success (Roll, 2013).

During Morsi's brief rule, the security situation was not conducive to economic growth. El Garhy (2021) reports that shortly after the 2011 revolution, the economy in Egypt experienced a severe contraction in all its sectors and indicators. This led to the absence of a clear economic vision as well as an ongoing state of conflict. Al-Omari (2021) argues that the period between 2011 and 2013 was characterised by confusion and conflict between Muslims and Christians. This conflict caused the creation of entities parallel to the official state institutions that espoused ideologies that were reflective of the Muslim Brotherhood. The newly emerged entities also worked towards promoting the interests of their groups without considering the general interests of the country (Al-Bagouri, 2016).

Furthermore, internal and external debt worsened during the Morsi era. Egypt's internal debt had previously risen from about a trillion pounds to about 3.3

trillion pounds, but its external debt surged from about 24 billion dollars in 2012 to about 42 billion dollars in 2013. This led to a decrease in Egypt's credit rating, putting the economy deeper into the danger zone. The drop in credit rating increased the cost of commercial transactions, opening credits, transportation, and shipping. It is worth noting that during the 2011 revolution, Egypt's second-richest Christian, Naguib Sawiris, left Egypt for London, England. He chose not to participate in the Egyptian market as long as the Muslim Brotherhood was running the country. Sawiris only returned to Egypt in June 2013, after Morsi left office (Abdalnabi, 2014). Undoubtedly, Morsi had not always been supportive of the cooperation of Copts and Muslims in issues regarding the economy. This led to the Egyptian economic collapse during his reign.

Under President Sisi, the rise of the Egyptian economy depends heavily on the cooperation of Muslims and Christians (Mena, 2022; Ali, 2014). Mena (2022) reports that at the Egyptian Economic Conference 2022, Sisi explained that he made the best use of popular support from Muslims and Christians in 2015 to initiate the process of reform and construction. According to Ali (2014), Pope Tawadros II and Sisi have held numerous discussions about issues in Egyptian society, including the Egyptian economy, with Pope Tawadros expressing to Sisi the importance of gaining the cooperation of the Copts to advance Egypt's economic goals. El Garhy (2021) notes that Sisi has made a qualitative leap since taking over the reins of power after the June 30, 2013 revolution. The Egyptian economy ranked third in the world with regard to the rate of economic growth for three consecutive years (2017–2020) and achieved first place in foreign direct investment flows on the African

continent for the same three years (El Garhy, 2021). In large part, Sisi has encouraged the growth of the Egyptian economy by urging cooperation between Muslims and Christians.

Sisi is not alone in stressing the importance of the two religious groups working together. All Egyptian presidents since independence have understood the need for economic cooperation between Copts and Muslims. Through the efforts of these presidents, Egypt has witnessed the active participation of these two religious groups in the areas of trade and their important contribution to the Egyptian economy. Countless Muslim and Coptic businessmen have met for talks with the presidents, aiming both to do business for their own interests while supporting the Egyptian economy. Such meetings have been closely monitored at the national and international levels.

In view of the foregoing, it can be said that religion has played an integral role in Egyptian politics through the speeches of Egyptian presidents, especially since 1952. At the same time, politics has also entered the religious sphere. Egyptian presidents have played a key role in alleviating political, economic, and social turmoil, which includes spreading social justice and suppressing sectarian strife. Egyptian presidents have used similar discourse strategies during times of crisis, despite the differences in the socio-political contexts. Cooperation, tolerance, and unity are among the most common strategies employed by the presidents in the selected speeches. In their messages, the presidents are quick to point out that there are Christian members of parliament as well as cabinet ministers and ambassadors.

Section Two: Initiatives Taken by Egyptian Presidents to Encourage Tolerance and Cooperation between Christians and Muslims

In Egypt, socio-religious issues such as church-building laws and intolerance and discrimination against Christians have become everyday challenges for Copts. Successive Egyptian presidents have sought to address these issues by emphasising the importance of religious tolerance between Christians and Muslims. According to Khatib (2016), several presidents of Egypt formed alliances between the state and religious institutions, which represents the state's position on religion and its various mechanisms (p. 1). As a result, numerous religious institutions were established in Egypt over the years, including mosques and the Council of Churches. The presidents also made highly publicised visits to religious buildings and attended both Muslim and Christian religious events (Ali, 2002; Zakaria, 2019). The efforts of Egyptian presidents to stress the essential unity of all Egyptians, regardless of religious confession, were crucial for building tolerance and cooperation between Muslims and Christians.

1 - The construction of churches

Church construction has proven to be a major flashpoint in the conflict between Muslims and Christians in Egypt (McCallum, 2007; Guiney, 2008). According to McCallum (2007), controversies have arisen over the building of churches in various areas, leading to sectarian strife in, for instance, Al-Khankah in 1972, Al-Zawya Al-Hamra in Cairo in 1981, and Al-Kosheh in 1998 and 1999 (Gabbay, 2018; Qandil, 2018). Moreover, the licensing of churches, which can lead

to friction and division, has become contentious for Christians themselves, as Egyptian law makes it quite difficult for them to obtain a construction permit. The main problem lies with security approval for Egyptian Christians (Farid, 2016). According to Reuters (2016), sectarian violence often erupts between Muslims and Christians on the back of suspicions that Christians are building churches that are not licensed. Homes are burned, and churches are attacked. This could lead to the denial of building permissions by the security apparatus (Farid, 2016). According to Qandil (2018), Egyptian law gives the security apparatus a say in the granting of permits and allows it to monitor, build, and repair churches to preserve public security. The Egyptian government has justified the building permissions given by the security apparatus as necessary to safeguard the security of churches. This should be viewed in the context of the state's commitment to guaranteeing protection by ensuring their freedom and security in the conduct of services in accordance with the Constitution and providing a permanent legal basis for their existence to avoid becoming the object of a dispute with any party, governmental or non-governmental, which would endanger their existence or their security. In spite of these conflicts surrounding church construction, the Egyptian presidents have sought to take initiatives that would facilitate the building of new churches for Copts.

Hamid (2015) explains that Nasser welcomed the establishment of a new major cathedral worthy of the status of Egypt and the millions of Egyptian Christians (Zakaria, 2019). According to Samir (2012), Nasser, “in his speech at the inauguration of St. Mark’s Cathedral, stated that, as Egypt’s president, he was equally responsible for all Egyptians regardless of their religion” (p. 2). As a

conciliatory gesture towards Christians, Nasser showed them their value to Egypt by dispensing “half a million pounds from the government’s budget for the construction of the new Coptic cathedral and participating in its inaugural festivities” (Tadros, 2009, p. 272). Moreover, Nasser authorised the construction of 25 Coptic churches annually, aiming to build tolerance and brotherhood between Christians and Muslims by permitting Christians of all denominations adequate and equal accommodation for their worship needs.

When Sadat took over the presidency, he, too, sought to resolve the recurring crises related to the construction of churches. In the wake of the sectarian Khankah incident, Sadat met with the Supreme Islamic Council, headed by the Sheikh of Al-Azhar. Afterwards, he met with Pope Shenouda and his bishops and authorised them to build 50 churches annually instead of the 25 proposed by Nasser (Zakaria, 2019). Undoubtedly, the initiative of Sadat has promoted the relationship between the two groups.

One of the important initiatives that Mubarak took was to issue Republican Decree No. 13 in 1997, authorising the president to build churches. This decree covered the construction of 23 churches in 2001 and nine in 2002 (Guiney, 2008, p. 12). In 2001, Mubarak ordered two churches to be rebuilt at the expense of the government after local authorities destroyed them. According to Rowe (2009), Copts managed to build dozens of churches in Mubarak's Egypt. In 2005, Mubarak granted building permits for 35 new churches and renovations for another 200. In some governorates, his decision helped ease the situation for Copts by giving their houses

of worship the government's seal of approval (Tadros, 2013). The Copts welcomed Mubarak's initiative.

Morsi also issued a decree to build St. Peter and St. Paul's Church in the New Nubaria City in Beheira Governorate (northern Egypt) on an area of 300 square metres (Abu Hamid, 2013; Sayed, 2021). This was the first church built after Morsi took office in June 2012. According to Abu Hamid (2013), the construction of the church in New Nubaria City was seen as a small but positive step taken amidst growing abuses against Egypt's Christian minority. Moreover, Abu Hamid overlooks the fact that 149 church permits are still pending, and Morsi's permission for the building of St. Peter and St. Paul's was an attempt to woo the Copts before the protest.

Sisi also passed Law No. 80 in 2014 regarding the construction and restoration of churches and their annexes that were damaged and/or burned due to 2011 sectarian strife (Sayed, 2021). As of April 2014, the committee's work has resulted in the regularisation of the status of 1,568 churches and buildings nationwide, constituting 937 churches and 631 church-related buildings.

In 2019, Sisi issued a decree approving the building of a total of 814 churches. This included passing a law to build churches and another law to build the largest cathedral in the Middle East next to the Al-Fattah Al-Alim Mosque in the New Administrative Capital (Hamdi, 2021). According to Gomaa (2019), Sisi donated the funds to build the largest mosque and church, representing the Egyptian state's affirmation of the approach of national unity and peace among the Egyptian people.

It also represents an affirmation of the president's message to spread brotherly love and reject fanaticism among citizens of the same country and set an example to follow in strengthening national unity. Pope Tawadros II expressed that we are witnessing the construction of a new Egypt and that the state is following a new and unprecedented curve (Hamdi, 2021). Sisi's efforts were clear in establishing tolerance between the two groups through church construction for Copts.

2- The spreading of the spirit of patriotism, tolerance, and cooperation

Despite perceived differences between Islam and Christianity, close relations between several Egyptian presidents and religious leaders have served as a source of encouragement and support for tolerance and cooperation among the Egyptian populace (Heikal, 2012; Brownlee, 2013). According to Heikal (2012), Nasser had friendly relations with Pope Kyrollos VI, which he described in his book *The Autumn of Anger* as a relationship of mutual admiration between the two men. Brownlee (2013) notes that Nasser's close friendship with Pope Kyrillos in large part prompted Egypt to undergo a revival of faith-based state-supported nationalism that included Christians. Nasser's vibrant speech, delivered on the occasion of laying a foundation stone on July 24, 1965, spread the message of brotherhood and cooperation between Muslims and Christians (Qusrey, 2018).

Sadat's relations with Pope Shenouda III were, however, somewhat strained. Nonetheless, Sadat did meet with the Pope and fulfilled many of his requests, including participating in the opening of a hospital, sending congratulations on holidays, and offering condolences (Mohamed, 2021; Guiney, 2008). Guiney (2008)

confirmed that Sadat visited Patriarch Shenouda more than once and that Sadat visited the cathedral in 1981 (Abdel Hamid, 2015; Manea, 2016). Sadat's intention was to clarify that tolerance and peace outside Egypt, such as with Israel, were expressions of tolerance and peace within Egypt.

The relationship between Mubarak and Pope Shenouda III was not that of the President of the Republic with the Pope of Alexandria, but a personal relationship and strong friendship that went far beyond formal state proceedings. This was especially evident in Mubarak's strong support for Copts. One of the Mubarak administration's key gestures to Christians was to declare January 7 (Coptic Christmas) a national holiday (Afifi, 2018; Alroeya, 2016). According to Melcangi (2012), "[i]n 2002, Mubarak declared Coptic Christmas a national holiday", thus equating the creation of the new holiday with a return of rights and what was 'owed' to Copts in Egypt (Tadros, 2013). Mubarak expressed that Coptic holidays are holidays for all Egyptians and that Copts are Egyptians; hence, there is no difference between them and their Muslim brothers with regard to their rights in all state institutions. Mubarak then ordered that the Divine Liturgies of Christmas and the Glorious Day of Resurrection would be broadcast and that the Egyptian radio station would be interested in Coptic church affairs and transmit church news. Mubarak also visited churches twice during his rule. The first time was in 2000, when he went to offer condolences on the passing of Lieutenant-General Fouad Aziz Ghaly, and the second was in 2006, when he attended church to offer condolences on the death of Hanna Nashed, a member of the National Party's Political Bureau. After these two visits, Mubarak contented himself with sending delegates to congratulate the pope

and participate in the celebration of birthdays (Saad, 2015). Moreover, Salam (2020) reports that in 2006, Mubarak became the first Egyptian president to open the largest Coptic museum in ancient Egypt, consisting of 26 halls containing 1,300 artifacts. The museum has since become a destination for millions of visitors to Egypt (Salam, 2020). Furthermore, being well aware of the importance of tolerance and the extent of its influence on citizens, Mubarak and the pope were united by one principle, which is that Egypt will not be subject to sectarian division. This made the pope declare with conviction and sincerity: “Egypt is not a country we live in, but a homeland that lives in us” (Afifi, 2018). In support of Mubarak during a national election, the pope wrote: “For the good and peace of Egypt, all members fervently demand that their children vote for Mubarak for a third term, considering it a religious duty, declaring that the Bible calls us to support President Mubarak” (Melcangi, 2012). Mubarak emphasised the promotion of tolerance with the Copts.

When he gained power, Morsi admitted that there was still a chill in the relationship with the Copts, despite his attempts to reassure and promise them that this would change (El Desouky, 2013). Ali (2014) reports that Morsi did not attend the inauguration ceremony of Tawadros II as Pope of the Coptic Orthodox Church in 2012, succeeding the late Pope Shenouda. However, in his speech in 2013, Morsi sent a direct message to the Copts, describing them as partners of Muslims in one homeland, history, and culture. Undoubtedly, Morsi was less tolerant of the Copts. According to Sedra (2013):

The country’s Coptic Christians are undoubtedly sneering at the insincerity of Morsi’s initial gestures towards magnanimity. They have

ample cause to do so, not least of all due to the president's February decision to set the now-suspended parliamentary elections for dates that coincided with the Easter observance of the Coptic Orthodox Church, by far the most important holiday celebrated by the Coptic Orthodox, who constitute the vast majority of Egypt's Christians." (p.2).

Morsi's alliance with the Muslim Brotherhood resulted in discrimination against the Copts, which one could argue played a role in the intolerance towards Christians.

Since taking on the presidency in 2013, Sisi has sought to create national cohesion between Muslims and Christians in Egypt, understanding that actions must accompany words (Farghaly, 2021; Yerkes, 2016; Ramadan, 2018). So, he attended mass in 2015 during Christmas, becoming the first Egyptian president to attend such an event. During the mass, he stated in his address to the congregation, "It is important that the whole world look at us, the Egyptians. Be careful that I do not use another name than the Egyptians. [because] we are Egyptians (Al-Sirjani, 2011, p. 15). Ali (2014) argued that Sisi has noted the national role of Christians since the beginning of the Egyptian revolution, explaining that the concerns of Christians will be the focus of the Egyptian state's attention, stressing the state's faith and its keenness that freedom of belief and worship be guaranteed to all citizens of the country, and he also stressed the importance of keeping pace with the state's efforts. (p. 34). Societal efforts to fix what has been corrupted in the relationship between the two main religious groups in Egypt have focused primarily on correcting misinterpretations and distorted visions.

Within the first few years of his presidency, Sisi made eight visits to churches to congratulate Copts and spread the message of peace, love, and tranquility. The first of these visits was to Abbasiya Cathedral on January 6, 2015, to celebrate Christmas. The second was to the cathedral in Abbasiya in February 2015 to offer condolences for the martyrs of the terrorist operation in Libya. The third visit was in January 2016 to offer congratulations to Pope Tawadros and the participation of the Copts in the celebration of Christmas. The fourth visit was in January 2017 to congratulate the Copts on Christmas and to announce the fulfilment of his promise to restore the churches. During this visit, he promised to build the largest mosque and church in the Middle East in the New Administrative Capital. Sisi's fifth visit to a Christian church was in April 2017, when he offered condolences for the martyrs of the two terrorist incidents in the churches of St. Mark in Alexandria and St. George in Abu El Naga in Tanta. The sixth visit, in January 2018, was to congratulate Pope Tawadros on the occasion of Christmas at St. Mark's Cathedral in Abbasiya. The seventh visit in January 2019 featured President Sisi jointly inaugurating the Al-Fattah Al-Alim Mosque and the Cathedral of the Nativity of Christ in the New Administrative Capital. The eighth visit took place in January 2020 during Coptic Christmas at the Cathedral of the Nativity of Christ (Sayed, 2021; Alroeya, 2016). In making the very public effort to join Egypt's Christians during important celebrations and events, Sisi demonstrates on a visceral level that Egyptian Muslims and Copts are all part of the same Egyptian social and national fabric. In fact, all Egyptian presidents sought to establish the importance of the concept of citizenship and to apply it equally to all Egyptians without distinction.

In view of the foregoing, it could be argued that since the revolution in 1952, the relationship between the religious leaders and presidents in Egypt has passed through five distinct stages, reflecting the five leaders. For example, Nasser's relationship with religious leaders can be called a partnership and friendship stage, with the president entering into a partnership with Pope Kyrillos VI, whereas Sadat and Morsi's relationship with religious leaders with regard to the rights of Christians was significantly colder. Even so, throughout the various incidences of crisis and estrangement, neither the words nor the actions of the respective ruling regimes were anti-Christian. The acts of violence and destruction, including murder and terrorism, were not perpetrated by the state but by extremist groups in the name of Islam. These acts were also a flagrant violation of the teachings of Islam. All Egyptian presidents since 1952 have focused on promoting the concepts of patriotism, tolerance, and cooperation among Egyptians of every faith. They have done this by building relationships with religious leaders through meetings, policy changes, initiatives, and participation in highly publicised social visits to mosques and churches.

Chapter Three

The Relationship Between Religion and Education in Promoting Peace

Introduction

In the educational context, religion is perceived as controversial since it can create conflict issues and reveal divergent views (Barak, n.d.; Jamil, 2015). This is especially evident when the issues relate to Islamic religious education in a multi-faith society (Jamil, 2015). The main problems are discrimination, sectarian violence, racial tension, and social divides between students based on religion (Pink, 2003; Cook, 2000). According to BouJaoude and Alters (2011), Islamic religious education is often seen as a source of sectarian discrimination against Christian students. For example, Barak (n.d.) reports that Islamic religious curriculum materials at Al-Azhar educational institutions are mostly addressed to Muslims, while Christians are considered second-class citizens (Kjeilen, 2008; Education Encyclopaedia, n.d.; Nakissa, 2019). Discrimination also occurs during Islamic education lessons, where Muslim students only learn about Christianity from the perspective of the Qur'an and the hadiths of the Prophet (Faour, 2012). This means that other religious texts are absent from the curricula (Jamil, 2015; Omar, 2019; Atta-Alla, 2012).

Moreover, in the Al-Azhar educational schools, Islamic religion is not only taught to students as a religious subject, but religious texts are also included in other subjects, such as Arabic language studies and social studies (Omar, 2019; Faour, 2012; Neill, 2006). Omar (2019) argues that the Islamization phenomenon has

deeply penetrated the school curricula, with the bulk of the curriculum consisting of Islamic subjects, which in fact violates the spirit of religious plurality (Atta-Alla, 2012). For example, in Arabic language studies, Qur'anic verses are used to illustrate grammar, and hadiths are provided for reading practice. Islamic texts are also used in other ways to illustrate distinct aspects of the language (Neill, 2006).

Egypt is a Muslim country (U.S. Mission Egypt, 2020). According to a report on international religious freedom (2022), the Egyptian constitution specifies Islam as the state religion and the principles of sharia as the main source of legislation but stipulates that the canonical laws of Jews and Christians form the basis of legislation governing their personal status, religious affairs, and selection of spiritual leaders. So a curriculum that highlights Islam and is based on Islam should be expected in Islamic religious education in Egypt (Jamil, 2015; Cook, 2000; Corgi, 2020). However, since most of the Islamic religious curriculum consists of Islamic subjects, can pupils also learn about values such as tolerance for other religions? In this context, the present chapter seeks to answer the following questions: Can Islamic religious curricula, despite being skewed towards Islam, still teach students to respect other religions, such as Christianity and Judaism? Does it teach the importance of religious tolerance, coexistence, and patriotism? Does Islamic education play a pivotal role in shaping students' understanding of religious diversity through focused teaching on specific aspects of other religions (Jeynes, 2012)? Does Islamic education at Al-Azhar teach students how to respect other religions and beliefs and to value peaceful relations between religious groups?

This chapter is divided into two sections. Section One will first shed light on the representation of other religions in the Islamic religious education curriculum. Second, it will look at how the Islamic religious education curricula in Egypt address tolerance and respect for other beliefs, especially Christian beliefs. Third, it will explore gender discrimination and inequalities in Islamic religious education curricula. By considering Islamic religious education curricula taught in K–12 public and Islamic religious schools, this chapter will investigate whether the curricula contribute to fostering peace and promoting respect between students or lead to controversy and conflict.

Section Two will identify initiatives taken by Egyptian Islamic religious education leaders and schools to promote citizenship values, tolerance, and peaceful cultural behaviour between Christian and Muslim students. This section will highlight what religious education leaders and schools have done to promote the following: first, the teaching of citizenship values; second, cross-cultural exchanges that take place among students from different religions; and third, the teaching of good moral values. It will do so by looking at what religious leaders and schools have said and done and by examining interviews conducted with Egyptian Islamic and Christian religious education leaders, including Tariq Shawky, Egyptian Minister of Education; Salama Daoud, head of the Al-Azhar school sector; Gohar Ezzat, Assistant General Secretary of Catholic Schools in Egypt; and Daoud Nasr, Director General of Evangelical Schools in Egypt. The focus of these interviews was to highlight initiatives undertaken by these leaders to foster peace between Christian and Muslim students. Initiatives promoted by Christian schools (e.g., Catholic,

Orthodox, and Evangelical schools) as well as Islamic schools, including those run by Al Azhar, will also be examined.

Section One: Contributions of Islamic Religious Education Curricula to Addressing Tensions among Egyptian Christian and Muslim Students

Along with several challenges affecting peaceful relations between Muslim and Christian students at the Islamic educational level, Abdul Jalil (2010) reported issues such as the non-representation of other religions, a lack of tolerance and respect for other beliefs, and discrimination between genders (Azzam, 2022; Shafiq, 2019; Abdul Latif, 2019; Mansour, 2008). According to Azzam (2022), these issues have contributed to creating negative feelings between the two groups. However, Islamic religious education curricula provide important insights to construct a cooperative Egyptian identity among Christians and Muslims (Sacre, 2006; Faour, 2012). For example, in a book taught in a Grade 2 religion class, children with Muslim names also have friends with Christian names. The stories start with phrases like “Ahmad and Girgis go swimming” or “Ali, Georges, and Zainab are friends” (Qassem, 2018). In this way, Islamic religious education fosters unity among all Egyptians, whether Muslim, Christian, or of another faith.

This section will show some of the challenges currently affecting the Islamic religious education curriculum and how they are being overcome. The challenges include the non-representation of other religions in the Islamic religious education curriculum, the call for tolerance and respect for other beliefs, and gender discrimination and inequalities.

1. Non-representation of other religions in Islamic religious education curriculum.

One of the key challenges related to Islamic religious education curricula in the earlier texts, according to Leirvik (2004), is the non-representation of other religions, especially Christianity and Judaism, in its lessons (Faour, 2012). According to Faour (2012), who is a researcher in educational reform and citizenship education in Egypt, most lessons in the Islamic religious education system tend to focus on Islam from its beginnings to the present day, which has largely meant the exclusion of the study of other religions. For instance, in the Grade 8 Islamic history book entitled *Our Islamic History*, there is a detailed description of the life of the Prophet Muhammad and the first Islamic state he founded in Medina. Islamic texts and Qur'anic verses are also presented in detail. In the same book, approximately 30 Qur'anic verses appear not only in segments associated with the emergence of Islamic thought, but also in references and verses denoting historical events. Phrases like “as was indicated in the Qur'an” are liberally used, leaving Coptic history and culture grossly underrepresented in the Egyptian Islamic educational curricula (Pink, 2003; Leirvik, 2004). There is no doubt that the exclusion of Coptic religion and culture from the religious curricula results in ignorance of it among the students, which in turn can lead to hatred and discrimination based on ignorance.

Yet, according to Lynch and McGarr (2014), there are several positive references to Coptic history and culture (Lynch & McGarr, 2014; Abdo, 2017). For example, in elaborating on why pre-Islamic Egyptians adhered to Christianity, a textbook published in 2016 entitled *Islamic Culture* explained that they were

concerned with values of equality, tolerance, and justice (Abdo, 2017). Hence, students not only learn the religion and culture of Islam but also of Christianity, and this in turn helps develop tolerance between religious groups.

Nabil Bibawi (n.d.) also mentions that two books covering the history of Egyptian Copts are taught in Egyptian schools. The first book is taught to first-year preparatory students and is entitled *My Home Egypt Is the Place*. In the book's fourth section, "The History of Egypt and Our Civilisation in the Era of the Romans," there are several chapters about the Roman invasion of Egypt in 30 BC; the conditions of Egypt in the era of the Romans in terms of political, social, civil, economic, and cultural life; the events that led to the spread of Christianity; the meaning of the word Coptic; and the recognition of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman state in 313 AD. There are also sections on monasticism and the life of monasteries; the high standing of the patriarch of Alexandria; and the city of Alexandria in relation to science and culture in the ancient world. The second book, *Egypt and the Civilisations of the Ancient World*, is taught to first-year secondary students and provides a more in-depth look at the same era as the first book. In it, Roman civilisation is further explored, along with the conflict between Rome and Carthage and the division of the Roman state. References are made to the Coptic era, such as its beginning and the victory of Christianity in Egypt (Bibawi, n.d.).

The new Islamic history books also present the Coptic and Islamic eras as integral parts of Egypt's history, showing Coptic and Muslim participation in Egypt's national struggle and emphasising their cultural achievements throughout

history (Mokhtar, 2020; Hafez, 2017). The books especially stress the importance of Christian and Muslim peaceful coexistence. For example, in a Grade 10 textbook entitled *Religion Basics*, there is a lesson about unity and peace. In the lesson, there is a picture of a priest and an imam holding a flag that shows a crescent and a cross (Mokhtar, 2020). Such lessons demonstrate the openness of Islamic religious education curricula to include other religions in the course of study, which can lead to greater tolerance between religious groups. Both Leirvik and Faour consider that Islamic religious education promotes and supports greater tolerance among religious adherents.

The above-mentioned books also touch on the significance of Judaism in Egyptian history. For example, they mention that Egypt is where the Prophet Joseph took refuge and lived in prosperity for most of his adult years. Joseph is the son of Jacob (Israel), a prophet of significant importance to the Jews. Egypt is also the homeland of the Prophet Moses, the messenger of the first monotheistic religion, who fled Egypt by the miracle of the “parting” of the Red Sea to escape from Pharaoh (Al-Minshawi, 2016). According to a report by the Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education (IMPACT-SE, 2023), the Egyptian textbooks sketch the educational ethos that connects Judaism and Islam by mentioning the common prophets between Jews and Muslims, which means that the history of Judaism is an integral part of Egyptian history.

The new Islamic history books also touch on war and peace, highlighting the “peace agreement” signed between Israel and Egypt and its importance to the stability of Egypt. For example, a Grade 7 textbook entitled *The Geography of the*

Arab World and the History of Modern Egypt describes the relationship with Israel as “a relationship of partnership in peace and friendship” (Al-Amoudi, 2016).

In general, Islamic religious education curricula have played a significant role in promoting peace and understanding among different nations and people from both a historical and a current perspective. The evidence provided by Leirvik and Faour clearly shows that religious education in Egypt has sought to encourage tolerance between religious groups.

2. The call for tolerance and respect for other beliefs

Islamic religious education curricula sometimes offer lessons about different religious traditions and ideas, which has occasionally been a source of violence and intolerance against other religions (Rieffer-Flanagan, 2016; Faour, 2012; Groiss, 2004). Groiss (2004) argues that there are two contradictory approaches presented in Islamic education curricula, both based on traditional Islamic notions. One approach treats Judaism and Christianity as heavenly revealed religions whose books and prophets are revered by Islam. The other approach is bent upon denigrating both religions vis-à-vis Islam on various grounds, one of which is the claim that Islam is the true religion (p. 20). For example, “an eighth-grade religion book entitled *Monotheism* explained that ‘Whoever desires other than Islam as religion—never will it be accepted from him, and he in the hereafter will be among the losers’” (Al Imran 2:85; Rieffer-Flanagan, 2016, p. 11). This same verse, Faour (2012) explains, asserts that there is only one true religion—Islam—which God revealed to Adam and all the prophets, including Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad, in the Qur'an.

According to this verse (Al Imran 2:85), only Muslims go to heaven, not all righteous believers. Such a position tends to undermine religious tolerance between Christians and Muslims.

Although Islamic education curricula teach that Islam is “the best religion,” the programme also clearly advocates mutual acceptance and cooperation among the people of the Book, meaning Jews, Christians, and Muslims. This is evidenced in the term ‘ahl al-kitab,’ translated as ‘the family of the book,’ which includes all the children of Abraham. In the Islamic education curricula, tolerance is a fundamental principle based on the imperative of love and respect for human life and dignity (Mikhail, 2021; Forward, 2021). One suggestive example is used in a Grade 9 religion book entitled *Reading and Texts*. The story is about the Prophet Muhammad showing his respect for the funeral of a Jew passing by in Medina. When asked why he stood to show reverence, he said, “Is it not a soul? If you see a funeral, get up.” This lesson is among a large group of religious texts and topics that call for piety and religious commitment (Sacre, 2006; Faour, 2012). In this way, Islamic religious education curricula have highlighted the interrelated practices and values of Islamic religion with Judaism and Christianity.

Islamic religious education curricula have also integrated various Qur'anic verses and Islamic stories into teachings about peace and tolerance in Islam in the official school study programme (Asik, 2012; Tveten, 2016). For instance, in a Grade 10 religion book, it is emphasised that “Islam has never become a religion of war or violence” (Asik, 2012, p. 7). Students learn that Islam is calling adherents to peace by God's saying: "O you, who have believed, enter into Islam completely [and

perfectly] and do not follow the footsteps of Satan. Indeed, he is to you a clear enemy" (Al-Baqarah, 2:208). Additionally, Qur'anic verses are used to illustrate tolerance between Muslims and Christians (Tveten, 2016). Students learn that Christians are warm-hearted by God's saying: "[A]nd you will find the nearest of them in affection to the believers those who say, 'We are Christians,' because among them are priests and monks and because they are not arrogant" (Al-Ma'idah: 5:82). Moreover, in a Grade 3 Religion book entitled *The Holy Qur'an*, there is a complete unit (with pictures) that talks about greetings in Islam and the obligation to greet people, whether Muslim or non-Muslim, because Islam is a religion of peace: "Shall I not tell you something that if you do it, you will love each other? Spread peace among yourselves." These lessons explain the necessity for peace, which comes from peaceful coexistence with non-Muslims in the Egyptian homeland (Al-Behairy, 2019).

Mustafa (2017) cites examples from books taught in Al-Azhar middle schools that stress the importance of tolerance between Muslims and non-Muslims. For example, in the subject on the principles of religion, a Grade 1 religion book entitled *The Holy Qur'an* illustrates a relationship of affection between Muslims and non-Muslims while explaining the rights and duties assigned to each group. Moreover, on page 88, the book includes a full lesson about the relationship of affection between Muslims and non-Muslims, which is accompanied by an interpretation of the verse (Al-Mumtahanah: 8): "God does not forbid you from those who do not fight you because of religion and do not expel you from your homes—from being righteous towards them and acting justly towards them. Indeed,

God loves those who act justly” (Mustafa, 2017). As can be seen from these examples, Islamic religious education curricula affirm that tolerance for others’ religious beliefs can lead to peaceful relations between religious groups.

Through Islamic education, Muslim students learn lessons in faith and transactions. Specifically, Muslim students learn about Islam as a religious and intellectual tradition that includes their beliefs and acts of worship, and they also learn about Islam as a transaction in its relations with other religions, including Christianity. There is no contradiction between the teachings of Islam as a transaction, where Muslims and Christians are equal partners in the Egyptian homeland, and the teachings of Islam as a belief. Islam allows all religions, including Christianity, so through Islamic education, Muslim students learn that true Islam encourages tolerance for others’ religious beliefs.

3. Gender discrimination and inequalities

Gender discrimination is an ongoing problem in Egyptian society. Despite a constitutional guarantee of equality, Muslim women do not, for the most part, enjoy the same rights as men (Radwan, 2023; Carlo, 2020). According to Radwan (2023), Egyptian Muslim women face numerous forms of discrimination that may discourage them from exercising their rights, including unequal inheritance and gender-based violence. Discrimination and inequality often result from traditional interpretations of some Qur'anic texts that appear to support discrimination.

Contemporary interpretations try to address these issues so that peaceful relations are attained between Muslims and Christians, and particularly between the

genders. Accordingly, these contemporary interpretations are of utmost importance as a first step to tackle this deep-rooted problem (Reynolds, 2007; Hefni et al., 2022). Contemporary interpretations frequently view these issues from a historical perspective and in the context of a holistic understanding of the Qur'an (Abdalhaqq Bewley, 2017; Geisinger, 2018; Bakhtiar, 2016).

The main goal of this section is to highlight some contemporary interpretations that promote modern values that can be adopted by religious education to eradicate discrimination. In this section, I present what is being done today to deal with Qur'anic texts that are often traditionally interpreted and that often lead to violence and gender discrimination. I will deal with three areas that continue to be contentious: inheritance laws, witnesses, and violence against women.

Inheritance Laws

According to the Islamic Inheritance Law (No. 77 of 1943), women are entitled to only half the inheritance granted to men. Radwan (2023) explains that the Islamic inheritance law in Egypt is considered a general law that applies to all Egyptians, regardless of their religion, whether Muslim, Christian, or Jewish. This comes in the event of a disagreement between the two parties or if they are from different sects. This means that discrimination related to the issue of inheritance is not only faced by Muslim women but also extends to Christian women and Jewish women, which leads to discrimination between Muslims and people of other faiths. Worthy Coptic Christian principles do not distinguish between male and female heirs and therefore allow for equal distribution of the deceased's inheritance

amongst all of the surviving children. Hence, applying sharia law to non-Muslims violated the section of the constitution stating that provisions for Christians and Jewish groups apply in matters of personal status. Article 3 of the 2014 constitution stipulates that non-Muslims may resort to their laws in matters of personal status, except in the event of a disagreement between the two parties or if they are from different sects, so consider Islamic Sharia to be automatically implemented (Ramadan, 2020). Individuals are also subject to different sets of personal status laws (regarding marriage, divorce, inheritance, etc.), depending upon their official religious designation (Report on International Religious Freedom: Egypt, 2021). There is no doubt that the application of the same Islamic laws to all sects led to conflict between the two groups. As in Nasrallah's case, a ruling was issued to distribute the inheritance among her brother and sisters according to Islamic Sharia inheritance principles. As will be later mentioned.

Carlo (2020) writes that Egyptian Christian women have recently been waging legal battles in an attempt to abolish the application of Islamic inheritance laws to Christians (El-Faizy, 2019). In one case of disputed inheritance, Al-Didamouni (2019) mentions that Hoda Nasrallah, who became a Christian when her father died in 2019, stood before three different judges to demand a full share of the property her father left to her and her two brothers. She launched a personal rights initiative, which is still ongoing, called "A Christian Woman on the Identification Card...but a Muslim Woman in Inheritance Law" (Al-Didamouni, 2019; Carlo, 2020). In fighting the courts, Nasrallah aims to shed light on the problem of

inheritance, confront it, and address it in order to pass laws granting complete equality in inheritance between men and women.

The rights Christians are granted fall under Article 3 of the 2014 Egyptian Constitution, which stipulates that "Christian laws are the main principle in personal status legislation." However, the provisions of inheritance contained in the Coptic regulations are not implemented unless all the heirs belong to the same religious sect and have all agreed that the inheritance be carried out in accordance with the provisions of their regulations. If the heirs belong to different sects, the current Egyptian law pertaining to inheritance, which is taken from the provisions of Islamic sharia, considers general sharia to be automatically implemented (El-Faizy, 2019). According to Carlo (2020), the reason why Egyptian courts apply Islamic inheritance laws to both Muslims and non-Muslims in the event of a disagreement between the two parties or if they are from different sects is to preserve public security (Carlo, 2020). According to Carlo (2020), in implementing inheritance provisions, Copt males sometimes depend on the application of Islamic law because they get twice the female share, so they resort to Islamic Sharia law to achieve personal interests. It is worth noting that under the Islamic Inheritance Law, sometimes women are entitled to only half the inheritance granted to men.

It is stated in the explanatory memorandum of the draft law (No. 77 of 1943), which is still in force, that "the provisions of Islamic Inheritance will apply to all Egyptians, whether they are Muslims or non-Muslims, regarding all issues or disputes related to inheritance" (Radwan, 2023, p. 26). Hence, there is no doubt that the application of sharia law to non-Muslims in regard to inheritance laws also bans

Christians from practicing their religious codes and leads in this case to double discrimination against Copts.

The Qur'an states that "men have a share, and women have a share" (Al Nisa 4:7). This determines inheritance for women by affirming their right to the property of their parents and other close relatives. It emphasises their financial independence and role as heirs, regardless of the size of the inheritance (Devy et al., 2022; Selçuk & Bozkurt, 2021). But the Qur'an also stipulates that women are to get half the inheritance of men. This does not mean, however, that men are superior to women. Rather, in the context of social justice in the 7th century, men were responsible for the livelihood of the family, the care of the parents, and the giving of the bride price to women. Women at that time had no financial obligations. Akdemir (1997) argues that if women were given a full share of the inheritance at that time, men would lose what should rightfully be theirs according to the extent of their family and societal obligations. Therefore, in allotting half-shares to women, the Qur'an promotes and ensures social justice (1997, p. 256). Akdemir thus finds the half-share distribution, as stated in the verse, to be more appropriate to justice, taking into consideration all the obligations of Islam and its balance of blessings and burdens.

Al-Murabit (2018) also calls for an understanding of the social-based meaning of inheritance verses, as women were not expected to inherit anything in seventh-century Arabia. He also stresses the idea that men bear the burden of financial responsibility for their families and points out that the alleged unequal distribution indicates that only sisters and brothers inherit, not all women and men. In fact, there were cases in which the man inherits but the woman does not, and

others where the woman inherits but the man does not, or one of them inherits more than the other regardless of gender but because of their closeness to the deceased (Abdel Sattar, 2023).

Ingrid Mattson (2021) asserts that the Qur'anic verses reflect certain social norms of the time of their revelation, and they need to be interpreted in the spirit of those norms rather than the letter of those norms, in conformity with principles of justice and equity. She emphasises that the contemporary social framework through which it is interpreted should not be ignored (Ramli et al., 2023). She (2021) proposes a review of the inheritance legislation to make it truly reflective of current values about gender equality and human rights, ensuring that the inheritance is indeed done according to need and personal circumstances.

Akdemir (1997), Al-Murabit (2018), Selçuk & Bozkurt (2021), and Mattson (2021) all argue for gender equality in inheritance laws, reflecting modern social realities and Qur'anic ideas of justice. These commentators advocate a holistic understanding of the teachings of the Qur'an that encompasses the greater values of justice, compassion, and the well-being of society.

Witnessing

The Qur'an also appears to promote gender discrimination when it comes to circumstances regarding women as witnesses. The witness of a woman is deemed to be half that of a man, especially in the case of legal contracts. The Qur'an states:

"O you who have believed, when you contract a debt for a specified term, write it down. And let a scribe write it between you in justice. Let no scribe refuse to write as Allah has taught him. So let him write and let the

one who has the obligation [i.e., the debtor] dictate. And let him fear Allah, his Lord, and not leave anything out of it. But if the one who has the obligation is of limited understanding, weak, or unable to dictate himself, then let his guardian dictate in justice. And bring to witness two witnesses from among your men. And if there are not two men [available], then a man and two women from those whom you accept as witnesses—so that if one of them [i.e., the woman]" errs, then the other can remind her. (Al-Baqarah, 1: 282)

The verse refers to the testimony of women at a time when they did not typically serve as witnesses on contracts or in commercial transactions. Women's duties were mainly domestic (homemakers, wives, and mothers), so they had little experience in the male-dominated business world. The verse also indicates that most women were in a weaker (i.e., dependent) financial position compared to men, which may affect their witness. Given these circumstances, a woman would need another woman similar to her in social standing to strengthen (or double) her position (Hamid, 2020). In acknowledgement of societal norms at the time the laws were being formulated, Islam made the witness of a woman to be worth half that of a man.

This rule does not apply in all cases, however. In some instances, the witness of a woman is greater than that of a man. One example is the case of a husband accusing his wife of marital infidelity. In this situation, if the man testifies five times to the act of adultery and the woman testifies the same number of times that she did not betray him (in what is called 'curses'), then her witness exceeds his witness. The Qur'an states:

And those who accuse their wives 'of adultery' but have no witness except themselves, the accuser must testify, swearing four times by God that he is telling the truth and a fifth oath that God may condemn him if he is lying. For her to be spared the punishment, she must swear four times by God that he is telling a lie, and a fifth oath that God may be displeased with her if he is telling the truth. (An-Nur, 4–9)

And those who accuse their wives of adultery but have no witness except themselves must testify, swearing four times by God that he is telling the truth and taking a fifth oath that God may condemn him if he is lying. For her to be spared the punishment, she must swear four times to God that he is telling a lie and take a fifth oath that God may be dissatisfied with her if he is telling the truth. (An-Nur, 4–9)

An interpretation of the Qur'an that includes a historical dimension has often been absent in previous discussions, which has then led to discrimination (Reynolds, 2007; Hefni et al., 2022; Syukriyana et al., 2019). Reynolds (2007) argues that in the historical context in which the verse was revealed, the management of commercial affairs was entirely the domain of men. According to Khaled Abou El Fadl (2015), the verse refers to women's testimony at a time when women did not typically serve as witnesses on contracts or in commercial transactions. Ziba Mir-Hosseini (2019) emphasises that one has to understand the verse in its context and consider the time and period in which it was revealed. In other words, witness testimony today cannot be looked at in the same light as it was in the historical context (Mir-Hosseini, 2019; Mubarrak, 2017).

Violence against Women

A clear case of discrimination against women relates to pervasive violence, which is any harmful act committed against them (e.g., physical or sexual abuse). According to Abdellatif (2022), women and girls in Egypt face the ever-present, lurking spectres of physical and sexual violence that continue to plague many Egyptian homes and public spaces (Ali, 2019). According to Amnesty International (2015), women in Egypt face violence on a disturbing scale, including vicious beatings, aggression, and other forms of abuse. Most of this violence comes from spouses (Amnesty International, 2015; Human Rights Watch, 2018). According to the National Council for Women (NCW) and the Central Agency for Public Mobilisation and Statistics (CAPMAS), around 7.8 million women annually suffer from forms of violence perpetrated by a spouse in public places (Ahram, 2022). Furthermore, according to the latest results of the Egyptian Family Survey, CAPMAS reports that 22.2 percent of married women experienced psychological abuse at the hands of their husbands, while 25.5 percent experienced physical abuse.

Ibrahim (2022) writes that pervasive violence also occurs against Christian women. Radwan (2022) notes that the beating of Egyptian Christian women occurs mostly by their husbands and is related to women changing their religion. Many Christian sects, such as Orthodox, permit divorce and second marriage for Copts only for adultery and changing religion. Consequently, some Christian women decide to change their religion and enter Islam in order to apply the provisions of Islamic law and obtain a divorce (Radwan, 2022; Ibrahim, 2022). Such conversions may lead to heightened tensions between Muslims and Copts. According to Islamic

Sharia, if the spouses differ in sect or religion, a wife can file a lawsuit requesting divorce (Ibrahim, 2022).

Perhaps one of the most difficult verses in the Quran concerns the matter of husbands beginning to give permission to admonish their wives. The Arabic word *dharb* is translated using various words such as "beat," "strike," or even "discipline gently."

And if you sense ill-conduct from your women, advise them 'first', 'if they persist, do not share their beds; 'but if they still persist, then discipline them 'gently'. But if they change their ways, do not be unjust to them. Surely God is Most High, All-Great. (Al-Nisa 4:34)

Such a verse appears not only to discriminate against women but also to allow and even encourage violence, especially domestic violence.

According to Al-Khatib (2022), striking is only permissible as a last resort to save the marriage. However, if striking one's wife will not produce the desired results of saving the marriage, the act is forbidden. Moreover, a husband is not allowed to hurt a woman to the extent that she is left bruised (Al-Khatib, 2022). The purpose of striking an errant wife "gently" is not to hurt her but to awaken her to the reality and consequences of her actions. At the same time, the Qur'an teaches that a husband is also displaying ill conduct (*nushuz*) if he assaults his wife by verbal abuse or striking without due cause. The Qur'an says:

If a woman fears indifference or neglect from her husband, there is no blame on either of them if they seek 'fair' settlement, which is best. Humans are ever inclined to selfishness. But if you are gracious and mindful 'of God', surely God is All-Aware of what you do. (Al-Nisa 4:128)

Al-Murabit (2018) proposes that there are several alternative meanings that could apply that accord with the Qur'an's comprehensive message of compassion and mutual respect in marriage. He explains that "strike" in the Qur'an does not mean direct violence, as it includes multiple meanings of gradual punishment, such as "moving away and abandoning" (Haneef et al., 2018).

Abdalhaqq Bewley (2017) argues that "strike" can have many meanings, including "to separate" or "to forsake." In further explaining the term, he emphasises Qur'anic teachings that encourage forgiveness and reconciliation in marital relationships (Qur'an 3:134), highlighting the importance of compassion and mercy in resolving conflicts (Geisinger, 2018: 302). Bewley talks as well about non-violent interpretations of Qur'anic verses. Both Al-Murabit and Bewley suggest that the verse should be approached with the understanding that compassion and mercy are embodiments of the wider values of Islam.

Similarly, Laleh Bakhtiar (2016) argues the term must be understood in the broader context of "forsake" and "separate." The Qur'an said, "If you anticipate a split between them, appoint a mediator from his family and another from hers. If they desire reconciliation, Allah will restore harmony between them. Surely Allah is All-Knowing, All-Aware" (Al-Nisa 4:35). Bakhtiar (2016) talks about non-violent

interpretations of Qur'anic verses. Muhammad Shahrur (2020) insinuates that hitting in the Arabic tongue also means setting proverbs, striking on the ground, and taking necessary measures, such as: “The state struck the price manipulators with an iron hand.” Therefore, the “beating” is to be understood in the sense of taking a strict stance against women who are arrogant, in the same way as the state struck criminals with an iron fist—that is, not literally but figuratively (Rahman, 2017: 312–315). Shahrur (2020) wholly condemns violence and advocates for mutual respect between spouses within marriage. He also criticises the classic patriarchal readings and stresses the importance of understanding gender relations in the Qur'an.

Al-Murabit, Bewley, Bakhtiar, and Shahrur confirm that the broader general ethical principles of the Qur'an play a crucial role in interpreting these verses. They call for a more culturally appropriate and historical understanding of the verses in a manner that matches the Qur'an's comprehensive message of compassion and mutual respect in marriage. They argue that defining *daraba* as physical hitting conflicts with Quranic basic principles that address fairness, equality, and mercy for the entire universe. Hence, the basic problem is more precisely interpreting *daraba*. These commentators advocate a holistic understanding of the Qur'an. Their main argument is that the word *daraba* in al-Nisâ' [4]: 34 does not mean “hitting” but “going” to ask other people's help to solve their household problems.

Islamic religious education curricula seek to promote gender equality by teaching and educating students from an Islamic perspective based on the rights and duties of women and men. This educational initiative is intended to enhance a sense of belonging to a multicultural, multi-religious society. In Islamic religious

education curricula, reference is made to numerous texts in the Qur'an that advocate for equality between men and women (Shafiq, 2019; El-Gendy, 2008). For example, a preparatory school religion book entitled *Equality in the Holy Qur'an* quotes the Qur'an as follows:

Surely, Muslim men and Muslim women, believing men and believing women, devout men and devout women, truthful men and truthful women, patient men and patient women, humble men and humble women, and the men who give Sadaqah (charity) and the women who give Sadaqah, and the men who fast and the women who fast, and the men who guard their private parts (against evil acts) and the women who guard (theirs), and the men who remember God much and the women who remember (Him)—for them, God has prepared forgiveness and a great reward. (Al Ahzab, 33:35)

Such a text teaches students that both sexes can achieve good moral qualities equally and that God rewards them equally in this world and the hereafter (Sekta, 2022). The Quran is very clear that husbands should treat their wives respectfully and that even if they dislike something about their wives, they will find more qualities to love. In this regard, the Qur'an says (Women 4:19), “Then if you hate them, it may be that you dislike a thing while God has placed abundant good in it.” Thus, this mutual love and compassion between the husband and the wife have been emphasised in the Qur'an.

Social and cultural norms and practices in Egypt have often acted against the Qur'an's teachings. While most Islamic religious education curricula promote equality between men and women, they have also been accused of encouraging gender discrimination and violence against women (Shafiq, 2019; Faour, 2012). Shafiq (2019) states that Islamic religious education curricula are still strongly masculine-oriented.

Yet, despite such orientation, teachers can give some contemporary approaches to the Qur'anic text and offer interpretations about gender equality. Moreover, teachers can demystify verses that may otherwise be misconstrued as promoting gender inequality as a religious practice. Contemporary interpretations would present a much more balanced outlook and advocate for gender equality based on Qur'anic principles of justice and fairness (Reynolds, 2007; Hefni et al., 2022; Syukriyana et al., 2019). Moreover, contemporary interpretations also offer a way of rethinking the text and emphasising an understanding of the Qur'an that is more inclusive and equitable (Abdel Sattar, 2023; Aria Nakissa, 2020). Qur'anic rules and values concerning women should be understood and interpreted in light of the socio-historical context of the time the Qur'an was revealed to the first generation of Muslims. It will assist students and others in determining which interpretations remain relevant today and which ones may be less relevant and more cultural artefacts (Firdayanti et al., 2023).

Islamic education curricula can highlight the importance of contemporary interpretations, thereby challenging traditional gender norms to advance gender equality and promote justice. It can discuss the historical background of gender roles

and highlight Qur'anic principles about equality, which can guide both men and women (Firdayanti et al., 2023). Islamic education curricula seek to expunge misguided impressions, clarify understandings of gender equality, and draw closer to contemporary values (Reynolds, 2007; Hefni et al., 2022; Syukriyana et al., 2019).

Islamic religious education curricula can discuss these highly debated issues and encourage values relating to equality and social justice between the two genders. This is done by adopting broader equality standards (Westerfeld, 2019). Where the teaching of gender equality is a principle of citizenship, Muslims and Christians are regarded as equal partners in the Egyptian homeland (Mustafa, 2017). An example is the Grade 5 religion book entitled *Values and Respect for Others*, where the rights and duties of citizens are presented in a lesson on equality between people around the world. This includes equality based on the principle of citizenship, indicating that Muslims and Christians are equal partners in Egypt (Al-Behairy, 2019).

The foregoing reveals that Islamic religious education plays a crucial role in educating and developing the values and morals of Egyptian society. It focuses on the ideas of citizenship, diversity, and peaceful coexistence, encouraging students to become more tolerant of all Abrahamic religions. Furthermore, Islamic religious education played a vital role in the emergence and structuring of Egyptian society, where it represented the umbilical cord linking Egyptians to their cultural and religious roots. In Islamic primary schools, the religious curriculum emphasises the moral and ethical aspects of Islam and its main pillars, in addition to training students in the performance of religious rites, especially prayer and fasting. At the

same time, religious tolerance towards Christians and Jews is highlighted as an Islamic value.

Islamic religious education curricula that do not teach equality, tolerance, or acceptance of other religions should not be integrated into the curricula. Furthermore, religious educational curricula that are out of date should be removed. Islamic religious education should align with modern women's values and aspirations in Egyptian society. Islamic religious education curricula ought to be updated and taught according to the international equality standards and objectives of the present day, which unfortunately are still lacking in some Islamic religious teachings.

Section Two: Initiatives Taken by Egyptian Religious Schools and Leaders to Promote Citizenship Values, Inter-religious Exchange, and Peaceful Cultural Behaviour

In Islamic religious schools, deeply ingrained religious and cultural differences persist, which can create a gap between Christian and Muslim students. These differences are exacerbated by issues such as extremist interpretations of Islam by some teachers and separating Christian and Muslim students during religion lessons (Al Saour, 2020; Ha, 2016). To address these issues, religious schools and leaders have taken some initiatives to promote citizenship values, tolerance, and peaceful cultural behaviour between Christian and Muslim Egyptians. The initiatives include instilling citizenship values, encouraging inter-religious exchange, and promoting the teaching of good moral values.

1. Instilling citizenship values

One of the most important challenges that has led to division among students in Islamic schools is teachers adopting a narrow vision that does not accept ‘the other’ or recognise other religions (Mansour, 2008; Al Saour, 2020). According to Mansour (2008), some “teachers sometimes created a false contradiction between Islam and science due to their individual interpretations" (p. 1629; Ha, 2016). For example, in Islamic schools, a trend has been noted in which “Islamic extremist” teachers use their own rather than the prescribed curriculum and teach Islamic songs instead of the Egyptian national anthem, the latter which they regard as a Western invention (Murphy, 2002, p. 131). Moreover, Murphy (2002) reports that “Islamic schoolteachers are separating Christian and Muslim students in class and giving fire and brimstone sermons about the horrors of hell, leaving students with the impression that they need to fight against those who do not share their views of the afterlife” (p. 131; Abdel Rahim, 2015). Such methods of teaching by extremist teachers have led to sectarian discord and violence between Christian and Muslim students. Moreover, the practices and rituals of extremist teachers have made all students easy prey to abnormal and extremist views of citizenship and principles of tolerance.

In response to these challenges, Tariq Shawky fired hundreds of extremist teachers (Neill, 2006; Dabouly, 2017). At the same time, a plan was implemented to raise the awareness level of teachers and mentors through mandatory training courses in order to work on improving the quality of the teachers of Islamic subjects. Shehta (2021) notes that Salama Daoud, head of the Al-Azhar school sector, has

played a pivotal role in advancing the affairs of Al-Azhar pre-university education. A package of training courses was held and organised inside and outside Al-Azhar in cooperation with affiliated bodies, such as the British Council and the American Embassy (Alaa, 2021). The aim of these training courses was to instill the values and principles of tolerance (Maher, 2021). The courses increased teachers' knowledge of the concepts of citizenship.

In my interview with Salama Daoud, he discussed decision No. 8, which was issued by Ahmed Al-Tayeb in 2013. The decision aimed to form a group of committees to reform and develop Al-Azhar schools at all stages. School instructors now teach values centred on peaceful coexistence, citizenship, and how to interact with people of other religions (Attia, 2021; Kamal, 2014). Islamic and Christian religious schools and leaders have empowered teachers to proactively teach in a way that encourages citizenship values, leading in turn to an increase in peaceful relations among all religious groups in Egypt.

Islamic and Christian religious schools and leaders have also sought to improve the education system in Al-Azhar (Al-Shami, 2022; Romani, 2022). According to Al-Shami (2022), a package of training courses was held and organised by Al-Azhar schools in cooperation with the General Administration of Holy Quran Affairs. The aim of these training courses was to develop the teachers' capabilities and talents and enhance their educational skills. Additionally, the courses were given to provide the teachers with the skills to effectively manage the modern educational process. Salama Daoud indicated that the training courses fall within the framework of a complete system to modify concepts and attitudes towards

students and teachers so that they can benefit from the specialised training, with the overall intention of improving the education system in Al-Azhar (Romani, 2022). The training courses provided by Islamic and Christian religious schools and leaders have played a pivotal role in the development of Islamic religious education, which in turn has encouraged peace between the two groups.

2. Encouraging inter-religious exchange among students

Religious and cultural differences between Islamic and Christian schools mostly concern matters of religious doctrine, with each religion having its own specificities (Mokbel, 2015; Morcos, 2018). So, for instance, Islamic school students are required to observe all Islamic rituals, such as praying and fasting, and girls must dress modestly, covering their skin and wearing a hijab (Mokbel, 2015). In Christian schools, students are granted more license regarding rituals, fasting, and clothing, but they are required to observe the teachings of the Holy Bible and apply its principles towards God, oneself, and others (Morcos, 2018). The cultural differences between Islamic and Christian schools could prove to be a setback to enhancing the relationship between Muslims and Christians, where deeply ingrained cultural differences may represent an obstacle to accepting ‘the other’ and exchanging ideas.

In the face of cultural differences, however, the Islamic and Christian religious education leaders in Egypt have promoted positive behaviour in students, regardless of their religious background (Ghaly, 2021; Ali, 2020). In one initiative, Pope Tawadros II, in partnership with Tariq Shawky, held religious competitions between Muslim and Christian students that aimed to strengthen the bonds between

them (Ghaly, 2021; Mamdouh, 2017). These initiatives emphasised the principles of citizenship and making good choices. Further, they were intended to teach students to accept others and tolerate differences by educating them on scientific thinking that avoids fanaticism and extremism (Ali, 2019). Such initiatives by the leaders of Islamic and Christian education can promote inter-religious exchange between the two groups.

At the same time, Tariq Shawky implemented the "Religions of Heaven... No to Violence, No to Blood" initiative, which aimed to obligate all schools to recite verses from both the Bible and the Qur'an during school assemblies (Ali, 2021; Eshrah, 2021). This initiative was meant to restore cohesion among students and deter the development of violence and extremism (Al Masry today, 2009). In his interview with me, Tariq Shawky confirmed that the initiative began in the Al-Azhar school in Cairo and is now being introduced in all Christian and Islamic schools. In this way, Muslim and Christian religious education leaders and schools play a vital role in shaping coexistence and tolerance between the two religious groups.

In a further gesture to encourage exchange between Muslims and Christians, Egyptian Jesuit schools offered initiatives that promoted citizenship through the concepts of civics, with citizenship incorporated into the content of social studies (Hafez, 2017; Al-Azzazi, 2020). For example, before the advent of the month of Ramadan, Gohar Ezzat, Assistant General Secretary of Catholic Schools in Egypt, distributed "lanterns" to both Muslim and Christian students in an affirmation of the establishment of the spirit of national unity (Rugh, 2016; Ahmed, 2019). In his interview with me, Ezzat confirmed that this behaviour had a profound impact on all

employees and students alike, stressing the values of national unity, citizenship, and love among members of the same society without discrimination or racism. He also pointed out that these encouraged students to fraternise, reject destructive ideas, and establish values of tolerance and coexistence (Sky News Arabia, 2021). Additionally, Ezzat observed that Christian schools promoted an ethical Muslim-Christian coexistence and the consolidation of freedom of religion (Education Encyclopedia, n.d., p. 7; Hafez, 2017).

In yet another initiative and in an event displaying national unity between Muslim and Christian students and highlighting their similarities, Daoud Nasr, Director General of Evangelical Schools in Egypt, organised a major celebration at the school's headquarters in Assiut, entitled "Together to Accept the Other." The celebration included a competition to memorise parts of the Holy Qur'an for Muslim students and portions of the Bible for Christian students from Grade 1 to secondary school at various levels (Ahmed, 2019; Almogz, 2020). The celebration included a variety of activities for students, along with theatre presentations and documentary films (Mokhtar, 2020; Badawy, 2021). In his March 2020 interview with me, Nasr confirmed that the purpose of this celebration was to promote tolerance by bringing students together. Spreading a culture of tolerance and love between Muslims and Christians resulted in an increase in peaceful relations between the two dominant religious groups.

As well, the schools of the Nile Evangelical Churches have celebrated the "Day of the Orphan" by hosting a large group of orphaned Muslim and Christian children at a sports and cultural entertainment day (Editorial, 2022; Ghaly, 2021;

Sobhy, 2017). In my interview with Nasr, he confirmed that the goal of the celebrations was to integrate students into society and help channel their energy in a positive way rather than into criminal gangs or terrorist organisations. Islamic and Christian religious education leaders and schools have developed values in their students such as empathy and acceptance of others, as well as knowledge of other faiths. From this, it is clear that Islamic religious education leaders and schools are working to promote a feeling of unity and peace among all Egyptians, regardless of their religious orientation.

3. Promoting good moral values

The issue of the withdrawal of Christian students from Qur'an lessons is problematic when these lessons attempt to promote citizenship values between the two groups (BouJaoude & Alters, 2011; Pink, 2003). According to BouJaoude and Alters (2011), Christian students leave the classroom during Islamic education lessons. They usually go to another classroom to receive religious lessons from a Coptic teacher (Musa, 2019; Mahnna, 2017). The withdrawal of Christian students from Islamic education lessons erects a barrier and creates a huge gap between the two groups. While there are other ways to address this issue, such as setting religion classes for each student at the same time, Muslim students go to a class and Christian students go to a separate class, there is no doubt that the main reason for the withdrawal of Christian students from Islamic education lessons is religious differences between the two groups. This would also leave a gap in Christian students's education, unless both groups were to learn both religions. However, Christian students would benefit from learning certain aspects of Islam, such as

tolerance and citizenship, as these aspects highlight the shared cultural values of the two religions.

In response to this issue of Christian student withdrawal from Islamic lessons, Islamic religious schools have received increasing attention of late by Islamic religious education leaders in terms of what to add or remove in the Islamic curricula to enhance the desired moral values (Qassem, 2018; Hussein, 2021). There is no doubt that Christian parents feel resentful due to the fact that Islamic religious curricula are not part of the Christian religion (Barbar, 2018; Hussein, 2021). According to Barbar (2018), Christian parents have fears due to religious education lessons that discriminate between their children and the children of Muslims. Hussein (2021) reports that the Egyptian Minister of Education, Tariq Shawky, introduced a new academic textbook in 2017 called *Morals and Values Education* for use in the elementary stages of education (Badawi, 2020; Al-Azzazi, 2020). The joint religious book allows Muslim and Christian students to attend the same classes and learn from the same curriculum, which will help mitigate sectarian divisions (Matar, 2018; Megahid, 2018). According to Nawal Shalaby, Director of the Curriculum and Educational Materials Centre at the Ministry of Education and Technical Education, the new academic textbook is derived from Islamic and Christian religious sources (Hussein, 2020).

In his interview with me, Shawky confirmed that the textbook aims to teach Muslim and Christian pupils that they share the same set of values and morals. He also added that the textbook did not substitute for Islamic education classes but instead represented a major step forward in unifying the values and morals of

students. For the first time, Christian students learned Qur'anic verses about tolerance and love, while Muslim students learned Bible verses about loving and giving. Thus, the aim of inspiring citizenship was achieved without any sectarian slogans (Mikhail, 2016; Tveten, 2016). Moreover, by studying the textbook, Muslim and Christian students can learn how to create a better understanding between diverse groups, regardless of their religious beliefs. From the above, it is clear that the recent initiatives taken by Egyptian religious education leaders and schools have played a key role in promoting peace between Christian and Muslim students.

To spread the moral values that urge peace among all students in all Islamic schools, Tariq Shawky launched an initiative in cooperation with Al-Azhar and Jesuit schools in 2019, aimed at spreading peace among students (Musa, 2019; Al-Bashir, n.d.). As part of this initiative, Shawky sent a sheikh and a priest to participate in the morning assemblies at two Christian and Islamic schools, where they were to give a speech. The underlying motivation for this initiative was to expose students to scenarios that depict religious peace (Mahanna, 2017). The idea is that when students see a respected Muslim elder and a priest at the morning assembly talking together and standing next to each other, their impression of both men changes, and they see unity rather than division between them (Al-Bashir, n.d.). Such an initiative represents a process of building and instilling values in a sound and effective manner between the groups.

The foregoing reveals that Islamic religious education leaders and schools play an essential role in the process of raising awareness about different religions and promoting an understanding of respect for the beliefs of others. Islamic religious

education leaders and schools also help to reduce discrimination and stereotypes that can lead to societal division. Hence, Islamic religious education schools occupy a prominent place in the Egyptian educational system and have many positive educational and behavioural goals, such as promoting coexistence and tolerance, instilling citizenship values, and teaching good behaviour. They also provide students from different religions with opportunities for inter-religious exchange. Overall, Islamic education schools make an important contribution in relation to tolerance and cooperation in Egypt's religiously diverse student body.

Chapter Four

Promotion of Peaceful Social and Cultural Behaviour by Religious Institutions and Leaders

Introduction

Despite Egyptian Muslims and Christians sharing some traditional values that support each other's social and religious practices, such as family life, chastity, funerals, and circumcision (Afayori, 2016; Rauch, 1995; Saad, 2000; Srikanthan, 2008; Vrugtman, 2018), these two groups do not always engage in the same social practices (Seaward, 2020; Cragg, 1992; McCallum, 2012). Some issues, like extending congratulations on religious occasions or the implementation of personal status laws (e.g., marriage, divorce, and inheritance), have led to social conflicts between Christians and Muslims (Ha, 2016; Nabil, 2019; Cragg, 1992). For example, some Muslim extremists (e.g., the Muslim Brotherhood) claim that Muslims congratulating Christians on their holy days is not compatible with Islam (Seaward, 2020; Kamal, 2021). Such differences in Islamic interpretation can cause a rift not only between the religious groups but also among Muslims who disagree with each other. Moreover, flashpoints such as these serve to highlight what, for many Muslims and Christians, are unbridgeable differences between the two belief systems. One of the main reasons for social tensions between the two groups is the discriminatory fatwas issued by extremist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafi movement, which have banned Muslims from congratulating Christians on their holy days.

Despite such challenges, religious leaders and institutions have sought to combat these and other related issues (Al-Mawardi, 2019; McCallum, 2012). For instance, Al-Azhar has countered what they called “deviant fatwas” by launching an initiative that spreads congratulatory messages via social media. In so doing, they confirmed the permissibility of Christians's congratulations. Additionally, the Dar al-Ifta Al-Misriyyah, an Egyptian Islamic institution, offers Muslims religious guidance and advice through the issuing of fatwas on every-day and contemporary issues. They confirmed that congratulating Christians on their holidays is indeed compatible with Islamic teachings (Dar al-Ifta Al-Misriyyah, 1998). Based on these examples, we can see that Al-Azhar and Dar al-Ifta Al-Misriyyah have actively sought to counter the extremist groups and their fatwas. Moreover, they have contributed to creating an atmosphere of tolerance and understanding between Muslims and Christians that surpasses even their belief systems. It is worth noting that while fatwas issued by extremist groups have always been on the periphery of Egypt's religious scene, Al-Azhar and Dar al-Ifta Al-Misriyyah have a significant influence on Egyptian society.

This chapter will include material from writings, speeches, and interviews with Muslim and Christian leaders, including Pope Tawadros II, leader of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria; Ahmed Al-Tayeb, Grand Imam of al-Azhar; and Andrea Zaki, leader of the Coptic Evangelical Institutions for Social Services. Despite simmering hostilities between some Muslims and Copts that occasionally erupt in violence, the religious institutions and leaders in Egypt have continued to strive for peace.

The chapter is divided into two sections. The first section sheds light on the contributions of Egyptian religious institutions and leaders in addressing social and cultural conflicts. The conflicts discussed here include policies concerning extending congratulations on religious occasions, the implementation of personal status laws, widespread poverty and illiteracy, discrimination against women, and violent social incidents. These issues create the most tension between Muslims and Christians in Egypt. Section Two identifies initiatives taken by Egyptian religious institutions and leaders to encourage peaceful social and cultural interactions between Christians and Muslims. These initiatives include religious festivals, occasions, and celebrations; the delivery of essential community services; and the development of literacy initiative projects. Initiatives taken in these areas are the most promising for peaceful relations between Christians and Muslims. The focus of this chapter will be on how Egypt's religious institutions and leaders have addressed social and cultural issues that led to conflicts and how religious activities and initiatives are being used to overcome them and foster peace between the two religious groups.

Section One: The Contributions of Egyptian Religious Institutions and Leaders to Addressing Social and Cultural Conflicts

Along with several challenges affecting Muslims and Christians at the societal level, issues such as social violence, discrimination against women, female circumcision, veiling, and gender inequality are still widespread in Egyptian society (Abdul Latif, 2019; Abdul Jalil, 2010). These issues have negatively affected the social relations between the two groups (Capmas, 2020; Azzam, 2022). For example, Nada, a sixth-grade student at Al-Hawatkeh Elementary School, was

subjected to circumcision in the village of Al-Elhawatka, in Asyut Governorate, after her family insisted on clinging to this tradition for their daughter. Their decision led to her death (Al-Badry & Saleh, 2020; Mahdi, 2020). Although traditional habits are tightly integrated into religious beliefs and practices in Egyptian society, the persistence of female circumcision has caused violence against women, which in turn has led to tears in the fabric of Egyptian society.

In both religious communities, discrimination and violence against women have been condemned. The Coptic Orthodox Church issued a document in 2022 regarding its position on discrimination and systemic violence against women, declaring its categorical rejection of these practices. The document stated: “The Coptic Orthodox Church supports women’s right to a life free from violence” (Khalid, 2023). Further, according to Hegazy (2021), Al-Azhar in 2008 affirmed, "Female circumcision is a harmful practice that does not indicate its legitimacy with a valid document or evidence. Thus, it is prohibited, and the punishment of those who conduct the procedure is permissible according to sharia" (p. 19). Al-Azhar also affirmed that circumcision causes great damage to a female’s personality in general and affects her family life after marriage, which then negatively impacts the entire society (Karem, 2020). Based on a fatwa issued by Al-Azhar that prohibits female circumcision, the Egyptian judicial authorities criminalised the procedure (Khlid, 2023). In working to renounce and outlaw traditional practices like female circumcision, the Coptic Orthodox Church and Al-Azhar continue to fight violence against women.

The next sections investigate how prominent religious institutions and leaders in Egypt address social and cultural points of conflict, including incidents of social violence and discrimination against women, by establishing religious events, organising gatherings and activities, and conducting social and religious works.

1. Incidents of social violence

Social tensions have proved to be persistent elements of Muslim-Christian relations in Egypt (Rieffer-Flanagan, 2016; Guiney, 2008). Rieffer-Flanagan (2016) writes that the situation has deteriorated recently for some religious minorities as a result of government policies and “aggressive social behaviours within Egyptian society” (p. 13). According to Guiney (2008), there have been several incidents, particularly in Upper Egypt, that have in some cases escalated into riots. One notable example is the violence that erupted in the village of al-Kush in January 2000. A dispute between a Christian shopkeeper and a Muslim customer led to the deaths of twenty Christians and one Muslim, as well as attacks on Christian homes and shops. Allegations of Muslim brutality were presented in the international media as evidence of the persecution of the Coptic community. However, many Muslims were outraged by the biased reporting and blamed Copts for this portrayal (Guiney, 2008).

Feuer (2020) claims that the root cause of these incidents is that some religious institutions systematically condone the intolerance and violence preached by radical groups (Fouad, 2015). For example, in 2014, Al-Azhar refused to declare that members of the Islamic State terrorist group were apostates. Furthermore, Al-Azhar

argued that no believer could be declared an apostate, regardless of his or her sins (Feuer, 2020, p. 4; Fouad, 2015). Such declarations could be construed as increasing the power of anti-Christian groups.

At the same time, Al-Azhar's Reconciliation Committee was established based on the honourable role of Al-Azhar, which translates the aims and purposes of Islam in preserving blood, honour, and property (Hegazy & Issa, 2020; Ali, 2022). The reconciliation sessions are organised by religious leaders and operate under the supervision of the Al-Azhar institution. The sessions include both Christian and Muslim religious leaders. Nearly 50 reconciliation sessions were organised between 2011 and 2014 to settle disputes between Christians and Muslims, as documented by the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR) in their 2015 report. Although the councils occasionally exacerbated the crises they were designed to address, they for the most part succeeded in providing reliable solutions for addressing the incidents of sectarian violence in Egypt (Fahmy, 2018).

Through the years, Al-Tayeb has accused the Islamic State's ideas of being incompatible with the teachings of Islamic law (Paraszczuk, 2014; Gabra, 2016). One such accusation was made at the international conference "Al-Azhar Against Terrorism and Extremism." Al-Tayeb also added that the emergence of the Islamic State was a "natural result of the policy of marginalisation in Iraq" (Paraszczuk, 2014, p. 43). It is possible that Al-Tayeb was concerned that such a pronouncement might create insecurity and fear among Christians. It is crucial that Christians in Egypt understand that the Muslims they interact with in businesses, schools, and neighbourhoods are different from the Muslim extremists who are calling for

increasingly dire measures against them. Christian-Muslim peace is now taking place within this general framework.

The implementation of personal status laws has also caused conflict between Egyptian Muslims and Christians. For instance, many Christians oppose the application of Islamic sharia because of personal status issues such as divorce and inheritance, which, under sharia, are skewed in favour of Muslims (Nabil, 2019; Cragg, 1992). In his study, “Violence Against Copts and the Transitional Period in Egypt,” published by the American Carnegie Endowment for Peace Research in November 2013, Brownlee found that legal rather than any other form of discrimination made Copts a target of social conflict (Brownlee, 2013). Although the Egyptian government has abandoned its most recent bills proposing the widespread application of sharia, violence against Copts has increased, as many Muslims resent what they perceive as unnecessary Coptic interference in a Muslim-only issue (McCallum, 2012, p. 390). I believe that each group should be allowed to set their personal status issues according to their teachings. However, the oftentimes radically different standards of personal status could prove to be a setback to enhancing the relationship between Muslims and Christians in Egypt (Cragg, 1992; Alexander, 2015).

2. Discrimination against women in the social/political realm

Despite a constitutional guarantee of equality between males and females, issues such as women's non-participation in high positions in the state and the obligation to wear hijab are still causing discrimination against women in Egyptian society (Hafez, 2018; Mohamed, 2021). Hafez (2018) claims that one of the reasons

for the persistence of these issues is religious hindrances and obstacles. For example, some fatwas have been issued by extremist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafi movement, banning women's participation in elections and claiming that women are not fit to be members of parliament (Shusha, 2021). It can therefore be argued that fatwas issued by extremist groups have led to discrimination against women.

However, despite the issuing of fatwas banning women's participation in elections and preventing them from sitting as members of parliament (Shusha, 2021), Al-Azhar has confirmed that it is permissible for women to do both. Women can also assume a high position in government. In 2002, a fatwa was issued and signed by the then Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar, Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi, along with the Mufti of the Republic, Ahmed Al-Tayyib (currently Sheikh of Al-Azhar), and the Minister of Awqaf, Mahmoud Hamdi Zaqzouq. The fatwa stated that there is no clear or definitive text from the Qur'an or the Sunnah that prohibits women from assuming the position of judge (Reuters, 2021). Through its fatwa, Al-Azhar sought to encourage women to pursue political participation with the hope of increasing their influence over policymaking and thus securing their interests in the public sphere. Shawqi Allam, the Grand Mufti of Egypt, argued that women are essential partners in society and cautioned that we should not under any circumstances ignore their role in the building of communities and the nation in general (Abdul Ghani, 2014). Furthermore, in seeking to prove Al-Azhar's support for Muslim women, Ahmed Al-Tayeb published a statement in 2021 affirming women's rights, including the right to act politically within society:

A woman can assume high positions in the judiciary, fatwas, and travel without a mahram when it is safe, and she has a share of her husband's wealth if she contributes to its development (Ali, 2023, p.2).

It is worth noting that the religious institution Al-Azhar has women and men faculty members. For example, Suad Ibrahim Salih is a professor and head of the Comparative Jurisprudence Department at the Faculty of Islamic and Arabic Studies at Al-Azhar University, and Amna Naseer is a professor of Doctrine and former Dean of the Faculty of Human Studies at Al-Azhar University in Alexandria. Abdul Fadil Al-Qusi, professor of Doctrine and Philosophy and former Minister of Endowments, and Mahmoud Muhanna Mahmoud Ismail, Vice President of the University and Member of the Islamic Research Academy. (Samih, 2022). Women have also assumed high administrative responsibilities in Al-Azhar. For example, Fatima Al-Ahmar held the position of Director of the Presidency of the Al-Azhar Central Region in Giza Governorate, and Nahla Al-Saidi was advisor to the Sheikh of Al-Azhar for expatriate affairs (Shehta, 2021; Samih, 2022). From these examples, it can be argued that Al-Azhar is clearly seeking to enhance the role of women and further their integration within society through their appointment to important roles in state institutions.

Women's participation in Egypt's state administrative positions reflects this aim. Currently, there are 1,980 female judges in the Administrative Prosecution, making up 43% of the body's members, and 670 women in the State Lawsuits Authority, comprising 20% of its members (Abdul Ghani, 2014). An Egyptian judge, Tahani El-Gabaly, was appointed in 2003 to the Constitutional Court.

Moreover, in 2021, Judge Radwa Helmy Ahmed Ali participated in the administrative judiciary, or what is known as the State Council (Abdel Majeed, 2022).

Religious leaders are also seeking to reshape Egyptian women's identity through a more modern adherence to cultural norms, religious, customs, and tradition (Halali, 2020; Khalil, 2022). In his interview and discussion with me, Ahmed Al-Tayeb confirmed that Egyptian Muslim women often wear headscarves as markers of Egyptian Islamic identity. Most Egyptian women wear the hijab, and many Egyptian Christians also veil out of tradition and modesty. The wearing of head coverings is thus widespread and extensive in Egypt (Khalil, 2022). According to statistics from the Information Centre of the Council of Ministers, 80% of Egyptian women make some form of veiling part of their outfits (Ahmed, 2006; Christensen, 2015). The free-will spread of the veil among Egyptian women has therefore made the wearing of head coverings the norm, not the exception.

Islam guarantees free choice of religion, including adherence to cultural norms and expressions that are not specifically Muslim (Hansen, 2016). Worthwhile, Egyptian criminal law neither criminalises apostasy nor imposes a penalty for the convicted of apostasy. (Mohammed, 2021). This happens in Syria, Kuwait, Algeria, and Jordan. According to Burger (2003), there are no explicit rules applied to apostasy in Egyptian law (Berger, 2003). Unlike some countries in the Arab world, such as Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Yemen, apostasy is punishable by imprisonment or death (Mohammed, 2021). Although apostasy is not a crime in Egyptian law, the apostate is often thrown into prison under other criminal charges such as

undermining public security and national unity, contempt of religions, or the legal provisions on blasphemy (Zainoun, 2018). Article 98 of Egypt's penal code makes blasphemy a crime that is punishable by "prison for a year." (Park, 2014). The Egyptian Penal Code contains provisions under which it is possible to punish any person for contempt of religion, but there is no text that punishes departure from the religion or apostasy (El Fegiery, 2013). On the other hand, Islamic Law (Shari'a) criminalises apostasy but does not impose the death penalty for apostasy crimes (Ali, 2016; Abdel Rahman, 2017). According to Ahmed Al-Tayeb, apostasy is a crime, but there is no specific limit; rather, it is left to the discretion of the ruler and the circumstances that society is going through (Ali, 2016). Ali Jomma sees that the apostate from Islam will not be killed, but his affairs will be left to God on the Day of Resurrection (Abdel Rahman, 2017). Amna Naseer, professor of doctrine and philosophy at Al-Azhar University, distinguishes between two cases of apostates. The first is the one who has apostatized between himself and himself and does not show any hostility to Islam (it represents certain perceptions and ideas). This is free in his belief. The second type is the one who apostatizes from Islam, publicises hostility towards his followers, and is used as a means to destroy Islam and ridicule his eliefs. And supporting his enemies (representing a true apostasy and departure from the system of society). Here, the problem is not that he changed his beliefs, but rather that he turned into a "warrior" for Islam and Muslims. Here, the apostate is thrown into prison for undermining public security and national unity or contempt of religions. It could be argued that Egyptian law and Islamic law do not guarantee free choice of religion. Except for cases of apostasy that undermine public security and

national unity or contempt of religions or the legal provisions on blasphemy, apostasy is punishable by imprisonment or death. There are veiled as well as non-veiled Muslim women in Egypt (Abdel Hadi, 2022; Katerji, 2015). It can be argued that the institution and leaders of Al-Azhar showed that the issue of the hijab is not a discriminatory one but rather an issue of Egyptian women's identity.

In view of the foregoing, the following could be argued: First, the voices of Islamic and Christian leaders like the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Al-Tayeb, and Pope Shenouda are critical in resolving the religious conflict. Second, these religious leaders can effectively address some social issues through pastoral visits to villages against women. Third, Islam and Egyptian law guarantee free choice of religion.

Section Two: Initiatives Taken by Egyptian Religious Institutions and Leaders to Reduce Tensions

Despite differences in practices between Muslims and Copts, Egyptian Christian and Islamic institutions and leaders have presented some commonalities that unite them through religious gatherings, activities, holidays, and celebrations. Said (2020) argues that the role of religious institutions and leaders has not been limited to acquainting people with the rituals of their worship but also includes educating them on relevant resources at all levels, whether moral, social, medical, or economic (Abdurrahman, 2013; Smith, 2015; Pew Research Centre, 2010). For example, according to Abu Khatwa (2016), religious leaders from the Coptic Church and Al-Azhar met to present their perspectives in a joint publication, "Peace, Love, Tolerance." The purpose of this meeting was to develop and educate religious

leaders on social and behavioural transformation for peace (Hutagalung, 2016; Malefijt, 2006). It is important to note that the outputs of the long-term partnership between the Coptic Church and Al-Azhar are aimed at creating peace between Muslims and Christians. These and other shared religious meetings promote peace, understanding, and acceptance between the communities.

This section identifies initiatives taken by Egyptian religious institutions and leaders to enhance peaceful coexistence between Muslims and Christians. Religious initiatives by religious institutions and leaders have had a lengthy and positive impact on building and repairing the social fabric of Egypt's civil society. They accomplish this by promoting a culture of pluralism and tolerance, as well as by establishing schools and working to reduce illiteracy. The section also explores practices that have helped to achieve lasting peace between the two groups. Some of the initiatives include religious meetings, festivals, celebrations, the delivery of essential community services, and the development of literacy projects.

1- Encouraging religious celebrations

Despite common celebrations between Muslims and Christians in Egypt, terrorist attacks linked to religion occasionally create social barriers between the two groups (Abdel Hadi, 2022; Ha, 2016). At the beginning of the Christmas and Coptic holidays in 2018, more than 100 Christians were killed in a spate of violence, including a shooting at a church south of Cairo that was attributed to the Islamic State (El Massassi, 2018). The attacks followed allegations that Christian holidays violate the Islamic faith (Staff, 2019). Hence, Christmas and other Coptic holidays

can attract unwanted attention from Egypt's Christians and provoke an intractable crisis between the two groups.

In response to the growing number of violent incidents targeting Coptic congregations and their religious practices, the institutions and leaders have sought to establish good communication and enhance social engagement through religious initiatives. For example, to encourage interreligious celebrations, the Catholic Church and the Justice and Peace Association traditionally hold breakfast tables for Muslims who are fasting (Rosario-Braid, 2002). At the same time, Christians are also careful not to eat and drink in front of Muslims during Ramadan, which is observed by all Egyptians. According to El Shamaa (2020), "Christians in Cairo have been sharing Ramadan traditions and rituals alongside their Muslim neighbours, including donating to charity and enjoying iftar meals at sunset" (Al-Ahram Weekly, 2021). According to Elgawhary (2019), one religious gathering that is fast becoming a tradition is the holding of interfaith "Iftar Ramadan" (Elgawhary, 2019; Seaward, 2020). Moreover, each year, Pope Shenouda III invites prominent Muslim figures to a National Unity iftar banquet held in the Coptic Orthodox cathedral in Abbasiyya (Said, 2020). In 2004, those sitting with the patriarch at the main table included the Sheikh of al-Azhar and several bishops (Guiney, 2008). Religious cultural events or festivals help social integration, peace, and harmony because almost everyone is welcome to participate and engage. Through such festivals, people interact and engage intensively, establishing channels of communication and relationships.

Additionally, one of the most startling stands that the Catholic Egyptian Society for Justice and Peace has taken involves offering spiritual support to people of other faiths (Nabil & Fawzy, 2018). It organises an annual Ramadan iftar for Muslims, which includes a seminar after the iftar on education and its challenges in Egypt (Nabil & Fawzy, 2018). This and other initiatives that involve cooperation between Christian and Muslim institutions over the years have been aimed at mitigating the negative effects of extremism, as extremist Islamic groups have increasingly been supporting violence towards Christians.

Moreover, these initiatives reinforce the idea that sharing religious festivals, gatherings, activities, holidays, and celebrations is an important way to promote peace between Christians and Muslims. Events such as these help members of the two belief systems understand that differences in religious practices are essentially theoretical in nature. Each religion has a collection of cultural beliefs and worldviews that are intended to give meaning to life (Abu Zahra, 2018; Abdel Hadi, 2017). Thus, it can be argued that Egypt's religious institutions and leaders were constantly working towards Egyptian social coexistence by encouraging religious gatherings and celebrations.

2- Facing the COVID-19 crisis

One of the most significant initiatives through which Christian institutions, alongside Muslim institutions, have encouraged peaceful coexistence is the creation of a respected set of values, the main one of which is living in the right relationship with people (Glatz, 2017). Muhammad Mukhtar Gomaa, Minister of Religious Endowments, shut down worship places and mosques, claiming that taking care of

one's body is a worship act. During the pandemic crisis, Islamic and Christian leaders coordinated with agencies without discrimination to prevent the disease from spreading. The Catholic Egyptian Society announced the “Draw Your Peace with Your Hands” competition following the closure of churches due to the COVID-19 crisis, social distancing, isolation, and leaving churches. The competition revolved around expressing how peace has been spread in the family, the street, the hospital, the school, and the playground (Faris, 2020). Moreover, the Egyptian Orthodox Church cooperated with the Coptic Evangelical Organisation for Social Services (CEOSS) to launch “One Hand Against Corona” (Salem, 2021; Faris, 2020; Kaiciid, 2020; Abdurrahman, 2013). According to Salem (2021), the purpose of the initiative was to assist poor families in the village through the participation of 25 male and female Muslim and Christian volunteers. These young people, according to Faris (2020), displayed a true image of socially conscious youth keen to protect their community in times of crisis. The COVID-19 outbreak prevented access to adequate food supplies for many Egyptian families. The influx of volunteers and their relief and social efforts have helped with food distribution to poor families in the village.

As well, the Coptic Evangelical Organisation for Social Services (CEOSS) and the Al-Azhar institution sought to encourage social cohesion by providing financial support to help people suffering during the COVID-19 crisis (Ali, 2021). Shaban (2020) reports that CEOSS implemented a project towards the prevention of COVID-19 in cooperation with the Egyptian Family House and the Directorate of Social Solidarity in Al-Buhaira Governorate. The project involved the distribution of 300 bags of food and 300 bags of disinfectants to 300 families in the village of

Manshiet Al Noba in Aswan Governorate. Zaki mentions that this type of social cohesion, which is expressed during hard times, has encouraged peace between Christians and Muslims in Egypt (Hasan, 2003). In partnership with the Al-Azhar institution, CEOSS aims to present a model of solidarity in the face of crises (Rahouma, 2021; Global Ministries, 2021).

3- Reduction in illiteracy

The two religious groups also sought to help Egyptians through adult literacy education programmes. Muslim and Christian leaders from both Al-Azhar and the Coptic Orthodox Church launched literacy-training programmes for adults in 2017. The purpose of the Caritas Egypt Adult Literacy Programme, which was initiated in Upper Egypt, was to help adults gain the ability to analyse and resolve problems in their daily lives through literacy, dialogue, and problem-solving techniques (Dodd, 2018). Anba Ermia, Head of the Coptic Orthodox Cultural Centre, explains that knowledge is power for people of all ages and that proper education gives people the capability to have self-esteem in society and deal successfully with other people (as cited in Allam et al., 2016, p. 5). It can be confirmed that the efforts of Muslim and Christian leaders have worked towards peaceful relations between the groups.

Despite the suspension of some study programmes in 2020 due to the coronavirus pandemic, Al-Azhar also contributed to the activation of the literacy and adult education programmes in Egypt by signing a cooperation protocol with the General Authority for Literacy and Adult Education (Hegazy, 2020; Dorsey, 2019). Around 9,000 students were taught in various governorates of Egypt until the end of

October 2020, and Al-Azhar was able to achieve a percentage of close to 60% of the total target for the year (Hegazy, 2020).

However, Al-Azhar was accused of not accepting students from other religious backgrounds in its programmes (Bashir, 2017; Yehoshua, 2020). Moreover, Yehoshua (2020) claims that Al-Azhar invested its efforts in implementing a wider change in its education system only on the informational level, without engaging in any significant reforms along cultural lines. According to him, its representatives attend many conferences and initiatives worldwide devoted to interfaith dialogue and eradicating extremism “without doing or seeing anything on the ground” (p. 3).

Yehoshua might have a point. Nonetheless, Al-Azhar's did attempt to initiate certain reforms. For example, Al-Azhar Al-Sharif sought to establish an observatory in foreign languages to combat terrorism and extremism, which achieved a strong presence and a prominent role in correcting misconceptions spread by extremist groups using modern means and technologies (Abbas, 2023). Additionally, Al-Azhar has stated that greeting Christians and non-Muslims at their celebrations is acceptable. Al-Azhar further strengthened the role of the “Reconciliation Committee in Al-Azhar Al-Sharif.” This committee is entrusted with reconciling relations between citizens, upholding the supreme interest of the Egyptian homeland, preserving lives, honour, and property, and rejecting inherited tribal fanaticism, all through coordination with the concerned authorities in the state. In addition, Al-Azhar also cooperated with various state institutions by sending advocacy, awareness, and solidarity convoys to remote areas.

In responding to a question about the possibility of Christian students enrolling at Al-Azhar University, in an interview with German television, Al-Tayeb explained:

There are conditions for joining Al-Azhar University, including memorising the Holy Qur'an in full. These conditions are for both Muslim and Christian students who have obtained a high school diploma, which means that the matter is not related to religion but primarily to the student's qualifications. (Al-Bashir, 2017)

Although Article 33 of Law 103 of 1961 regarding the reorganisation of Al-Azhar did not set the requirement for students to be Muslims in order to attend Al-Azhar University, every university does have special conditions for admission, such as, in this case, memorising the Qur'an. Moreover, Al-Azhar University specialises in religious subjects such as jurisprudence, interpretation, doctrine, and hadith, which means that the system of study in Al-Azhar requires all students, regardless of their religion, to memorise the Qur'an, which may discourage Christian applicants. Studying at Al-Azhar would also not be suitable for Muslims who have not memorised the Qur'an. In this regard, the requirement to memorise the Qur'an in order to study at Al-Azhar has nothing to do with discrimination. Studying at Al-Azhar is open to all who fulfil the admissions requirements.

It is worth noting that most religious universities in Arab countries, such as Asmarya Islamic University in Libya, require all students to have memorised the Qur'an as a condition of acceptance. However, even these universities make exceptions for Christian and Muslim students if they are entering scientific colleges,

such as medicine and engineering. In those streams, memorising the Qur'an is not required as part of the course material. On the other hand, for students at religious universities, including Al-Azhar, who will be religious scholars and Muftis in the future, memorising the Qur'an will make it easier for them to know and understand religious texts. It is also worth noting that those with extremist ideas rarely memorise the Qur'an. As such, they make mistakes in interpreting the texts by taking them out of context. One of the main reasons for memorising the Qur'an is to see the “big picture” and not take one verse in isolation, but instead to compare different parts of the Qur'an with each other for a more holistic understanding. Extremists often err in their interpretation of the Qur'an by not seeing the “big picture.”

4- Establishment of Schools

Government schools in Egypt have recently suffered deterioration in their buildings due to the large number of students who attend them (Allam, 2015). Furthermore, some religious institutions used as schools to fill the gap left by governments are inadequately equipped and not held to the same facility standards as the purpose-built government schools (Gerges, Monica, & Shenouda, 2019). As a result, many Egyptian Muslims are choosing to send their children to better-equipped and better-funded non-Muslim schools. Daoud Nasr, a member of the General Council of the Evangelical Community, reports that several international schools, the most recent of which is the British Ramses School in Katameya, have opened recently (as cited in Allam, 2015, p. 5). According to Mounir Rady, director of the Jesuit School in Minya, implementing the principle of a good education that highlights “equality and impartiality and appreciates individual differences among

students” is the most important reason for Muslims and Copts to enrol in those schools (Maamari, 2019; William, 2019; Allam, 2015, p. 5). Undoubtedly, the establishment and opening of Jesuit and Islamic schools have led to peaceful relations between the two groups.

William (2019) further mentions that another purpose of the schools established by the Jesuits is to enable the poor to invest their potential for the sustainable development of themselves and their communities by providing educational opportunities for all. In my interview with Ibrahim Sedrak, he stated that it is important for all students, regardless of their economic or religious background, to have a good education. The Coptic Evangelical schools aim to equip their students with a good general education, and the schools are not limited to Copts. In fact, thousands of Egyptian Muslims race to enrol their children in these schools annually (Maamari, 2019). The Evangelical schools accept students from different religious backgrounds without discrimination. It can be argued that Islamic and Christian schools have played the important role in achieving equality and impartiality between their Christian and Muslim citizens. Currently, many Islamic and Christian schools in the country have focused on providing a good general education for their students this means that the religious schools have sought to promote peaceful relations between the two groups.

5- Promoting a culture of pluralism, citizenship, and tolerance

Egypt’s religious institutions have played a pivotal role in supporting a culture of pluralism and have led to an increase in peaceful relations (Adel, 2015). Andrea Zaki emphasises that Muslims and Copts’ mutual support for each other clearly

shows that they are “civilised” and love democracy (Homeland, 2011). For example, in 2021, CEOSS organised a dialogue in Cairo called "A legislative vision to support coexistence." The cultural dialogue was aimed at promoting the concepts of citizenship, building a society of tolerance, and confirming coexistence values based on respect for and understanding of others (Nabil, 2021). It concluded with several positive results and served as a general reminder that religious institutions play an influential role in combating hate discourse. One of the dialogue’s main conclusions was that tolerance is a supreme human and heavenly principle and value emphasised by all religions, and so therefore it is an essential part of building society. Moreover, the feeling of national unity has a strong impact on promoting coexistence between the two groups. In fact, according to Nabil (2021), the decline in hate speech depends on the existence of a social, educational, and cultural climate that supports the speech of tolerance, not hate. The efforts of religious institutions to promote the concepts of citizenship and tolerance promote peaceful relations between the two groups.

Moreover, through the development of programmes aimed at interfaith collaborations, the Al-Azhar institution highlights the values of citizenship, social solidarity, and humane treatment, which in turn leads to an increase in peaceful relations (Van Doorn-Harder, 1995; Malaty, 1993; Meinardus, 2004; Reiss, 1998). On July 5, 2021, the Coptic Orthodox Christian Association (COCA) participated in the Al-Azhar symposium “Respect for religions is a religious duty and a societal necessity” at the International Book Fair (Alwatan, 2021; Hisham, 2021; Mansour, 2018). During his speech, Anba Ermia confirmed that all religions call for peace

clearly and directly. He also explained that peace in Islam is one of the names of God, and in Christianity, peace is also highly valued (Strijdom & Tarusarira, 2017). It can be argued that outreach between the groups has led to increased peaceful interactions by members of both religions as they work together to deal with pluralism and citizenship issues.

Since pluralism has led to an increase in peaceful relations among Muslims and Copts, it is important to define the concept of pluralism. Pluralism is a concept with many different meanings. According to Porterfield (2015), pluralism describes a religious diversity that imputes positive meaning to religion and encourages appreciation of religion in all its forms. Afsaruddin (2011) argues that the term refers to the acceptance of a multitude of religions existing in harmony despite internal doctrinal differences and variations in external rituals and practices. Smith (2011) considers pluralism in the discipline of religious studies to be a policy or attitude that encourages diversity in beliefs and religions. Further, Gaus (2008) sees that pluralism is characterised by different factors, such as understanding and acceptance. Pluralism, therefore, according to these understandings, appears to promote openness to the rituals, practices, attitudes, and diversity of beliefs, which can serve to promote peace between Muslims and Christians.

Pluralism, according to Smith, is also centred on every person having the freedom to hold and express their own beliefs and values (Smith, 2007). Accepting other people's right to believe as they see fit goes a long way towards minimising religion-based conflicts (Gaus, 2008). Devan (2014) argues that no religion should force others to convert but should embrace differences with tolerance and respect.

Devan highlights the importance of accepting and recognising the existence of multiple religions and belief systems in society and concludes that pluralism is a way to promote tolerance, respect, and understanding between different cultures (Devan, 2014).

Religious schools, such as Evangelical and Catholic, have played a key role in promoting pluralism by encouraging equality between all students (Mokhtar, 2020; Porterfield, 2015). According to Mokhtar (2020), Christian schools in Egypt are distinguished by the lack of discrimination between students and the equal application of the law to everyone. Gohar Ezzat, Assistant General Secretary of Synod Schools in Egypt, states that Christian schools promote pluralism by encouraging Muslim-Christian coexistence and the consolidation of freedom of religion (Hafez, 2017). For example, places of worship are allocated in church schools, where there is a place for prayer for Muslim students and teachers next to a place for Christian students and teachers. Many Muslim parents send their children to Christian schools, such as the German Evangelical High School in Cairo (Asik, 2012), because they feel their children will be better treated and educated there. Christian schools in Egypt have sought to achieve religious harmony through the participation of Muslim and Christian students in their schools.

Egypt has been consistently working towards pluralism on the political front (Rahman, 2016; Report on International Religious Freedom: Egypt, 2021). Rahman (2016) explained how the Egyptian constitution recognises the canonical laws of Jews and Christians as the basis for legislation governing their personal status and

religious affairs regarding marriage, divorce, and inheritance, except in the event of a disagreement between the two parties or if they are from different sects. For example, according to the International Religious Freedom Report (2021), an appellate court ruled in 2017 that applying sharia to non-Muslims violated the section of the constitution stating that personal status matters for Christian and Jewish communities and that these communities are to be governed by their respective religious doctrines. The Court of Appeal's decision came after the announcement of the issuance of a draft unified personal status law for Christians. Based on this, Copts won the right to apply Christian inheritance laws, having previously been subject to Islamic sharia (Casper, 2021). I think that the lack of a unified personal status law for Egyptian Christians, which leads to disagreement between Christian sects, made the Egyptian government and courts oppose implementing Christian inheritance rules. Worthy, a new unified personal status law for Christians appears to be on the horizon and may be passed during the next parliament session.

The Egyptian government has also sought to promote pluralism between Christians and Muslims through the Church Construction Law (International Religious Freedom: Egypt, 2021; Ahmed, 2022). According to the report “International Religious Freedom: Egypt” (2021), the government issued legal permits to authorise church construction or renovation for Christians, with the constitution affording members of “revealed religions” the right to establish places of worship. For example, in 2016, the Church Construction Law (Law No. 80 of 2016) was ratified in compliance with Article 235 of the Egyptian constitution,

which required that a law to govern the building and renovation of churches be passed within the first legislative term following the constitution's establishment. Although the Church Construction Law introduced some improvements to the licensing, construction, and renovation of Christian houses of worship, the size of new churches continues to depend on the government's determination of the "number and need" of Christians in the area (Ahmed, 2022). For example, in 2021, the Egyptian government handed down 1,958 preliminary status approvals out of 5,540 applications, which represented an approval rate of only 35.3%. The government's mishandling of this issue has resulted in increased discontent within the Christian community (Ahmed, 2022), which seeks approval for the construction of new churches in areas where there is a lack.

The foregoing reveals that pluralism is starting to play a key role in Egypt. Pluralism promotes strong moral values among all citizens of the nation, regardless of their religious background. By promoting the values of tolerance and citizenship among Egyptians, the groundwork is being laid for forming intellectually, morally, culturally, and scientifically balanced students. The Egyptian government continues to work on establishing pluralism between Muslims and people of other belief systems.

Additionally, the Coptic Orthodox Church and Al-Azhar have undertaken joint initiatives to create training programmes for priests and imams (Stoyanov, 2018). They also launched three publications by Islamic and Christian scholars, aiming to protect Egyptians from violence and harmful practices (Abu Khatwa, 2016; Stoyanov, 2018). For example, Al-Azhar introduced a programme called "Al-

Azhar Unites Us” (Iskander, 2012). The programme served as a dialogue between Al-Azhar and various Christian centres, focusing on the dangers of radical ideologies (Guindy, 2010). As well, the Al-Azhar Centre established religious rulings involving over 300 religious scholars, with the objective of monitoring and following propaganda in jihad associations on the internet and distributing a contrasting narrative in Arabic and other languages (Seaward, 2020).

The priest and imam training programmes serve as a form of mobilisation at the community, national, and international level in support of the local and global peace process. The aim of the mobilisation is to reduce segregated spaces and eradicate misinformation and misperceptions (Guirguis, 2012). For instance, the initiatives have led to fewer references to Christians in Egypt as a 'minority'. Peace mobilisation has also played a crucial role in building inter-group relationships by challenging misperceptions and demonising the “other.” One of the early outcomes of this work is improvements in the quality of life among the two religions and the establishment of mechanisms for collaboration and de-escalation of disputes (Seaward, 2020; Guirguis, 2012). According to Al-Tayeb, Egypt not only needs religious leaders but also scientists, doctors, and engineers, and these are being trained at Al-Azhar (Seaward, 2020; Guirguis, 2012). The religious institutions have also taken some initiatives to reconcile Islamic law with issues of gender and citizenship.

Moreover, in response to the widespread change in perception of women’s role in society, Al-Azhar has developed training courses for women as clerics and religious adjudicators. The aim is to highlight women as agents of transformation

(Stoyanov, 2018). Women would then take part in the reshaping of the religious life of the nation, with the intention of encouraging social change at the community level (Scott, 2010). The courses are part of the “Women in Democratic Transition” project and include “Legal Reform for Women” and “Women in the Professional Syndicates.” The stated goal of offering the courses is to ensure that women have a voice in the democratic reform process that is moving quickly in Egypt. It is worth noting that Egypt has recently had the largest increase in the number of women ministers in the region (“The third annual report on the status of women in politics in the Arab region,” 2019).

The religious institutions in Egypt have also contributed to tolerance-building between Christians and Muslims through their many religious activities and initiatives (Gamer, 2015; Rahouma, 2019). For example, one of the most well-known initiatives developed by the Catholic Egyptian Society for Justice and Peace is TA’ALA (Tolerant Attitudes and Leadership for Action), which is a programme that offers opportunities for leaders and youth through the cultivation of positive relations (Shafir, 2017). The term TA’ALA means “come over” in Arabic, signifying the initiative’s central theme of uniting Christians and Muslims. TA’ALA was a two-year project (2013–2015) to help curb interfaith conflicts, with a specific focus on reducing religious intolerance as a result of the cultural separation of Christians and Muslims (Tanyas, 2016). The programme was implemented in Upper Egyptian governorates, where it aimed to enhance interreligious tolerance as a way to peacefully mediate between the two religious groups (Ardovini, 2016; Shafir, 2017).

Overall, TA'ALA enjoyed moderate success during its two-year run. Gelvin (2015) indicates that Muslim and Christian religious leaders, together with clan leaders in Upper Egypt, participated in establishing TA'ALA to monitor and resolve interreligious conflicts among their people. Approximately 38 self-reported and corroborated situations for successful intergroup interventions in the different religions and intrareligious and domestic conflicts were handled (Gelvin, 2015). Additionally, attitudes based on tolerance were established between the two groups by the religious institutions.

6- Reduction in poverty

Given its large and growing population of 120 million, Egypt has numerous challenges that affect the country at the societal level. For instance, poverty is widespread (Abdul Latif, 2019; Abdul Jalil, 2010). According to the Central Agency for Public Mobilisation and Statistics (CAPMAS), the poverty rate rose from 16.7% to 32.5% between 2000 and 2018, respectively, with Upper Egypt (the southern part of the country) topping the list of the poorest governorates in the republic (CAPMAS, 2020). According to Almuneir (2021), most Christians who reside in Upper Egypt, such as Sohag, Minya, Beni Suef, and Assiut, which host 40 percent of the country's population, have lived in extreme poverty, where many encounter substantial barriers, including a lack of secure shelter, a lack of medical treatment, and increased unemployment. Khalil (2019) pointed out that there are dozens of cases of Coptic citizens who ended up committing suicide due to poverty. For example, "Farag Rizk Farag, 48 years old, was found dead after hanging himself on the Cairo-Ismailia desert road after he had gone through a financial crisis and was

unable to meet the demands of his family and children at school" (Almuneir, 2021, p. 4). There is no doubt that poverty and issues around it, such as domestic violence, illiteracy, and substance abuse, can adversely affect community cohesion. For example, in 2021, during the activities of the El Gouna Film Festival, the Egyptian film "Rish" sparked widespread controversy by the Egyptian press, which considered it opposite to reality. The film depicted poverty in Egypt through the eyes of a Christian woman from Upper Egypt who struggled to cover her living expenses. According to Azzam (2022), Egyptian Muslim directors and actors objected to a Christian family being portrayed as living in extreme poverty (Hia, 2021; BBC, 2021), as the general image of Christians in Egypt, according to directors and actors, is that they are wealthy and "financed" from abroad. The representation of Christian poverty created an obstacle to the peaceful coexistence between some Christians and Muslims. Social media, in particular, played an active role in sparking controversy between the two religious groups. It can be argued that what was reported about this film by the media does not express the opinion of all Muslims, but only of certain sectors, such as directors and actors.

Despite these and other challenges, the past few years have also seen significant developments by religious institutions to deal with conflicts stemming from poverty (Ratliff, 2020; Al-Mawardi, 2019; McCallum, 2012; Said, 2020; Elgawhary, 2019; Seaward, 2020). Ratliff (2020) writes that religious institutions and civil organisations have sought ways to eradicate poverty (Guindy, 2010; Allen, 2011).

Religious institutions have played an effective role in addressing poverty (Jamal, 2014; Abdalnabi, 2014). In his interview and discussion with me, Ahmed Al-Tayeb

confirmed that Al-Azhar, since its founding, has been helping the poor. As evidence, he pointed to the Egyptian House of Zakat, which was also established in 2014 by him to support charities and assist poor people. It has been a major contributor to Egyptian community development (Mandour, 2017). The House disburses Zakat (charity) funds in its legally prescribed banks, gathering and disbursing alms, donations, gifts, bequests, and charitable subsidies for charitable works. At the same time, it raises awareness about the obligation to give Zakat and the House's role in community development through spreading the spirit of solidarity and compassion among all individuals (Hamid, Hajar, & Al Jamal, 2014).

Since its inception, the Egyptian House of Zakat has witnessed a great expansion of its activities, ranging from social, financial, and healthcare assistance to development and emergency relief programmes. At the same time, it has been gaining the trust and support of Zakat payers and donors and consolidating the values of giving and social solidarity. This is being done in accordance with a scientific development vision that seeks to bridge developmental gaps and provide optimal support to the beneficiaries of Zakat (Mandour, 2017; Al-Mawardi, 2019; Hamid et al., 2014). According to Shehta (2021), annually, the Egyptian House of Zakat has distributed 20,000 blankets and quilts to eligible families in Upper Egypt under the slogan "Cover and Warm." When it comes to social and cultural practices, enhanced scrutiny has been a critical factor in Egypt's push for peaceful and positive relations between Coptic Christians and Muslims (Abaza & Nakhla, 2005). Egyptian Christian and Islamic institutions have presented new models for religious

participation through their religious activities and community-based works, while at the same time dealing with poverty (Jamal, 2014).

It is important to note that most Muslim and Christian leaders in Egypt are also cooperation-based and geared towards community development (Abdalnabi, 2014; Makari, 2007). For example, the “Long Live Egypt Fund” was established to assist Egyptians, with Al-Tayeb and Pope Tawadros serving on the Board of Trustees (Mounir, 2018). Haynes (2016) notes that the “Long Live Egypt Fund” was organised to provide shelter, food, and clothing for orphaned children of all religious backgrounds living in Egypt (Mounir, 2018; Rowe, 2020; Wahba, 2020). The Fund embraces all cultures and social beliefs by not discriminating against anyone under the programme, encouraging more and more people to trust the religious leaders’ initiatives to help everyone, regardless of their religious or cultural background (Rowe, 2020).

In my interview with Ahmed Al-Tayeb, he mentioned that the Long Live Egypt Fund is significant to all people in Egypt and that its primary purpose is to teach us about love. It is worth noting that Al-Tayeb donated half a million Egyptian pounds to the fund. This amount represents the value of the Human Fraternity Award, which was bestowed on him because of his global efforts in spreading peace and working to achieve human brotherhood (Elbehairy, 2019). Tawadros and El-Tayeb also donated 8 million Egyptian pounds to the Long Live Egypt Fund to support the state in fighting COVID-19 (Nabih, 2020; Egypt Today, 2020). From these donations, we can see that Egyptian institutions, both Christian and Muslim, have contributed to reducing poverty.

In view of the foregoing, Egypt's religious leaders and institutions have a respected set of values that they follow, as they are trusted and are believed to be acting for the good of the community. Ultimately, the values of both the religious institutions and the religious leaders are geared towards peaceful coexistence. Religion does actively contribute to shaping and prolonging peace. Therefore, the representation of social and cultural relationships by religious institutions and leaders is significant for the analysis of both the dynamics of Muslim-Christian relations in Egypt and of state and church policies towards peace. Moreover, religious institutions have significantly influenced Egypt's ongoing efforts to achieve a higher level of peaceful coexistence between its Christian and Muslim citizens. Currently, many religious institutions in the country have focused on development centres and spreading awareness of social conditions, all with the intention of continuing the drive for interreligious peace and cooperation.

Conclusion

This study has shown that peace forms a major part of the contents of both the Qur'an and the Bible, and that genuine Muslims and Christians understand that neither of these two religions advocates violence. Rather, both religions promote peace by asking believers to “do good” to their enemies and not repay evil with evil. Although the Qur'an and Bible also appear to have contradictions regarding the concept of peace, such texts are often misinterpreted by both believers and non-believers, who may use them as a pretext to cause harm to others. In my view, these texts are, in fact, meant to fight evil and establish God’s Kingdom in those who are still in the world. Similarly, the Qur'an advocates peace as well as measured violence. Sometimes peace is delivered through Jihad. Kalin (2013) states that:

Jihad is a necessity to protect justice, freedom, and order. In this regard, the position taken by the Qur'an and the Prophet concerning the use of force against oppression by Muslims and non-Muslims alike is essentially a real stone and aims at putting strict conditions for regulating war and using force. (p. 237).

Furthermore, while there are some verses in the Qur'an that advocate for Jihad, such acts were meant to fight evil and bring justice to the world. Hauerwas (1997) argues that "violence is always a secondary willed intrusion known as such only because of a profounder peace" (p. 190). The Qur'an emphatically states that Jihad is for the defensive, not for the offensive. The

Bible and the Qur'an both agree that violence for the sake of violence should be renounced.

As argued in this study, the Qur'an and Bible also have more similarities than differences in terms of promoting peace. The Bible holds that God is the main giver of peace, and the Qur'an holds that God has that same role. All texts of the Qur'an and Bible that encourage violence and conflict are in specific cases and historical circumstances. It should also be noted that, according to both Muslims and Christians, the inspired Word of God, by definition, cannot contain inherent contradictions.

The study also demonstrates that religion has promoted peace between Muslims and Christians through the teachings of Islam and Christianity in general, both of which urge collaboration. In Egypt, as elsewhere, the relationship between these two groups has been shaped by the beliefs and theologies of the two religions. Pluralism, which has characterised cooperation, unity, understanding, and acceptance, has likewise led to positive relations between the two religious' groups. In addition, the study explained how Muslims and Christians, guided by their respective religious teachings of Islam and Christianity, have consistently leaned towards collaboration, tolerance, unity, understanding, and acceptance, especially and most notably during times of war and revolution. For example, the 2011 revolution against Mubarak's regime witnessed a rebirth of this strong unity and tolerance. Additionally, we have seen that it is Muslim and Christian teachings on Islam and Christianity, respectively, that have enabled the adherents of these two groups to maintain close and positive relations.

Besides highlighting the beneficial impacts of religion on Muslim-Christian relationships, this study discussed other positive initiatives that have inspired unity, like the common identity of culture, language, and nationalism. These findings have pointed to the efforts of religious leaders on both sides through initiatives such as religious dialogues, religious conferences, the Egyptian Family House, and the addressing of sectarian disputes. Additionally, the study has discussed the importance of religion in promoting peace and harmony in Egypt, using the teachings of Islam and Christianity to help Muslims and Christians overcome conflicts. Despite their different religious views, these two groups share a common ancestry and a desire to work together as one nation. While each group seeks to maintain its religious distinction, both are fervent supporters of Egypt as a country that respects religious freedom and allows them to live peacefully together. The roles played by religious leaders, religious peace norms, and religious peace activism were also examined here, revealing that although Muslims have different religious views than Christians, both groups have made a positive contribution to peace in Egypt.

As well, the study investigated how religion affects politics in Egypt through select political speeches given by Egyptian presidents since the country's independence in 1952. In their speeches, presidents Nasser, Sadat, Mubarak, Morsi, and Sisi stressed the need for peace and harmony among Muslims and Christians and focused on the benefits that will ensue if all Egyptians recognise and value their shared heritage. Even Morsi's government included known experts, activists, and intellectuals from various political backgrounds. As well, the speeches explained the

connection between religion and state legislation, demonstrating that religion has been effective over the years in addressing social issues for the Egyptian people. The evidence, as presented here, suggests that religion remains a crucial component in determining how Egyptian presidents rule their Muslim and Christian citizens and that political discourses referencing religion that promote cooperation and tolerance between the two groups still matter to all Egyptians, irrespective of their religious differences.

The study also discussed how religious education has had a profound impact on society through religious schools and curricula. Religious education helps to promote strong ethics among students, which include honesty, faithfulness, a strong work ethic, respect, and dignity. Some religious education systems, including those based on Christianity and Islam, promote these virtues. Religious education promotes good interpersonal relationships as well by teaching students to appreciate diversity and the need for peaceful coexistence regardless of religious confession. These attributes can ideally be acquired through the study of religion in schools, preferably from the primary level onward. The failure to instill these concepts in school may result in a violent and undisciplined generation that lacks meaning or focus in life.

In addition, this study highlighted how Islamic- and Christian-based education helps to nurture students into well-rounded citizens by developing and shaping their character, values, and beliefs. In religious education, there is no separation between religion and other aspects of life, as it adopts a holistic perspective. School initiatives in Egypt have shown that religion has a life-long impact on students and

can orient their ideas towards peaceful, inclusive, and humanistic values. It also instills in them respect and tolerance, thereby minimising radicalization among students. This reinforces the need to teach religious education at the all-educational institutions, not just those that are specifically religious. Moreover, the religious curricula can also result in positively influencing students' religious beliefs by instilling in them values aimed at improving their tolerance towards other beliefs as well as towards those who hold them.

Finally, the study showed how institutions and leaders influence peace promotions between the groups through religious practices, rites, ceremonies, and religious gatherings. Moreover, the study indicated that when the two groups work together and help each other in their respective efforts, their communities can flourish. Muslims and Christians have been shaped by the beliefs and theologies of the two religions as well as the socio-cultural events in which they find themselves.

The outcome of these joint efforts has been an increase in positive relations between Muslims and Christians, especially in recent years. The two groups are increasingly interacting and sharing each other's beliefs and values, leading to a greater understanding and tolerance of each other. The sharing of common cultural practices and values has further promoted a positive relationship, prompting them to want to build a nation that is characterised by common social, cultural, and religious traditions. Indeed, many obstacles have been removed by consolidating the notion of joint cultures. Egyptian Muslims and Christians share the same ethnic background, language, and individual and group traditions, so sharing the same country

peacefully based on their common background, language, and traditions is a natural extension of who they are.

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CURRICULUM VITAE

Candidate's full name: Ibrahim Hariz

Universities attended (with dates and degrees obtained):

M.Sc. 2010 Department of Faith and Islamic Thought, University of Al Asmarya, Zliten, Libya

B.Sc. 2007 Department of in Interpretation of Quran and prophetic tradition “hadith”, University of Al Asmarya, Zliten, Libya

Publications: The Canadian Journal for Middle East Studies, October 2019, Vol. 3, No. 1, pp. 38-64 ISSN. The entitled: "The Current Positive Relationships between Christians and Muslim in Egypt".

Conference Presentations: The International Conference on Comparative Religion and Theology which took place in the city of Toronto, July 2019, , entitled: "The Positive Relationships Between Christians and Muslims in the 21st Century, Egypt as a model".

Academic award: The best presentation at the conference of Comparative Religion and Theology which took place in the city of Toronto, July 2019, entitled: "The Positive Relationships Between Christians and Muslims in the 21st Century, Egypt as a model".